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### MYANMAR'S DIGITAL REGIME FORESHADOWS SE ASIA

By

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The throttling of internet freedoms in the wake of Myanmar's coup is the latest in a distinct trend toward digital authoritarianism in Southeast Asia. Attacks on the internet are rising, including countrywide shutdowns and targeting of conflict zones.

Such assaults also include tactics like intentionally slowing down internet servers in Vietnam, pressuring technology companies to take down critics' social media posts in Cambodia, actively manipulating social media narratives in the Philippines and the alleged deployment of signal jamming during political protests in Thailand.

The active disruption of mobile and internet connectivity in Myanmar since its February coup represent a significant escalation of these tactics. They are an unabashed effort by the newly ruling military junta to not only control media content, but to limit access to communication and information itself on a widespread and ongoing basis.

Even before the coup, the Myanmar military manipulated the internet to disrupt information flow to its benefit. Flaring insurgencies in Rakhine and Chin states prompted a 19-month internet shutdown within conflict zones during 2019 and 2020. This move had the tragic side effect of disrupting residents' ability to access Covid-related public health information. During this period, internet shutdowns also targeted critics of the military. In March 2020, several news outlets were blocked for allegedly spreading fake news. And, in the lead up to the 2020 general election, the website of Justice for Myanmar – an advocacy group critical of the military – was blocked for allegedly publishing fake news.

Myanmar's downhill slide has accelerated rapidly. On the day of the coup, the internet went dark, and access to phone lines and television were disrupted. Nighttime internet shutdowns continue to prevent civilian communication as critics are rounded up. Local internet providers were strongarmed into blocking Facebook for a period -- and later Twitter and Instagram -- for "stability" and on the basis that these platforms spread disinformation and incite violence.

For a period, telecommunications operators were mandated to block the direct messaging apps Facebook Messenger and What's App, citing the necessity to protect public security. Later, the junta rolled out content-restrictions on Wikipedia and its affiliates, with a mandate to block references to the coup and pro-democracy activism. Most recently, five media outlets that covered the coup and protests were shut down, and dozens of journalists were arrested.

Residents with resources skirted some of these shutdowns with Virtual Private Networks, which enables secure connections to contraband sites when internet access is available, and moved from Facebook Messenger to more secure alternatives like What's App and Signal. Still, despite these workarounds, these measures significantly hamper the free flow of information in Myanmar.

In support of new telecommunications restrictions, the military has cited Section 77 of Myanmar's Telecommunications Law, which allows restriction of telecommunications during national emergencies. Furthermore, Section 379 of the Myanmar Constitution allows suspension of civil liberties like the right to express and publish their convictions and opinions, as well as to freely associate and assemble, during insurrection or a threat to the nation's unity. These are major loopholes to meaningful protection of civil liberties and freedom of expression.

More ominously, a proposed new cybersecurity law would allow the disabling of social media accounts that post content allegedly threatening national "unity, stabilisation and peace". This vaguely worded ordinance could enable the junta to hamper all social media criticism by forcing the shutdown of critics' accounts. With criminal penalties of up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of the equivalent of up to US\$7,500 (230,000 baht), this proposal could seriously chill public discourse in Myanmar if implemented.

Facebook (which owns Messenger, What's App and Instagram), and the international parent companies of local internet providers have decried these developments. Recently, Facebook and Instagram permanently banned all entities and businesses affiliated with the Myanmar military from its platform, expanding its existing ban on senior military officials.

The irony is rich that the military -- which has long deployed disinformation on Facebook, including unsubstantiated allegations of election fraud after its 2020 defeat to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy -- is using the threat of social instability from fake news to shut down Facebook itself and restrict the internet more broadly. This escalation from manipulating information to outright controlling of information flow itself

is a significant deterioration of the fragile public forum within which Myanmar's civil society operates.

Developments around internet freedoms in Myanmar unfortunately do not augur well for Southeast Asia. Unless we push back on emerging restrictions in multiple countries, the digital space for civil society on the internet may evaporate throughout the region.

Myanmar is the canary in the coal mine. What's unfolding there demonstrates the worst-case scenario of what can happen throughout Southeast Asia should an authoritarian government take over and consolidate control. While most countries in the region have a longer history of civil society and democratic institutions, marked moves toward information control throughout Southeast Asia are deeply concerning. Civil liberties -- including but not limited to internet freedoms and the free flow of information -- must be protected, to ensure at all costs that other countries do not go into the same free fall as Myanmar.

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