

Digital Authoritarianism:

Implications of Military's Social Media Repression on The Lives of Online Activism Participants Post 2021 Coup

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Abstract

The overall development of Myanmar was severely impeded by the military coup in 2021, which also had a detrimental impact on both digital and human rights. The digital landscape changed when The State Administrative Council (SAC) enforced limitations on social media, which limit freedom of expression, minimize access to information, and hinder democratic participation on the internet. For the years since 2021, the implementation of laws and policies has consistently endangered individuals, affecting a large number of civilians. The impact of the junta's digital authoritarianism in the 21st century has been felt globally, particularly with the significant number of individuals forced into exile in neighboring Thailand and other countries. An analysis is conducted on the impact of social media activism on individuals fighting for democracy in Myanmar, focusing on the social and psychological effects of their efforts against the coup d'état.

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I dedicate this work to the resilient people of Myanmar, whose bravery in the face of oppression inspires and drives my research. I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Prof. Cameran Ashraf, Ph.D., whose unwavering guidance and support have been invaluable throughout this journey. Most importantly, I am deeply grateful to the participants who bravely shared their stories, making this study possible. I heartfully appreciate my family and friends for their steadfast support and encouragement. Lastly, I am profoundly thankful to Central European University for their support and for enriching my educational journey in countless ways.

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Abbreviations

- CDM** - Civil Disobedience Movement
- CIB** - Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior
- FEM** - Free Expression Myanmar
- ISPs** - Internet Service Providers
- MCRB** - Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business
- MPT** - Myanmar Post and Telecommunications
- MWD** - Myawady (national channel)
- NLD** - National League for Democracy
- NUG** - National Unity Government
- SAC** - The State Administrative Council
- UN** - United Nations
- USDP** - Union Solidarity and Development Party
- VPN** - Virtual Private Network

Introduction

“Social media, a double-edged sword for a Facebook nation during an ongoing long-term conflict.”

Myanmar's progress towards democracy was abruptly interrupted on February 1, 2021, when the military, known as the Tatmadaw, conducted a coup d'état. The military used this extreme measure in response to the National League for Democracy's (NLD) overwhelming triumph in the November 2020 general elections. The military alleged, without any proof, that the elections were tainted by extensive fraud. During the first stages of the coup, the military apprehended important government officials, such as State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. They also proclaimed a state of emergency lasting for one year and handed over control to Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. The abrupt usurpation of authority sparked extensive indignation and opposition throughout the country, causing Myanmar to descend into a state of political and social upheaval.¹

Social media rapidly emerged as a crucial arena in the aftermath of the coup. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which were already essential components of Myanmar's digital environment, evolved into vital instruments for coordinating demonstrations, disseminating up-to-the-minute data, and rallying global assistance. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a grassroots initiative advocating for government officials and people to reject collaboration with the military dictatorship, garnered significant momentum on the internet. Hashtags like #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar and #CivilDisobedienceMovement have become powerful slogans, disseminating the message of defiance and recording the oppressive actions of the military regime against nonviolent demonstrators.²

The military junta countered this act of digital resistance with stringent restrictions designed to suppress opposition. Activists were criminalized and silenced through the use of internet blackouts, social media restrictions, and the enforcement of oppressive regulations, including the contentious Section 505A of the Penal Code. Section 505A was specifically employed to

¹ Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson, “‘Politicide’ and the Myanmar Coup”, *Anthropology Today*, 37.2 (2021), pp. 3–5, doi:10.1111/1467-8322.12639.

² Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Ko Kabya, ‘Revolutionary Responses to the Myanmar Coup’, *Anthropology Today*, 37.3 (2021), pp. 1–2, doi:10.1111/1467-8322.12649.

apprehend and legally pursue individuals who were suspected of disseminating "false news" or instigating turmoil against government officials, encompassing a broad range of persons who expressed dissent to the ruling regime. The arrest of hundreds ensued as a result of this expansive and vague legislation, causing terror and compelling several activists to seek refuge in secrecy.³

Consequently, a large number of social media activists were forced to flee, seeking shelter both inside Myanmar and in other countries. Within the nation, activists adopted covert lifestyles, always relocating to avoid being detected. They persisted in their fight by utilizing encrypted communication methods, establishing and managing networks, and coordinating their operations, all while facing the constant risk of imprisonment.⁴ These folks have experienced significant psychological distress due to the constant terror they live in, as well as the pressure on their personal relationships and financial difficulties.

A considerable number of activists from Myanmar sought refuge in nearby countries like Thailand, as well as in faraway nations like the United States, Europe, and Australia. A search for protection was frequently dangerous, entailing unlawful border crossings and dependence on clandestine trafficking networks. Upon arriving in foreign countries, these activists encountered the difficulties of applying for asylum, assimilating into unfamiliar environments, and persisting in their advocacy work while in exile. Despite the challenges, several individuals have successfully utilized international forums to increase awareness of the situation in Myanmar, mobilizing worldwide backing for their cause.⁵

The engagement of these social media activists in the resistance has permanently changed their lives. Their narratives are characterized by their ability to endure and make selfless choices as they traverse the intricacies of upholding their struggle for democracy in highly challenging conditions. This thesis seeks to investigate the significant effects of social media limitations imposed by the military on the lives of civilians in Myanmar. It attempts to provide insights into their challenges, adjustments, and the wider consequences for digital rights and political

³ Tuwanont Phattharathanasut, '#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar: The Evolution of the Digital Fight Against Authoritarian State Repression', *International Journal of Communication*, 18.0 (2024), p. 21.

⁴ ADAM SIMPSON, 'An "Activist Diaspora" as a Response to Authoritarianism in Myanmar: The Role of Transnational Activism in Promoting Political Reform', in *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule* (Routledge, 2012).

⁵ Phone Pyae SoeChiang Mai University | CMU · School of Public Policy Doctoral Candidate, 'Phone SOE | Doctoral Candidate | Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai | CMU | School of Public Policy | Research Profile', *ResearchGate*, 2023 <<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Phone-Soe>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

participation in the country. This paper aims to provide complete knowledge of how digital authoritarianism has transformed Myanmar's resistance landscape and influenced its people's resilience. This will be achieved through qualitative interviews and examination of current literature.

Background Context

Myanmar, often called Burma, is a Southeast Asian country characterized by an extended period of military governance and political instability. Following the attainment of independence from British colonial authority in 1948, the military usurped control in a coup d'état in 1962, resulting in several decades of autocratic rule⁶. In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD), under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, achieved a significant victory in the election, indicating a notable transition towards democratic governance.

The most significant isolated period of the country was from 1962 to 2011, when the nation was mostly cut off from the rest of the world for 60 years. Before the general elections that took place in 2010, Myanmar had one of the most strict censorship regimes in the world. The sole extant free and autonomous media operated in exile beyond the nation's borders. Those who ventured to disapprove of the junta government were severely punished, and the dictatorship did not accept any criticism. At the same time, it severed the country's connection to the rest of the world, preventing it from being informed about the situation within Burma. The government owns roughly 75% of the private media. Additionally, the Burmese state-owned media vilified the US, UK, and EU governments since the Burmese government was suspicious of foreign media, which barred many news organizations from covering the country. Foreign media are "spreading lies" to erode national unity, according to one senior general.

Myanmar's first experience with the Internet was in November 1997, when the government-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunications (MPT) company launched the country's first official electronic mail service, primarily for government and military use. Access for the general public was extremely limited and heavily regulated. Before its launch, the regime prepared The 1996 Myanmar Computer Science Development Law⁴, the initial government effort to limit internet freedom. This legislation criminalized the possession of an unregistered

⁶ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34.2 (2012), pp. 197–216.

computer modem and connecting to unauthorized computer networks. By the early 2000s, internet access began to expand, but it was still restricted to a small population segment, primarily in urban areas. The military government implemented stringent controls on internet service providers (ISPs) and content. The first private internet service provider was introduced in 2002, leading to a rise in the number of users. However, the junta finally gained control of the company in 2004.⁷

The 2010 election in Myanmar was a pivotal moment that brought about important transformations in the country's political environment, especially concerning the liberties of media and expression. Despite facing criticism for lacking freedom and fairness, the election marked the beginning of a shift from direct military control to a supposedly civilian administration led by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), with support from the military. During this era, Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from her confinement at home, and political and economic reforms were initiated. One significant transformation was the relaxation of media restrictions and the enhancement of freedom of expression. Under the leadership of President Thein Sein, the government implemented measures to decrease state regulations on the press, permitted the establishment of private newspapers, and eliminated limitations on internet and social media usage.⁸

This facilitated a more transparent political atmosphere, promoting public discussion and critique that had been significantly limited during past military administrations. These changes enhanced diplomatic relations as Western nations lifted sanctions and augmented their support and investment. The junta claims that it signifies the shift from military governance to a democratic system run by civilians. Nevertheless, the military continues to influence the country's key industries and holds a significant portion of parliamentary seats, amounting to one-fourth of the total. The increased liberty of media and expression was vital in creating a political environment that allowed opposition parties and civil society to thrive, leading to the significant 2015 election and subsequent attempts to promote democracy.

⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2011*, 2011

<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Burma_FOTN2011.pdf>.

⁸ Tin Than, 'MYANMAR'S 2010 ELECTIONS: Continuity and Change', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2011*, 2011, doi:10.1355/9789814345040-014.

In 2012, the censorship board was disbanded, resulting in the publishing of over 400 monthly and weekly publications and the elimination of pre-censorship. Introducing private daily newspapers into the media industry was a direct consequence of eliminating censorship. Although there has been some relaxation of Internet regulations, several laws still allow for the punishment of journalists who write something that angers or offends the government. According to BBC's article ⁹, around 300 newspapers and periodicals that discuss less controversial topics have already been authorized to publish without censorship. Additionally, limitations on 30,000 internet sites were removed, granting users free access to political information for the first time.

Facebook is the Internet in Myanmar

Myanmar is commonly referred to as "Facebook Nation" due to the widespread use and influence of the social media platform Facebook among its population. Owing to a lack of proficiency in digital skills and the provision of free access to Facebook through the free fundamentals program, many individuals in Myanmar rely on Facebook as their main entry point to the online realm, sometimes oblivious to other internet resources. The extensive dependence on Facebook in Myanmar has had notable, advantageous, and disadvantageous consequences for the distribution of information, communication, and social engagement.

The telecoms sector was deregulated after the quasi-civilian administration introduced political and economic changes in 2011. This initiative was a component of more extensive endeavors to modernize the economy and facilitate international investment. In 2013, the government conducted a competitive tendering procedure for telecommunications licenses, granting licenses to two foreign corporations, Telenor (Norway) and Ooredoo (Qatar), alongside MPT.¹⁰ These businesses made significant investments that fueled the telecommunications infrastructure's fast growth, which included the creation of mobile networks and internet services.

⁹ BBC, 'Burma Abolishes Media Censorship', *BBC News*, 20 August 2012, section Asia <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19315806>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

¹⁰ Alliance for Affordable Internet A4AI, *Delivering Affordable Internet in Myanmar*, 2015 <<https://a4ai.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Myanmar-Case-Study.pdf>>.

The country's leapfrogging digital landscape saw the extensive social media culture as a thriving space for the economy, politics, and civilians' lives, helping connect its long-isolated population and driving political and social change. Before 2013, a minority of individuals in the nation had the opportunity to use the internet, and most of those who did rely on sluggish dial-up connections.

As an important transformation occurred with the implementation of mobile internet in Myanmar, The accessibility to the internet and the utilization of social media platforms had a significant increase, with almost 50% of people in the nation engaging in regular usage of Facebook by the end of 2013. By mid-2014, Facebook has emerged as the primary medium for media organizations, government institutions, and politicians to communicate with the Burmese population. Around 1% of Myanmar's 53 million population had internet access. In 2016, the country appeared to have more Facebook users than any other Southeast Asian country, resulting in one of the highest internet penetration rates globally. In 2017, over 30% of the nation's populace was utilizing the internet.¹¹ Data published in Meta's advertising resources indicates that Facebook had 18.50 million users in Myanmar in early 2024.

However, as a downside, Facebook has not only contributed to the increased openness in political affairs but has also led to a steep decline in the quality of public discussions and provided a convenient platform for inciting violence.¹² The misuse of the right to freedom of speech and expression in Myanmar, namely on social media platforms, has emerged as a substantial and concerning problem. The main participants in this activity have been mostly Buddhist nationalists and their supporters, who have utilized these forums to disseminate hate speech, misinformation, and hoaxes.

These measures have provoked violence against the Rohingya and Muslim communities, intensifying ethnic and religious tensions throughout the nation. The Rohingya population has been a victim of severe violence, particularly in 2012 and 2017, resulting in widespread displacement and several fatalities. Social media played a pivotal role in exacerbating these

¹¹ Insight Myanmar, 'How Facebook Came to Myanmar', *Insight Myanmar*, 2022
<<https://insightmyanmar.org/all-about-burma/2022/9/1/how-facebook-came-to-myanmar>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

¹² Noel M. Morada, 'Hate Speech and Incitement in Myanmar before and after the February 2021 Coup', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 15.2–3 (2023), pp. 1–28, doi:10.1163/1875984X-20230003.

violent outbreaks by disseminating inflammatory information that galvanized crowds against the Rohingya.¹³

The Role of Social Media In Spring Revolution 2021

Facebook is a crucial platform for online activism and political engagement, extensively used by many of the public to coordinate demonstrations, spread information, and gain worldwide backing after the military announced a power catch. Notable social media campaigns that gained widespread attention include social punishment, an online petition urging people to boycott companies owned by the military, clicking campaigns to raise funds for the revolution, and most significantly, the CDM involving thousands of government employees from various sectors, including the bureaucracy, medical community, and education sector, who actively participated on Facebook. Additionally, technology has facilitated instantaneous updates and communication among demonstrators, enabling them to evade security personnel, maneuver around obstacles, and promptly react to evolving circumstances on the field. Social media facilitated the connection between Myanmar's fight and a worldwide audience¹⁴. The SAC implemented repression and limitations in response to the opposition of the people. These measures were taken to restrict civilians' digital privacy and rights, which affected millions of civilians.

¹³ Amnesty International, 'Myanmar: Facebook's Systems Promoted Violence against Rohingya; Meta Owes Reparations – New Report', *Amnesty International*, 2022
<<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebooks-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

¹⁴ SPP, 'LOCAL EFFORTS TO INFLUENCE GLOBAL LEVEL POLICY AMID COUP: THE CASE OF FACEBOOK IN MYANMAR', *School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University*, 2022
<<https://spp.cmu.ac.th/local-efforts-to-influence-global-level-policy-amid-coup-the-case-of-facebook-in-myanmar/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

Literature review

Digital Authoritarianism in Myanmar

Digital Authoritarianism is “the use of the Internet and related digital technologies by leaders with authoritarian tendencies to decrease trust in public institutions, increase social and political control, and/or undermine civil liberties.”¹⁵ It is also claimed that the differentiation between illiberal and authoritarian practices is based on the kind and extent of the harm caused and its political consequences. Illiberal behaviors violate the independence and self-respect of individuals, whereas authoritarian practices undermine responsibility and, hence, pose a danger to democratic processes.

The word Digital Authoritarianism is not new to Myanmar, which has been facing repression in many forms of either significance or insignificance. Since 2012 of leapfrogging technology and growing number of Facebook users throughout the country, The Unfreedom Monitor, Myanmar report says that “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.”¹⁶

The World’s Longest Internet Shutdown

The NLD-led government implemented a 20-month-long internet blackout in the states of Rakhine and Chin, making it one of the longest internet shutdowns globally. This measure was used to prevent the dissemination of information about the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar, a country infamous for its 67-year-long civil war. In 2019 and 2020, Rakhine and Chin states saw prolonged internet unavailability periods, referred to as “the longest internet shutdown in the world.” Following the military coup, there has been a notable escalation in both the magnitude and length of internet shutdowns.¹⁷ Furthermore, between mid-2019 and early 2021,

¹⁵ Erol Yayboke and Samuel Brannen, ‘Promote and Build: A Strategic Approach to Digital Authoritarianism’, 2020 <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/promote-and-build-strategic-approach-digital-authoritarianism>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

¹⁶ Global Voices Advox, *A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World*, April 2022 <https://globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Unfreedom_Monitor_Myanmar_Country_Report_2022_updated.pdf>.

¹⁷ Brian Nemo, ‘Myanmar Is the Leading Edge of Digital Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia’, 2022 <<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/myanmar-is-the-leading-edge-of-digital-authoritarianism-in-southeast-asia/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

the Ministry of Transport and Communications issued directives on mobile phone carriers to cease Internet connectivity in many townships in western Myanmar experiencing conflicts.¹⁸

Since the beginning of 2012, when it first made the Internet accessible to the general public, Myanmar has been subject to censorship and monitoring in its digital areas. This continued until the coup that took place in February 2021. It is expected that the digitization of the nation would benefit the growth of e-government and the improvement of every sector of the nation and the people. The downside has been the government's ability to monitor and regulate its administration, which has been the cause of the shutdown. There have been several instances in which the Telecommunications Law has been utilized to restrict individuals' rights to freedom of speech and expression since it was first implemented in 2013.

Certain individuals, including reporters, legislators, and users of social media platforms, have been accused of defamation following Section 66(d) of the statute. Numerous individuals have been taken into custody for expressing their disapproval of the government, the military or even just posting on Facebook. Following the provisions of Section 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law, "any person found guilty of extorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence, or threatening any person by using any telecommunications network shall be punished with a maximum of three years in prison, a fine, or both."¹⁹

Surveillance & Censorship

The Internet was introduced in Myanmar in 1997, and its expansion began in the early 2000s. Access to the Internet is limited to a select group of individuals, including regime officials, high-ranking military personnel, and leaders of export enterprises, totaling only a few hundred people. Even for those who are fortunate, this primarily refers to using email solely for work-related purposes.

¹⁸ KYAW HSAN HLAING and EMILY FISHBEIN, 'In Myanmar, One Blackout Ends, Another Begins', *Rest of World*, 2021 <<https://restofworld.org/2021/myanmar-one-blackout-ends-another-begins/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

¹⁹ Burma Campaign UK, *Burma's Repressive Laws 66d Telecommunications Law*, 2013 <<https://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/Repressive-Laws-Section-66-d.pdf>>.

By mid-2003, there were around 20,000 accounts available, which could be obtained for a one-time fee of 40-80 euros, granting lifelong access. The telecommunications industry, which includes internet services, was under the monopoly of the state-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT). The government's monopoly enabled them to exert strict control over internet access and utilization. The postal and telecoms regulator MPT and military intelligence employ a Dans Guardian content filter to monitor and control email traffic rigorously. In late 2003, around 25,000 individuals could use the Myanmar Wide Web, a restricted local intranet established by the government. This intranet provided access to a limited number of online publications, mostly on government service or administrative websites authorized by the authorities. Acquiring an individual Internet account, subject to initial authorization by the governing authority, incurs a fee of 260 euros, while corporations must pay 600 euros.²⁰

Internet cafés played a vital role in providing internet access for communications and information in Myanmar since residential internet connections were expensive and scarce. During that time, social media and other interactive platforms were essentially non-existent. Those cafes were one of the limited venues where the general public could avail themselves of an internet connection. These cafes were under stringent rules and were obligated to maintain comprehensive records of users' identities and their online activities.

The junta instituted a "Blog Supervising Committee" in every government ministry towards the end of 2007. Civil servants were then directed to create pro-government blogs to offset the influence of external bloggers and foreign or exile media and to launch verbal attacks against democracy campaigners such as Aung San Suu Kyi using offensive language. The imposition of severe jail sentences and the discriminatory application of regulations, such as the Electronic Transactions Law, promote a culture of self-censorship, which is prevalent among most internet users. However, there is a relatively unrestricted environment for speech in online comment sections, where individuals may maintain anonymity. Users frequently practice self-censorship when discussing negative news about high-ranking military officials and their relatives. Despite

²⁰ UNHCR, 'Internet Under Surveillance 2004 - Burma', *Refworld*, 2004
 <<https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/rsf/2004/en/48870>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

the lack of regular implementation, numerous pro-junta blogs were active as of December 2010.²¹

Social Media as A Tool For Systematic Repression

Myanmar has gained a reputation for the strategic use of social media as a weapon, particularly concerning the Rohingya issue. Facebook acknowledged the situation in Myanmar as an instance of Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB), which refers to the manipulation of information by a network of social media users in a planned and organized manner. The 2017 military operation in Rakhine State, characterized by the UN as a "Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing," compelled more than 700,000 Rohingya individuals to seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh.²² The dissemination of hate speech and dissemination of false narratives on social media had a crucial role in justifying and carrying out these horrific activities.

Buddhist nationalist organizations, such as the Ma Ba Tha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion), and important monks like Wirathu have employed social media platforms to disseminate anti-Muslim discourse. This includes the use of offensive language, provocative statements, and incitement to commit acts of violence targeting the Muslim population. The proliferation of misinformation and falsehoods on social media platforms has been aimed at instigating feelings of dread and hatred. Widespread allegations were made that Muslims were plotting to take control of the country, engaging in acts of violence against Buddhists, and posing a substantial risk to national security. These rumors frequently consisted of concocted narratives and manipulated visuals, giving them an air of credibility among those who lacked information.²³

The UN Fact-Finding Mission in Myanmar asserted that Facebook had a significant role in the commission of the inhumane atrocity. As a result of pressure exerted by the United Nations and local human rights organizations, Facebook has decided to prohibit around 20 accounts and pages associated with the military, including Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, due to

²¹ Sanja Kelly Sarah Cook, 'Freedom-on-the-Net-2012-a-Global-Assessment-of-Internet-and-Digital-Media', 2011, doi:10.1163/2210-7975_HRD-1234-0381.

²² UN News, 'UN Human Rights Chief Points to "Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing" in Myanmar | UN News', 2017 <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

²³ Anas Ansar and Julian Maitra, 'Digital Diaspora Activism at the Margins: Unfolding Rohingya Diaspora Interactions on Facebook (2017–2022)', *Social Media + Society*, 10.1 (2024), p. 20563051241228603, doi:10.1177/20563051241228603.

their involvement in grave crimes against humanity.²⁴ Similarly, in 2021, following the coup, Facebook implemented a block on pages associated with the military because of the perceived risks of allowing their presence on Facebook and Instagram. The prohibition applies to the Air Force, navy, defense ministries, home affairs, and border affairs.²⁵

Intensified Digital Authoritarianism

The junta's initial action on the day of the military coup on February 1, 2021, was to implement an internet blackout to regulate the dissemination of information and hinder any protests against the coup. Myanmar has had previous instances of internet blackouts, but it was one of the Southeast Asian countries that had the highest number of disruptions in 2021. Several difficult regions remain unreachable, devoid of internet connectivity, concealing all information regarding civil strife.

Access Now's report mentioned that a minimum of seven shutdowns occurred in 2022. However, this figure does not fully capture the extent and characteristics of connection interruptions nationwide. By 2022, the military in Myanmar had complete control over all telecommunications companies, developed surveillance equipment throughout the country, and intermittently disrupted mobile and internet services in several places.²⁶

As the revolution gathered traction through social media campaigns, the governing government's sporadic and recent measures to suppress any anti-coup activities garnered enough strength to be promptly enforced. The curtailment of free expression has led to concerns about the infringement of civil liberties such as access to information, digital rights, and individuals' privacy. February 2021, internet and mobile access were rapidly curtailed to prevent the mobilization of anti-military protests. After taking over the telecommunications department responsible for regulating telecom companies, the junta seized control of three of

²⁴ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar**, September 2018
<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_CRP.2.pdf>.

²⁵ April Roach, 'Facebook and Instagram Bans Myanmar Military from Using Platforms', *Evening Standard*, 2021 <<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/myanmar-coup-facebook-instagram-military-ban-b921168.html>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

²⁶ Zach Rosson, Felicia Anthonio, and Carolyn Tackett in collaboration with the Access Now team, *Weapons of Control, Shields of Impunity*, February 2023 <<https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-2022/>>.

the country's four mobile service providers, including Norway-based Telenor, which sold its Myanmar operations following a military order to activate surveillance technology.²⁷

The cyber security law was released in early February 2021, shortly after the military coup. This timing raised significant concerns among human rights groups, international organizations, and businesses, as it appeared to be part of the military's broader strategy to tighten control over information and communication within the country in the wake of widespread protests and civil disobedience against the coup. The draft law was circulated for public and stakeholder feedback, but it was widely criticized for its potential to restrict freedoms and enable extensive surveillance and censorship.

The draft law grants the government extensive authority to regulate and limit internet access. This includes the power to terminate internet services, restrict access to particular websites, and regulate online information that risks national security or public order. The policy requires internet service providers (ISPs) and other digital service providers to store user data and allow authorities to access it. This includes sensitive personal information, internet surfing history, and communication records. The proposed legislation delineates provisions to govern the material on social media and other digital channels. Platforms must eliminate anything the government deems as misleading information, hate speech, or content that encourages unrest. The legislation imposes stringent sanctions for various cyber offenses, encompassing illicit entry into computer networks, data breaches, and the dissemination of false information. Violations may lead to substantial monetary penalties and extended periods of incarceration.²⁸

The SAC has used mass social media surveillance, website bans, content monitoring, pro-military propaganda that is widely disseminated, and content filtering to put millions of citizens' lives and well-being at risk. The current autocracy targets both human and digital rights by limiting access to online spaces and controlling social media. The coup had a major influence on Myanmar's internet and social media usage. Indeed, in the short years between the fall of the last military administration in 2016 and the 2021 coup, Facebook has become a main source of news for the Burmese public, to the degree that users "confuse the Silicon

²⁷ Access Now, 'Resist Myanmar's Digital Coup', *Access Now*, 2024 <<https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/statement-myanmar-coup-en/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

²⁸ State Administration Council, *Myanmar Cyber Security Law (DRAFT)*, 2022 <<https://engagemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2022-MM-Cybersecurity-Law-ENG.pdf>>.

Valley social media platform with the internet.²⁹

Although Facebook was banned after the coup by the military, the availability of free VPNs made it possible for dissidents to circumvent the ban, and the reliance of the Myanmar population upon Facebook as a mode of communication before the coup encouraged wider use of VPNs. Three days after the coup and immediately following the Facebook ban, the demand for virtual private networks (VPN) in Myanmar increased by 7200% compared to the average of the seven days prior.³⁰ The non-governmental organization Free Expression Myanmar (FEM), focused on digital rights, has produced an unauthorized English translation of the 2022 draft legislation. This translation includes annotations highlighting the differences from the February 2021 draft. Additionally, FEM has undertaken a thorough study of the potential effects of the 2022 draft law on human rights.³¹

The February 2021 draft still includes all the previous concerns, such as internet shutdowns and blocking specific websites, without any safeguards in place. It also includes extraterritoriality, stricter criminalization, and longer prison sentences for various free speech "offenses," holding internet intermediaries accountable for the content, inadequate data protection measures, and data localization requirements without a clear explanation of the data classification process. One provision in the proposed legislation states that the use of VPN would be made illegal, with a penalty of up to three years of jail and a fine (Art. 90). Under the present conditions, this would essentially make using Facebook a criminal offense, as the military has prohibited it since February 4, 2021. Considering the necessity of VPNs to access Facebook, it is plausible that any person or organization posting on the platform might potentially be generating incriminating information.

The functioning of digital economy ecosystems relies on the international exchange of knowledge, technical expertise, and scientific and commercial information through transnational IT networks. It also requires access to digital tools and global market

²⁹ Marie Lamensch, 'Digital Authoritarianism: The Role of Legislation and Regulation', 2024 <<https://www.cigionline.org/publications/digital-authoritarianism-the-role-of-legislation-and-regulation/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

³⁰ Megan Ryan and Mai Van Tran, 'Democratic Backsliding Disrupted: The Role of Digitalized Resistance in Myanmar', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 9.1 (2024), pp. 133–58, doi:10.1177/20578911221125511.

³¹ Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB), 'Update on Draft Cybersecurity Law and Its Impacts on Digital Rights and the Digital Economy', *Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB)*, 2022 <<https://www.myanmar-responsiblebusiness.org/news/draft-cybersecurity-law.html>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

opportunities, which contribute to the growth of economies, the promotion of literacy, and the improvement of global living standards. The draft law contradicts Myanmar's digital economy objectives and will disrupt business operations, limit opportunities for digital innovation, and result in missed chances for inclusive development. Consequently, this will lead to broader economic losses, a less stable investment environment, and reduced foreign direct investment.

Digital rights protect many forms of digital communication, including emails, messaging services, websites, and social media. Facebook has served as the primary forum for the Junta to propose its laws, rules, and regulations and disseminate state-controlled material across various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and others.

The phrase "Facebook nation" was embraced to articulate the sensitivities of the general population and the governing authorities. The nation's intensifying internet censorship has further deteriorated following the coup, with the SAC engaging in systematic persecution of internet users by tracking anti-military and revolutionary content on Facebook. Additionally, on the ground, the SAC has implemented random electronic device checks at checkpoints. They examine images in the gallery, Facebook posts, SMS messages, and other sources. In general, the military's deliberate harassment of internet users has become a cause of fear, a clear example of suppression that limits fundamental human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of movement.

Another channel, Telegram, a widely used messaging medium, has been a breeding ground for pro-military activities within SAC. This is mostly because of its lenient content moderation policies, which allow for the dissemination of violent and sexist messages. Women frequently fall prey to the practice of "*doxxing*," in which personal information is publicly disclosed without authorization, often accompanied by incitements to violence or demands for arrest.³²

Resistance Against Restrictions

Myanmar has an extensive history of controversial collective action and a diverse range of protest methods. Following the coup, protestors utilized many traditional political activism methods deeply rooted in Myanmar's history and culture. However, they also devised inventive

³² Mi-Kun, 'In Myanmar, Telegram Is Used as a Weapon to Destroy Lives', *EngageMedia*, 2023 <<https://engagemedia.org/2023/myanmar-telegram-digital-rights/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

methods and plans influenced by international protest patterns. The CDM campaign on Facebook has gained over 230,000 followers since it was first launched on February 2, 2021. During the initial two months following the coup, citizens bravely posted 250 million tweets to get international notice, even putting their lives in danger. Six academics in Norway nominated the initiative for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize. Approximately 410,000 of the total one million public officials are believed to have engaged in the CDM following the coup.³³

#whatishappeninginMyanmar, this hashtag emerged as a worldwide call to action to increase consciousness of the circumstances in Myanmar. It served as a platform for disseminating updates, news, and personal narratives directly from the location, attracting global scrutiny towards the military's activities and the demonstrators' aspirations for democratic governance. The hashtag gained global traction, facilitating the mobilization of foreign support and garnering media attention. Activists, journalists, and concerned global citizens utilized it to maintain focus on Myanmar.³⁴

Similarly, content with the hashtags #HearTheVoiceOfMyanmar and #SaveMyanmar amplify awareness of the country's situation. At the same time, The Milk Tea Alliance, which initially emerged as a solidarity movement among pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, has extended its reach to include Myanmar following the coup. The alliance derives its name from the widely consumed milk tea beverages in these areas, serving as a symbol of solidarity in opposition to authoritarianism. The Milk Tea Alliance facilitated transnational solidarity and cooperation among campaigners. It emphasized the same challenges faced by pro-democracy groups throughout Asia and encouraged reciprocal assistance and advocacy endeavors. These social media movements were vital in coordinating opposition, increasing consciousness, and fostering global unity. They utilized the capabilities of digital media to combat tyranny and promote democratic government in Myanmar.³⁵

³³ Sarah Oh and Zachary Nelson, 'The Incomplete Digital Transformation' (2023), doi:10.2139/ssrn.4353001.

³⁴ Archana Atmakuri Anuradha Rao, 'The Role of Social Media in Myanmar's CDM: Strengths, Limitations and Perspectives from India', *The Role of Social Media in Myanmar's CDM: Strengths* (Institute of South Asian Studies, 2021), p. Limitations and Perspectives from India, doi:10.48561/3HFW-QDDB.

³⁵ Karen Lee, 'The #MilkTeaAlliance in Southeast Asia: Digital Revolution and Repression in Myanmar and Thailand | New Perspectives on Asia | CSIS', 2021 <<https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/milkteaalliance-southeast-asia-digital-revolution-and-repression>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

505A Enactment

To quell the online users who criticize the military coup and reveal their political views, the State Administration Council (SAC) issued a very oppressive revision to Penal Code 505, aiming to criminalize further the act of expressing one's beliefs freely. This amendment modified many provisions in the Penal Code, particularly Article 505, significantly expanding the spectrum of penalties that the military can employ to unjustly curtail the freedom of expression.

Section 505A criminalizes the dissemination of statements, rumors, or reports with the intent to cause fear, spread false news, or agitate directly or indirectly a criminal offense against a government employee. The provision's language is broad and ambiguous, allowing for wide-ranging interpretation and application. Violations of Section 505A can result in imprisonment for up to three years, a fine, or both. This makes it a serious offense with significant penalties. Since its introduction, Section 505A has been used extensively by the military regime to target activists, journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens who oppose the coup.³⁶

The use of Section 505A has been condemned by international human rights organizations and foreign governments. Critics argue that the provision violates international standards for freedom of expression and is being used to stifle legitimate dissent and criticism. Legal experts and human rights advocates have raised concerns about the lack of due process and fair trial guarantees for individuals charged under Section 505A. There have been numerous reports of arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention without trial, and lack of access to legal representation.³⁷

Free Expression Myanmar (FEM) identified that 12,039 individuals are threatened, detained, charged, and arrested under the penal code 505A for their involvement in social media activism. At least 3,995 were criminalized for their free expression online (on Facebook), facing criminal warrants, being detained, investigated, charged, or sentenced.³⁸

³⁶ Tamas Wells, 'International Aid Partnerships Amidst Myanmar's Revolution: Solidarity or Self-Preservation and Compliance?', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2024, pp. 1–20, doi:10.1080/00472336.2024.2320415.

³⁷ Amnesty International, 'Human Rights in Myanmar', *Amnesty International* <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/myanmar/report-myanmar/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

³⁸ Free Expression Myanmar, *505A Art of Revenge : REVIEW OF MYANMAR COUP SPEECH 'CRIMES'*, 2022 <<https://freeexpressionmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/505a-act-of-revenge-1.pdf>>.

Section 505A of the Myanmar Penal Code has been effectively utilized by the military dictatorship to stifle opposition and uphold its authority. The consequences for those accused under this clause include arbitrary detentions, unjust legal proceedings, severe punishments, suppression of freedom of expression, social marginalization, and economic adversity.

The utilization of this legislation highlights the more extensive violations of human rights taking place in Myanmar and the pressing requirement for legal and political overhauls to safeguard freedom of speech and guarantee justice for all individuals. Individuals accused under Section 505A frequently encounter societal isolation, being branded as felons or perceived as jeopardizing national security. The stigma can harm their personal connections and social status within the community. Additionally, their families typically face financial difficulties due to the loss of income and the expenses related to legal defense. Extended incarceration can result in severe financial devastation for several households.

Previous studies and scholarly inquiries into the military coup in Myanmar have mostly concentrated on the methods and scope of social media constraints enforced by the ruling military regime. These publications have thoroughly described the diverse techniques employed to regulate and suppress online environments, including internet shutdowns, platform prohibitions, and implementing oppressive legislation such as Section 505A. Although these studies offer valuable insights into the tactics used by the military to suppress digital opposition, there is still a notable lack of research on the specific consequences faced by individuals involved in social media activism due to these limitations.

My research aims to address this void by examining the individual, social, and financial consequences of limitations on social media for activists. This research will provide insight into the significant difficulties faced by those targeted by the junta, both inside Myanmar and abroad, by examining their experiences. These problems encompass psychological strain, financial struggles, and the breakdown of social connections. By conducting qualitative interviews and in-depth case studies, my research aims to offer a comprehensive knowledge of the impact of digital repression on activists' lives. This study will bring useful insights into the wider discussion on digital rights and resistance in authoritarian settings.

Methodology

This study aims to investigate the following research question: "What are the effects and implications of the military regime's social media repression on the lives of social media activism participants following the 2021 coup in Myanmar?" By employing qualitative research methodologies and doing an in-depth analysis of the existing body of literature, the author investigates the effects of the event on the participants. The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 persons who participated in social media activism after the military coup. These interviews were carried out using programs that were encrypted digitally. Among the participants were 6 females, 3 men, and one individual who identified as belonging to the LGBT community. Each of them was between the ages of 25 and 50 years old. The participants were recruited through a diligent procedure, including direct contact with the researcher. This approach also included establishing contacts through the interviewee's trusted networks.

Each interview lasted for a minimum of forty-five minutes and was taped with ethical considerations in mind throughout the process. Anonymization of the participants was done to protect their privacy and maintain their confidentiality. Journalists, students from Myanmar who were studying abroad, refugees from Myanmar who were living in third countries, advocates and influencers on social media, activists, and professionals stationed in Thailand and Austria were among the persons who were questioned. The city of Chiang Mai was selected as a destination due to the enormous number of people looking for safety and security from Myanmar, as well as a significant number of Myanmar exiles in the city.

Between the 1st of April and the 12th of April, interviews were conducted. This study aims to investigate how people's participation in pro-democracy activities and online resistance against the military regime has affected their lived experiences. The purpose of this study is to explicitly investigate how individuals' posts on social media platforms, including Facebook, can help them manage the transition to a new stage in their lives. Significant difficulties arise when attempting to quantify the amount to which an individual's actions impact the entire population. On the other hand, the samples include people from a wide range of age groups, occupations,

and socioeconomic backgrounds. The conclusions from the interviews with these individuals have major ramifications, and they give birth to various events and circumstances.

The secondary study is strengthened by conducting a content analysis of news articles, reports, research, and academic papers that apply to the same subject matter and have been published locally and internationally by respected news media outlets. In this investigation, several different statistics, news releases, and reports gathered from foreign sources and civil society organizations will be analyzed. This collection of facts and figures pertains to how the Burmese junta employs social media to repress individuals. Not just before the coup but also throughout it, I have been conducting research on the digital repression that occurred in Myanmar. Myanmar is a nation that has garnered minimal attention in mainstream academic circles and is presently going through a very volatile political crisis. This is especially significant because Myanmar is currently experiencing a political crisis.

In addition, I do a supplemental study of reports that have been supplied by international and civil society organizations. My objective is to bring attention to the size and gravity of the government's use of social media as a tool for political repression in Myanmar, even though it is not feasible to provide a precise count of the number of people who have been punished in Myanmar for their participation in online activism. Taking a look at the instances that have been published in various news media sources will allow us to accomplish this goal.

Through a comprehensive peer review process, the methodology of this study, which investigates the impact of social media constraints imposed by the military rule on residents in Myanmar following the coup, is significantly improved. The study is subjected to a comprehensive examination and validation by experts and PhD candidates working in peace and security during this process. The insights of these individuals ensure that the study is robust and reliable. The use of their expertise contributes to the enhancement of the research design, the enhancement of the validity of the procedures used to collect data, and the guarantee of the accuracy of the analysis. The addition of critical evaluations, which offer a variety of perspectives and a thorough academic analysis, is beneficial to the research since it strengthens its benefits. Validating the findings, strengthening the methodological rigor, and identifying potential biases are all accomplished with the assistance of this approach. This method, which has been subjected to stringent evaluation, provides a solid foundation for understanding the major consequences that restrictions on social media have had on the civilian population of

Myanmar. As a result, it contributes essential insights to the larger conversation about digital rights and authoritarianism.

Another means of acquiring information is from my introspection and firsthand encounters as a Myanmar citizen who faced allegations of breaching Section 505A and managed to evade apprehension for two and a half years, commencing in April 2021. My perspectives and expertise would greatly enhance the value of this project since I have personally experienced social stigma and endured significant setbacks in my career, social connections, and overall well-being.

Empirical Studies

Myanmar saw a startling and unsettling stillness on the morning of February 1, 2021, when internet and communication channels were suddenly severed. The internet outage caused widespread confusion and prompted millions of individuals to doubt the events that occurred overnight. The tranquility was abruptly disrupted by a statement on national television, in which the military, referred to as the Tatmadaw, proclaimed their assumption of authority, claiming unverified claims of electoral misconduct in the November 2020 elections as their rationale. The coup resulted in the arrest of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and several other high-ranking government leaders affiliated with the NLD.

In response to the coup, the public's initial shock rapidly transformed into a pervasive sense of dismay and fury. Despite the communication blockade, word of the military's actions was disseminated, prompting citizens throughout Myanmar to coordinate nonviolent demonstrations. The demonstrations were characterized by a tangible feeling of sorrow and fury in response to the sudden arrest of their duly chosen leaders. Individuals from diverse backgrounds, including government employees, students, and regular laborers, participated in public demonstrations in urban and rural areas. The protests started nonviolently, with individuals practicing civil disobedience and employing symbolic actions, such as banging pots and pans, to repel malevolent forces. This customary ritual had a novel significance as a means of opposition.

The CDM witnessed substantial involvement from healthcare professionals, educators, and government employees who declined to perform their duties under the military government. Their objective was to undermine the system's functioning and demonstrate support for the imprisoned leaders. Over time, the protests escalated in terms of the number of participants and the level of fervor, as the protestors demanded the reinstatement of democratic governance and the liberation of all incarcerated officials. The military's reaction to the escalating opposition became progressively more brutal and used coercion to scatter gatherings, resulting in confrontations and losses. Notwithstanding the dangers, the citizens of Myanmar have shown their fortitude and dedication to democratic ideals by persistently engaging in protests and strikes.

Globally, the coup and ensuing suppression elicited considerable censure. Nations and institutions worldwide conveyed their endorsement for the citizens of Myanmar and urged the reinstatement of democratic rule. The global community's focus contributed to magnifying the voices of the demonstrators despite the significant obstacles in maneuvering through the intricate political terrain enforced by the military regime.

Social Media Activism is One Click Away

The level of digital resilience is increasing. All the participants vociferously expressed their views on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, alongside their actual demonstrations. The primary activity of citizen #1 since the coup has been consistently expressing her strong disapproval of the military coup, General Min Aung Hlaing, and disseminating other individuals' provocative content on her Facebook profile. General Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's military, has garnered significant controversy and has become the target of several humorous and insulting memes and trolls on social media. The online memes and trolling operations are manifestations of the profound resentment and opposition that the people of Myanmar harbor against the military regime.

The content mostly focuses on deriding his physical appearance and personality and scrutinizing his actions and leadership abilities. A multitude of memes deride his physical features, depicting him in a hyperbolic or comical manner. This frequently involves the creation of caricatures that emphasize exaggerated characteristics or draw similarities to less attractive imagery. His involvement in the military coup and subsequent suppression of nonviolent demonstrators is often the subject of criticism in memes and blogs. He is frequently portrayed as a despot, suppressor, or manipulator exerting control over the nation by intimidation and brutality. Trolls frequently employ historical and cultural allusions to criticize Min Aung Hlaing. For instance, they may establish connections between him and previous tyrants, encompassing those from Myanmar's past as well as other autocratic governments throughout the globe. Cultural markers, such as traditional clothing or local expressions, are occasionally employed to emphasize mockery or enhance the relatability of memes to the indigenous populace.

Simultaneously, several individuals actively participated in constructive analysis and discussion on social media platforms concerning the military coup in Myanmar. Facebook

served as a versatile platform, fulfilling several roles, including satire and protest, and providing a critical area for thoughtful analysis and educated conversation. These analysis posts frequently offered valuable insights, educated the public, and stimulated additional resistance efforts by providing Context and Background on Myanmar's extensive history of military rule, past coups, and the ongoing struggle for democracy. They also examined how the military justified its actions based on the 2008 Constitution and analyzed the legality of the state of emergency declared by the Tatmadaw. Several participants discussed the Immediate Economic Consequences, focusing on the negative effects of disruptions in daily life and business operations on local economies and individual livelihoods. They also examined the coup's implications on Myanmar's economy, including market reactions, currency fluctuations, and the consequences of foreign investment.

Participant #5 discussed the topics of Human Rights and Humanitarian Perspectives, specifically focusing on the wider consequences of the military's activities in Myanmar. These acts include the suppression of freedom of speech, unjustified imprisonments, and the deliberate persecution of ethnic minorities. The posts contained firsthand testimonies, photographs, and videos depicting the suppression, apprehension, and aggression toward demonstrators.

By providing in-depth explanations, doing economic evaluations, reporting on human rights issues, conducting strategic analyses, and working together, all the participants offered valuable perspectives, organized opposition. They gained global recognition and backing for the suffering of the people of Myanmar. The combination of comedy, activism, and rigorous research emphasized the significance of social media in contemporary political movements and crises.

Voluntary Participation Rather Than Peer Pressure

The resistance, shown by protests, civil disobedience movements, and participation on social media, is motivated by a sincere aspiration for democracy and a more promising future rather than by the influence of peers. Myanmar has seen several military coups, with the last being on February 1, 2021, which has had a profound impact. In contrast to past cohorts who experienced prolonged periods of military governance, the contemporary younger generation, emboldened by worldwide interconnectivity and a glimpse of democratic liberties, are resolute in their determination to disrupt this recurring pattern. The 2021 coup unexpectedly terminated ten

years of political and economic reforms, leading to extensive volunteer opposition from all sectors of society. The movement's commitment is driven by a shared recollection of previous hardships endured under military regimes and a determination to save future generations from experiencing similar difficulties. The grassroots movement in Myanmar's battle for democracy has been significantly bolstered by the backing of the international community and the smart utilization of social media, thereby marking a crucial turning point.

April 2021 Is The Beginning Of The Next Chapter

In April 2021, the Myanmar military junta intensified its suppression of opposition by declaring the issuing of arrest warrants under Section 505A of the Penal Code. These warrants specifically targeted those actively participating in the anti-coup rallies and civil disobedience on the national channel Myawady (MWD). This action has several menacing repercussions for the civilian population. Section 505A is written widely and imprecisely, making some behaviors illegal if they create fear, propagate false information, or encourage offenses against government personnel. This ambiguous terminology enabled the military to focus on a broad spectrum of actions, encompassing even nonviolent demonstrations and online content while claiming to uphold societal stability.

The dictatorship sought to suppress notable activists, journalists, and regular individuals who openly opposed the coup by obtaining warrants under this provision. This fostered an atmosphere of apprehension wherein voicing opposition could result in apprehension and incarceration, endangering the public by deeming dissent a criminal offense. This atmosphere instilled fear and doubt, disrupted people's lives and sources of income, suppressed unbiased media and non-governmental organizations, and discouraged involvement in the movement against the coup. This maneuver was a component of a more comprehensive plan to uphold authority and suppress dissent, intensifying the nation's political and social turmoil.

The daily broadcast of arrest warrants on television intensified the already stressful and repressive environment, driving many individuals into precarious circumstances. This study examined the many difficult situations encountered by individuals accused under this oppressive law, ranging from being arrested and held in custody, living in concealment, escaping to nearby countries like Thailand, to seeking refuge in faraway nations such as the United States, Europe, and Australia. The major 4 categories emphasize the significant

consequences of the junta's suppression on the well-being of Myanmar's citizens, their fight for survival, and their unwavering resilience in the presence of oppression.

Category 1: Detained and Taken into Imprisonment

Arrest and Detention: Individuals accused under Section 505A are frequently apprehended abruptly by the military or police. These arrests might occur in the individuals' residences, places of employment, or even during demonstrations. Detainees sometimes endure terrible conditions while in detention, such as overcrowded cells, insufficient medical treatment, and inadequate provisions for food and hygiene. Incidents of torture and ill-treatment during questioning are frequently reported.

Legal Process: The legal proceedings carried out by the military administration are usually characterized by a lack of transparency and impartiality. Detainees can be subjected to prolonged periods of custody without undergoing trial. If trials occur, they are frequently carried out without proper adherence to due process or provision of legal counsel.

Sentencing: Individuals convicted under Section 505A may face a maximum jail term of three years. Nevertheless, the specific length of incarceration can fluctuate, and certain persons may be granted early release due to global influence, medical conditions, or shifts in political conditions.

Category 2: Living In Hiding; Departing From One's Residence, Concealing One's Whereabouts, and Deliberately Avoiding Detection By Authorities (or) Surveillance Systems.

Immediate Reaction: Upon being informed that they are being sought after under Section 505A, persons frequently evacuate their residences to evade apprehension. This might occur suddenly, leaving little opportunity to make arrangements or collect personal possessions.

Living in concealment necessitates constant relocation to evade notice: Individuals may choose to reside with acquaintances, family members, or in secure accommodations. Minimal communication is employed to avoid detection.

Psychological and emotional burden: The pressure of residing in concealment can be overwhelming, accompanied by persistent apprehension of being apprehended. Preserving

confidentiality can create tension in relationships with relatives and acquaintances, who may also encounter intimidation and persecution from governmental entities.

Economic Consequences: Individuals in hiding, lacking a steady source of income or the ability to utilize banking services, depend on assistance from sympathetic individuals or clandestine networks. This tenuous existence makes fulfilling fundamental requirements difficult.

Category 3: Fleeing to Neighboring Thailand And Residing There Without Legal Authorization.

Crossing the Border: Escaping to Thailand frequently entails perilous and unlawful border crossings, perhaps aided by smugglers. These expeditions may be treacherous and fraught with the dangers of apprehension, exploitation, and aggression.

Living conditions in Thailand are often characterized by many individuals residing in the country without proper documents or legal status. This renders them susceptible to exploitation, unfavorable working conditions, and mistreatment by employers.

Daily Life and Work: A significant number of individuals work in low-wage, unregulated industries such as construction, agriculture, or household labor. They frequently endure extended labor hours in challenging environments, with few legal options for addressing mistreatment.

Fear of Deportation: Residing in Thailand without legal status entails a perpetual apprehension of being apprehended by Thai authorities and repatriated to Myanmar, where they are susceptible to apprehension and incarceration.

Category 4: Relocating to other Third Country (United States, Europe, and Australia)

Seeking refuge: Individuals who successfully flee to nations such as the United States, Europe, or Australia frequently pursue refuge. The procedure of seeking refuge can be protracted and intricate, necessitating the presentation of substantiated proof of persecution and a plausible apprehension of being sent back.

Integration Challenges: Despite being granted refuge, adjusting to a new nation presents substantial difficulties. Integration might be impeded by language obstacles, cultural disparities, and the psychological impact of being displaced.

Availability of Support Services: The availability of support services differs from one country to another. Certain countries give extensive help to asylum seekers, encompassing housing, healthcare, and legal aid, whilst others offer just little support. Despite their obstacles, several individuals construct a fresh existence for themselves by actively seeking education, jobs, and engagement within their society. They frequently maintain involvement in advocacy and support networks for Myanmar's pro-democracy movement while residing outside.

Economic Hardships Experienced by Individuals

Immediate job loss and financial instability are common consequences for those who are identified in the Section 505A warrant. To avoid being arrested, these individuals sometimes have to abruptly quit their occupations. This abrupt shift leads to an immediate reduction in earnings, causing individuals to experience financial instability. Securing a new job can be challenging for individuals who must maintain a concealed or undisclosed identity. Implications in a professional context: Being on the warrant list might result in professional ostracism due to the associated stigma. Employers concerned about potential government monitoring or consequences may hesitate to recruit persons linked to anti-government activities, therefore further restricting career prospects.

Financial burden on households: Loss of breadwinner in the family: The apprehension or necessity to seek refuge from a family member, frequently the only source of income, can result in a significant economic burden on the whole household. Families may struggle to fulfill necessities such as sustenance, shelter, medical care, and education.

Costs associated with legal and medical matters: The financial cost is increased by legal disputes and medical treatment for those who have been harmed or subjected to torture during their detention. Expenditures related to legal expenses, bribes, and other connected charges can potentially exhaust a family's financial resources, resulting in enduring financial hardship.

Section 505A poses a threat to professionals and skilled workers, causing their careers to be disrupted. Their lack of transparency in their work hinders their career advancement, resulting

in a decline in skills and fewer professional opportunities. Students and young professionals who are on the warrant list frequently have to discontinue their education or training. This disruption can have enduring effects on their professional paths and income prospects.

Informal Sector Work: Numerous persons are compelled to engage in employment within the informal sector, characterized by poor wages and a lack of job security or benefits. This kind of labor frequently entails extended periods in challenging environments, with few or nonexistent legal safeguards. In the absence of adequate paperwork or the opportunity to work transparently, individuals may be subjected to exploitation by employers who exploit their vulnerable position. This form of exploitation encompasses the practices of paying workers less than they deserve, making them work excessively, and subjecting them to hazardous working environments. Over time, the financial burden can result in the depletion of personal and family assets. Financial reserves are exhausted, assets may be forced to be sold, and the capacity to invest in prospects is significantly hindered.

Dependence on Community Support: Numerous persons depend on community support networks for their existence. Although these networks offer vital support, they are frequently overwhelmed and incapable of fulfilling all requirements. Humanitarian help provides limited and uneven support, whether from international or local sources. The need for help further highlights the absence of enduring economic remedies for the individuals targeted by the military rule.

The abrupt termination of work, along with enduring financial insecurity, greatly affects their capacity to support themselves and their families. The negative perception and apprehension linked to being on the warrant list impede their chances of obtaining permanent and secure employment, compelling them to engage in hazardous and exploitative labor circumstances. These economic difficulties are worsened by interrupted professions and schooling, the psychological burden of living under continual danger, and the depletion of assets. The overall economic ramifications on families and communities emphasize the wider socio-economic effects of the military junta's oppressive strategies, requiring immediate attention and support from both domestic and foreign stakeholders.

Psychological Consequences

The release of the warrant list caused significant apprehension and ambiguity among the population. Civilians, especially those engaged in rallies or who had expressed dissent against the military, had concerns over their security and the well-being of their families. The persistent risk of capricious detention fostered a climate in which everyday existence became hazardous and uncertain. This widespread concern resulted in increased levels of worry and stress, which had a substantial impact on mental health and overall well-being.

Social Stigmatization: The psychological difficulties were further intensified by social stigmatization, leading to a substantial influence on mental health. The individuals listed on the warrant were designated as enemies of the state, resulting in their exclusion and rejection by their communities. Interview Participant Phyu said that publicly being recognized as a dissenter frequently led to social isolation, as neighbors, colleagues, and even extended family members deliberately removed themselves to prevent any connection with the targeted individual. This state of isolation intensified emotions of alone, powerlessness, and despondency, further deteriorating mental well-being.³⁹

Burden in Families: The anxiety and apprehension linked to being singled out by military rule also significantly impacted personal relationships. The families of those included on the warrant experienced significant strain, as the possibility of arrest hung over their houses. The perpetual apprehension regarding possible incursions and the well-being of cherished individuals fostered an exceedingly tense domestic milieu. This chronic tension frequently resulted in disputes and misinterpretations within families, placing significant strain on relationships to the point of rupture.

End of Partnerships and Marriages: The psychological burden and the necessity for continual watchfulness frequently resulted in substantial disturbances in family dynamics. The partners and wives of targeted persons often had challenging choices, such as whether to remain in a relationship and face potential retribution as a group or to split to guarantee the well-being of their children and other relatives. The choice to conceal oneself or escape the nation exacerbated tensions within families, since extended periods of being apart and the unpredictability of being reunited burdened family dynamics significantly.

³⁹ Phyu, Interview with Participant 1 in Chiang Mai, Thailand., 2024.

For several individuals, these tensions peaked and resulted in the dissolution of partnerships and marriages. The individuals who were targeted under Section 505A faced persistent dread and isolation, which, combined with the social and economic difficulties caused by the military's crackdown, made it extremely difficult for them to establish healthy and supportive connections. In severe instances, this resulted in marital dissolution, as couples grappled with the unrelenting strain and the psychological burden of residing in such oppressive circumstances.

Depression and isolation lead to suicide: Isolation over an extended period might result in sentiments of despondency. Those hiding may have the impression that there is no way out of their predicament and no way out of their hiding scenario. This has the potential to increase symptoms of depression, such as chronic melancholy, tiredness, and a loss of interest in things that they previously loved. One of the factors that might lead to a feeling of helplessness is the perception that one is unable to exert control over one's circumstances or an impact on the larger political situation. One of the most important contributors to the development of depression is the feeling of powerlessness.

Being isolated from one's friends, family, and other support networks can create a strong sense of emotional isolation. As a result of the fact that humans are fundamentally social animals, the absence of meaningful social contact might make their symptoms of depression even more severe. There is a correlation between extended feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and hopelessness and experiencing great emotional anguish, which can lead to thoughts of suicide. Some people may consider suicide to be the only way out of their intolerable circumstances. Interview participant Thein expressed that she would like to vanish from that cramped space since she is experiencing feelings of hopelessness and being a burden of the situation.⁴⁰

Some people may perceive that their circumstances are putting their loved ones at unnecessary risk or undue worry. Suicidal thoughts can be a contributing factor for those who believe that they are a burden to others around them, as they may believe that their absence would ease the suffering of people they care about. Also suffering are the families of individuals who are hiding. There is a possibility that they are unable to give help owing to security concerns or because they are unaware of the whereabouts of their loved ones. It is possible for the strain

⁴⁰ Thein, Interview with Participant 4 in Bangkok, Thailand., 2024.

that is placed on family members to result in secondary mental health problems inside the family unit.

The psychological ramifications of the warrant list also had a wider cultural influence, deterring others from participating in the resistance. The evident anguish experienced by individuals subjected to Section 505A acted as a somber cautionary message to prospective activists and demonstrators. The awareness that expressing dissent towards the military may result in significant adverse effects on one's personal life and family members created a feeling of apprehension and powerlessness among the broader populace. The diminished deterrent impact of this phenomenon undermined the resistance movement as individuals carefully assessed the potential consequences on their psychological well-being and personal relationships before deciding whether to participate.

Continuing or Stopping Social Media Activism

Despite being included on the Section 505A warrant list, several individuals persisted in their social media engagement. Their resistance is frequently motivated by a profound dedication to the advocacy of democracy and human rights in Myanmar. These activists assert that it is essential to sustain visibility and express outspoken opposition to ensure worldwide attention is focused on the junta's heinous acts and rally support for the resistance movement.

Interview participant Hlaing asserts, "This is the sole method that can transport us to our place of origin."⁴¹ For a significant number of individuals, the act of persisting in activism is regarded as a moral obligation, motivated by a strong sense of responsibility towards their fellow citizens and a feeling of unity with other demonstrators. They believe their opinions are crucial in the joint effort to fight against oppression and that being silent would be equivalent to giving in.

Although these activists demonstrate endurance, the persistent risk of arrest and the burden of leading a covert existence have a substantial psychological impact on them. The constant presence of anxiety, tension, and the apprehension of being betrayed significantly affect their mental health and overall well-being. The assistance of individuals who share similar beliefs and values and worldwide organizations that show support and unity is essential for both

⁴¹ Hlaing, Interview with Participant 6 in Vienna, Austria., 2024.

emotional and practical help. These networks support maintaining the morale and operational capabilities of participants facing threats.

Simultaneously, some individuals discontinue their social media involvement out of serious apprehensions about the safety of their families. The military administration frequently employs strategies that include not just singling out activists but also subjecting their families to harassment, intimidation, and even arrest. For some individuals, the possible detriment to their loved ones surpasses the necessity of persisting in public resistance.

The apprehension of doing damage to their family elicits a substantial psychological weight of culpability and obligation. Activists have the challenge of balancing their dedication to the cause and their responsibility to safeguard their families from retaliation. Interview participant Swe stepped back from the public visibility. After ensuring the safety of their families, several activists choose to withdraw from public action while still supporting the movement via more discreet means. This may involve activities such as backstage coordination, financing, or offering strategic counsel. Activists may migrate their families to more secure regions, either inside Myanmar or overseas, to mitigate the possibility of reprisals. Nevertheless, this task is frequently challenging and precarious.⁴²

Family issues leading to the cessation of social media engagement might undermine the movement by diminishing the quantity of outspoken and prominent adversaries of the regime. This hinders the transmission of information and the organization of resistance efforts. Nevertheless, many individuals who discontinue their participation in public action continue to engage with clandestine networks. Although less apparent, these covert endeavors are essential for maintaining the resistance, offering logistical assistance, and preserving the vitality of the movement.

The choices made by persons on the Section 505A warrant list about their activity on social media demonstrate an intricate combination of bravery, apprehension, obligation, and consideration for protecting their families. While several individuals persist in challenging the government through ongoing action, others prioritize safeguarding their loved ones by withdrawing from public engagements. Both pathways emphasize the significant personal costs and ethical challenges encountered by those who oppose the military dictatorship in Myanmar.

⁴² Swe, Interview with Participant 2 in Chiang Mai, Thailand., 2024.

The persistent conflict, driven by both overt and covert endeavors, highlights the tenacity and resolve of the citizens of Myanmar in their pursuit of liberty and democratic governance.

Impact on Civil Society and Media

Journalists and media workers were prominently included in the 505A warrant lists, which significantly negatively affected the functioning of independent media. The fear of being arrested resulted in self-censorship, which restricted the dissemination of information and reduced the extent of reporting on the junta's misconduct and the resistance movement.

Civil society groups, which have a crucial function in promoting and defending human rights, saw a decline in their effectiveness due to the deliberate targeting of their members. This impaired their capacity to function efficiently and promote democratic government. The release of the 505A warrant list acted as a disincentive to anyone engaging in the anti-coup movement. The deterrent effect of potential arrest and severe consequences dissuaded several individuals from engaging in protests or partaking in CDM. The widespread fear and suppression have lasting consequences, possibly discouraging future generations from participating in political engagement and fostering a culture of quiet and obedience.

Conclusion

The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, was a major setback in the country's political development, undoing ten years of democratic advancements and causing widespread chaos. This study has investigated the significant effects of the military junta's limitations on social media on the lives of Myanmar's citizens, uncovering a complex situation of oppression, opposition, and adaptability. The coup has interrupted Myanmar's rapidly developing digital environment, where social media has become an essential component of daily living, political discussions, and citizen participation. The State Administrative Council (SAC) utilized various digital authoritarian strategies, such as internet shutdowns, online censorship, surveillance, targeted prosecution, and social media manipulation, to suppress opposition and regulate the dissemination of information. Implementing these policies has had significant adverse effects on the freedom of expression, availability of information, and democratic engagement of the people of Myanmar.

Implementing Section 505A of the Penal Code has been too harsh, making a wide range of expressions and behaviors that endanger public order or state security illegal. The indiscriminate apprehensions and incarcerations of activists, journalists, and ordinary residents according to this legislation have engendered pervasive trepidation and ambiguity. The persistent presence of danger has had a profound psychological impact, resulting in increased levels of worry, tension, and social withdrawal. The negative perception linked to being identified as an adversary of the government has worsened these difficulties, leading to considerable psychological problems and putting pressure on personal connections.

Engaging in social media activism has resulted in significant and frequently disruptive transformations in the lives of several individuals. The individuals on the Section 505A warrant list have had significant, life-changing consequences. People have been subjected to sudden arrests and have had to endure severe conditions while in prison, such as overcrowded cells, insufficient medical attention, and instances of torture. The obscure and unfair judicial procedures have exacerbated their suffering since several individuals are detained for prolonged periods without being granted a trial.

For those who successfully avoided being captured by law enforcement, the choice to conceal themselves has presented its unique difficulties. Residing in secrecy necessitates perpetual mobility to evade discovery, resulting in a life characterized by unpredictability and apprehension. This unstable way of living disturbs the normal state, resulting in substantial economic and social difficulties. Individuals in concealment frequently have to relinquish their employment and schooling, depending on assistance from compassionate networks to fulfill their fundamental necessities. The psychological burden of this way of life can be overpowering, resulting in intense anxiety, melancholy, and, in certain instances, contemplation of suicide.

The effect on family relationships has been significant. The families of individuals targeted by the military experience significant pressure and danger, resulting in strained relationships and, in certain cases, the dissolution of marriages. Concerns of reprisals against their loved ones have led several activists to disengage from public advocacy, placing the well-being of their families above their dedication to the cause. Although serving as a form of protection, this retreat also indicates a personal act of giving up something and emphasizes the significant weight of shame and responsibility that these individuals bear.

Despite the menacing dangers, several individuals have pursued their advocacy, propelled by a deep-seated dedication to democracy and human rights. These activists utilize social media to record instances of misconduct, rally assistance, and maintain the persistence of the opposition movement. They get their strength from a strong feeling of obligation and unity with their fellow citizens, firmly believing their voices are indispensable in the struggle against injustice. Nevertheless, this persistent activism incurs a significant personal toll. The persistent apprehension of being apprehended and the emotional burden of living a covert existence have a substantial impact on mental well-being, necessitating strong support systems to maintain their endeavors.

The larger implications of these discoveries pertain to the influence on civic society and autonomous media. The deliberate persecution of journalists and members of civil society has undermined these crucial foundations of democracy, resulting in the practice of self-restraint and a decline in the ability to champion human rights and democratic government. The 505A warrant list has had a chilling effect, discouraging political engagement and maybe promoting a climate of quiet and conformity among future generations.

Engaging in social media activism has resulted in substantial personal consequences, including profound alterations and disruptions in one's life. Notwithstanding these obstacles, several individuals persist in advocating for their rights, displaying extraordinary fortitude and resolve. The wider ramifications for civil society, media, and future political engagement emphasize the necessity of ongoing campaigning and backing for Myanmar's pro-democracy movement.

Future research should focus on several critical areas to further understand and address the ongoing crisis in Myanmar from a human rights perspective. It is essential to continue documenting human rights violations, particularly those facilitated by digital surveillance and repression, by compiling detailed case studies of individuals targeted under Section 505A and analyzing the broader impacts on their families and communities. Investigating the long-term mental health consequences of living under a repressive regime, especially for those who have been in hiding or detained, is crucial to inform the development of support mechanisms and interventions. Additionally, assessing the effectiveness of international sanctions, diplomatic efforts, and advocacy campaigns in mitigating the impacts of digital repression and supporting the pro-democracy movement can help refine strategies for international solidarity and pressure on the junta. Exploring the development and implementation of digital security measures, such as VPNs and encrypted communications, can provide activists and ordinary citizens with tools to protect themselves from surveillance and persecution. Furthermore, examining how social media can be leveraged to build resilience among Myanmar's citizens, through safe communication, information dissemination, and mobilization of support, is vital. Finally, studying the long-term effects of the current repression on political engagement and civic participation is essential for fostering a future generation committed to democratic values and human rights. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute significantly to Myanmar's ongoing fight for freedom and justice.

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