The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma was in many ways an unprecedented event in the intersection between politics and technology. There is, of course, the obvious: the event marks a rare instance in which a government leveraged control of nationalized ISPs to entirely black out Internet access to prevent images and information about the protests from reaching the outside world. At another level, it is an example of an Internet driven protest which did not lead to tangible political change. On deeper reflection it is also of interest because of the complex interaction between eyewitnesses within the country and a networked public sphere of bloggers, student activists, and governments around the globe. To that end, this case study examines the root causes, progress, and outcomes of the Saffron Revolution and attempts to parse out the extent to which technology may have played a useful or detrimental role in the unfolding of events. The case concludes with some initial hypotheses about the long-term impact of the protests and the role of the Internet in highly authoritarian states.

THE INTERNET & DEMOCRACY PROJECT

This case study is part of a series produced by the Internet and Democracy Project, a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, that investigates the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes. More information on the Internet and Democracy Project can be found at http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/internetdemocracy.

The project's initial case studies focused on three of the most frequently cited examples of the Internet's influence on democracy. The first case looked at the user-generated news and its impact on the 2002 elections in South Korea. The second documented the role of technology in Ukraine's Orange Revolution. The third analyzed the network composition and content of the Iranian Blogosphere.

Fall 2008 will see the release of a second set of cases which broaden the scope of our research and examine some more recent and less well-known parts of the research landscape. This includes two cases on the role of the Internet and technology in the 2007 civic crises of Burma's Saffron Revolution and post-election violence in Kenya. Urs Gasser's three part work examines the role of technology in Switzerland's advanced, direct democracy. Following our research on the Iranian blogosphere are two cases on the Arabic and Russian blogospheres.

The objective of these case studies is to write a narrative description of the events and the technology used in each case, to draw initial conclusions about the actual impact of technology on democratic events and processes, and to identify questions for further research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In September of 2007, the world witnessed another uprising by the people of Burma against the military regime that has run the country since 1962. Due to the tightly controlled media environment in Burma, it is generally difficult to get access to information about the situation on the ground, especially during times of citizen unrest. This protest, however, was different.

The movement that came to be known as the Saffron Revolution caught global attention as bloggers and digital activists flooded cyberspace with grainy images and videos of saffron-robed monks leading large, peaceful demonstrations against the government. Burmese citizens took pictures and videos, many on their mobile phones, and secretly uploaded them from Internet cafes or sent digital files across the border to be uploaded.

When the government cracked down on the demonstrators, killing monks, civilians, and even journalists, the world watched in horror as the Internet gave people outside Burma a peek into what was actually happening inside the country. Activists from around the world joined the democratic struggle through protests and demonstrations in their respective countries. Many governments issued strong statements against the regime.

On September 29, in a desperate attempt to keep the world from knowing about events in Burma, the regime completely shut down the country's Internet connection and disabled international mobile phone connections in an unprecedented attempt at a total information blockade. The country was cut off from the international Internet gateway for nearly two weeks. The government's severe response indicates its need for total information control, as well as the difficulty of controlling the networked public sphere compared to traditional media.

The recent history of Burma is an interesting case of the role of the Internet in protests and transnational democracy movements. However, in this case it is an example of a situation where Internet-driven protests did not lead to political change, which is worth understanding in its own right. The significance of the Internet on the Burmese pro-democracy movement is also worth analyzing from several perspectives, including:

- The effect of the 'new mass media model' in fostering the democratic behavior of citizens;
- The role of the Internet in transnational mobilization;
- The impact of the Internet in authoritarian regimes and their response to citizen unrest.

The Internet has created a platform that allows individuals living under authoritarian rule to send information to the outside world, something that was much more challenging in the pre-Internet era. It is also an efficient tool for people from across the globe to organize pro-democracy protests and campaigns. Overall, the Internet has brought about a new dimension to political activism. However, the level of information control within authoritarian countries seems to have important ramifications on the efficacy of Internet-based political activism. The uprising in Burma is ultimately an example of a protest where digitally network technologies played a critical role, but where the protests failed to lead to major political change. As discussed at the end of this paper, the lasting impact of the protests is debatable, and potentially both positive and negative. Let us first turn to Burma's recent political history before investigating the Internet's impact on the Saffron Revolution.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SAFFRON REVOLUTION

Burma, the largest country in Southeast Asia, is situated in an important geopolitical location bordering some of the biggest emerging powers in Asia, namely China, India, and Thailand. Migration over the past few centuries has made the Burmese population racially diverse.[1] Tensions along racial lines have nearly always existed and have been one of the main challenges to national unity.

Early Years after Independence

Burma was ruled by a local monarchy until the British dethroned the last king of Burma in 1885. It was part of the British Empire in South Asia until 1937, when it became a separately administered territory, independent of the Indian administration.[2] After the Second World War, the United Kingdom was too weak to retain control over Burma and began to gradually transfer power to local leaders.

Burma became independent from Britain in 1948 through successful negotiations led by the nationalist leader, Aung San. He also had the additional challenge of unifying different local ethnic factions under the Union of Burma. Aung San was assassinated along with a host of other leaders before the declaration of independence. Deprived of many of its nationalist leaders who were key players in national unification, the country soon plunged into civil unrest and interethnic conflicts. The democratically elected government, which was formed by a power sharing arrangement among major ethnic groups, proved largely incapable of controlling racial tensions and civil unrest as ethnic factions took up armed struggle to demand independence from the Union of Burma. [3]

Rise of the Military

The inability of the elected government to maintain control led to unprecedented growth in the strength of the armed forces, which ultimately staged a coup in March 1962 under the leadership of General Ne Win. He established a socialist regime in the country under a newly formed political party, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), nationalized private enterprises, and by 1964 dissolved all other parties. [4]

The economy faltered under Ne Win's. Although it was once one of the world's largest rice exporters, by 1987 it was one of the ten poorest countries in the world. There were numerous protests—often led by students—which were put down by Ne Win's soldiers and routinely led to the closure of universities. While the economy collapsed, the army continued to grow in size and strength. [5]

The protests against Ne Win culminated in August of 1988, when a student-led uprising led to widespread pro-democracy demonstrations. The unrest began when students at the Rangoon Institute of Technology organized campus protests. The military responded by killing a student activist, provoking a large-scale uprising that began on August 8, 1988 that became known as the '8888 Uprising.' Students were joined by people from all walks of life, including monks, teachers, and day laborers. The military opened fire on the peaceful protest, killing at least three thousand demonstrators. [6]

As the uprising spread across the nation and spun out of

control, the government of General Ne Win fell, only to be replaced by another military dictator, General Saw Maung, who declared a state of emergency to gain control of the situation. He soon declared himself the prime minister and promised to hold a free and fair election to transfer power to a democratically elected government. He formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which consisted of senior military personnel, to run the affairs of the country until the promised election. [7]

Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of assassinated leader Aung San, gained national recognition during the 1988 uprising. In September 1988, she founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) and formed a formal political platform for pro-democracy movements in the country. She was placed under house arrest in July of 1989 when she refused the junta's demands to leave the country.

The election promised by military leaders was held in May 1990, and saw the National League for Democracy win an overwhelming majority of seats. However, the SLORC refused to relinquish power and instead arrested many newly elected MPs, while many others fled to neighboring countries. The elected assembly never had the opportunity officially meet. The NLD also lost strength as many of its leaders were either in jail, under house arrest, or forced into exile.

Consolidation of the Junta's Power

Senior General Than Shwe assumed power in 1992 and has served as the head of the ruling military junta ever since. There have been occasional uprisings between 1992 and the Saffron Revolution, usually led by students. The government has put down each protest with arrests, torture, and political executions. In 1997, the military junta renamed SLORC the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in an attempt to rebrand itself. The pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, remains under house arrest, and many other pro-democracy leaders are either in jail or exile. [8]

Some experts argue that external diplomatic pressure has not had a significant impact on the military junta's control of the government. [9] With diplomatic and trade support from its powerful neighbors, including China, India, and

Russia, threats of sanctions from the U.S. and British governments have had little impact. There are also those who argue that Western economic sanctions often hurt average Burmese citizens while inflicting minimal pain on the government [10] since Burma's primary trade partners are China, Thailand, India, and Japan.[11]

The Saffron Revolution

The Saffron Revolution was the first major nationwide uprising since 1998. The origin of the revolution can be traced back to August 15, 2007 when the military government announced the end of government subsidies for diesel fuel and natural gas. This precipitated an immediate and significant hike in the price of diesel fuel and natural gas, which quickly created inflationary pressure on basic commodities such as rice and cooking oil. By August 19, hundreds of civil society activists and NLD party affiliates started to march through the streets of Rangoon. Although the participants in these marches were severely harassed and beaten, the protest quickly spread to other parts of the country. [12]

By late August, scores of Buddhist monks began to join in protests against the government. On September 5, a group of monks was attacked by a pro-government militia, who tied monks to poles, beat, and disrobed them.[13] The news of this incident renewed waves of protest around the country since monks are a revered segment of society in Burma's Buddhist culture.[14] The All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA), an organization formed during the Revolution to coordinate protests, demanded a formal apology from the government. When the government refused, tens of thousands of monks, surrounded by other civilians, began to march in the streets of several Burmese towns during the week of September 17.[15] The military government had not seen a protest of this scale in almost twenty years and appeared largely unprepared for it.

The government attempted to control the situation through mass arrests, torture, and murder. Pro-government forces raided monasteries and detained suspected marchers. The number of protesters killed during the Saffron revolution ranges from thirteen[16] by the government, to thirty-one according to the UN Human Rights Council, to estimates as high as several hundred by pro-democracy groups. [17] The government was able to stop the protests,

and afterwards security forces continued to search for suspected protesters and carry out political executions.[18]

THE EFFECT OF THE NEW MASS MEDIA MODEL ON AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Yochai Benkler argues that the Internet has created tremendous possibilities for the media, even under autocratic regimes. He argues that before the Internet, or under the old mass media model, there were limited points of media production since the cost of producing content was high. This made it easy for authoritarian regimes to capture and control media outlets. With the advent of the Internet, the scenario has changed drastically.[19]

According to Benkler, the new mass media model has had two major features: 1) The Internet has drastically reduced the cost of producing and publishing media content since there are only minimal barriers to creating Web content, and; 2) The Internet has also decentralized and distributed media production, which makes it much harder for authoritarian regimes to capture media outlets. Burma presents a particularly compelling case for comparison of the pre-Internet scenario and the new mass media model.[20]

The Old Mass Media Model in Burma

Despite the strict control of the Burmese media today, it was not long ago that Burma had one of the least restrictive and relatively sophisticated press environments in Asia. The roots of Burmese press freedom date to the colonial era when several newspapers played a significant role in the rise of the nationalist movement in the 1920s. Many editors and journalists from these newspapers became influential political figures during Burma's independence movement. One, Ba Choe, editor of the journal *Deedok* and founder of the Fabian Society in Burma, embodied the relative freedom and prestige of the press during the 1930s and 1940s.[21]

On July 19, 1947, Aung San was assassinated along with *Deedok* editor Ba Choe, allegedly by their political opponents. On the same day, U Saw, the editor and founder of *Thuriya*, one of the most outspoken newspapers at that time, was arrested and later hanged on charges of murder. By the time the Union of Burma was formed in January

1948, many prominent leaders and journalists involved in the independence movement had been either assassinated, jailed, or forced into exile.[22]

When General Ne Win seized power in March 1962, one of his first steps was to establish the Soviet-style Printers and Publishers Registration Act, which, ". . . required the approval by a censor of anything that is written and distributed in the country, including all books, magazines, other periodicals, song lyrics, and motion picture scripts — in most cases before the material is distributed, and sometimes before it is printed."[23] The government also created the Press Scrutiny Board to oversee the process of censorship.[24]

In early 1963, the government arrested the editor of the *Nation*, an outspoken defender of press freedom, and closed down the newspaper, thus setting in motion a process that would lead to a ban on all private newspapers by December 1966. In July 1963, the military launched its own daily newspaper, *Loktha Pyithu Nezin* (The Working People's Daily), and formally took over another newspaper, *The Guardian*. In 1969, two more newspapers were nationalized including *Myanma Alin* (The New Light of Burma), one of the oldest newspapers in the country. In the end, only six newspapers remained, all of them owned and controlled by the military government.[25]

The government also severely restricted the import of international newspapers and magazines. In order to further prevent uncensored information from leaving the country, locally-based foreign news agencies were forced to appoint local Burmese citizens as their correspondents, and those appointments had to be approved by the government.[26]

The government has retained strict control over TV and radio as well. In 1985, the Ministry of Communications, Posts, and Telegraphs enacted a special Television and Video Law that required compulsory licensing of TV sets, video machines, and satellite television. While it was more difficult to get access to foreign TV channels, those in Burma still had limited access to Burmese-language broadcasts of BBC Radio and Voice of America.[27]

The Burmese government is one of the more successful au-

tocratic regimes to take advantage of the 'old media model,' which lends itself to relatively easy control. The government does this through strict oversight, nationalization of media outlets, and strict censorship laws. There are numerous accounts of journalists who have been jailed, tortured, killed, or exiled using the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration and 1985 Television and Video Law,[28] including the arrest of the editor of the weekly *Myanmar Nation*, in February 2008.[29]

In Burma today, the traditional media are completely controlled by the state, including three newspapers, three TV stations, two radio stations, and one news agency.[30] However, with respect to online media, the case is different. With the emergence of the Internet during the early 1990s, the military government's media policies began to evolve in reaction to the challenges posed by the online environment.

The New Mass Media Model in Burma

With the rise of the Internet as a widely available resource in the early 1990s, several pro-democracy Burmese expatriates began to communicate over an electronic mailing list called *seasia-l*, which was used for discussions about Southeast Asia. Among the early users was Coban Tun, who used *seasia-l* to post information and news about Burma gathered from various online sources (such as the Usenet system) and newspaper reports.[31]

In 1994, BurmaNet emerged as the first source of online news about Burma, particularly information about human rights abuses collected primarily from newspapers in Thailand.[32] It remains one of the major aggregators for news about Burma.[33] A grant from the Soros Foundation provided a boost to this early effort, which quickly attracted the attention of many Burmese expatriates and Burma sympathizers.[34] During the early years of the Internet, the Burmese government likely did not foresee that the Internet would become an alternative news source that would also launch a new breed of dissenters: digital activists.

In the mid-1990s, online news sites dedicated to the promotion of democracy in Burma began to emerge. This was a significant step forward compared to earlier

online news groups and mailing lists, which only collected materials from mainstream media sources. Websites such as Irrawaddy (www.irrawaddy.org), Mizzima News (www.mizzima.com) and Democratic Voice of Burma (www.dvb.no) which were established by Burmese journalists living in exile began to gradually generate independent news about Burma. Many of these sites were based in Thailand and were closely affiliated with pro-democracy movements.[35] The Internet allowed users to become creators of content instead of just consumers of information.

With no easy way to stop the information flow in cyberspace, the military government began to actively promote its own views online. A military representative regularly transmitted the regime's official statements on BurmaNet and the *soc.culture.burma* newsgroup, and also sometimes participated in online discussions and debates.[36]

In 1996, the government stepped up its efforts to curb production of unauthorized online media content with the establishment of the Computer Science Development Law, which prohibited ownership of a computer, modem, or fax machine without prior approval of the Ministry of Communications. It further prescribed a prison sentence of seven to fifteen years for violators. The law also established harsh measures against the establishment of computer networks without government approval.[37]

The government also created its own online platforms to compete with BurmaNet, including its own electronic mailing list, MyanmarNet. As one might expect it was strictly moderated and presented official news and policy statements—many lifted from the state-controlled newspaper *New Light of Myanmar*. Two government Websites, myanmar.com and myanmar-information.net, were also established and regularly provided government approved information about Burma. The first is an official government portal with links to national government agencies and newspapers. The second is a daily compilation of news items coming from various government sources. These sites are also used to address international accusations against the regime. [38] Some believe that the Internet is used by the junta to "misinform, divide and intimidate." According to an activist based in Ireland:

> Before the Net, the regime had no real voice

in the world. Now, it has its own platform to woo naive potential tourists and provide information for business interests. The multilingual www.myanmar.com attempts to paint Burma as a peaceful, beautiful, welcoming place. Most people will not be fooled by the blatant disinformation, but inevitably it gets through to some. [39]

The Saffron Revolution and the New Mass Media Model

Online dissemination of news and information about the Saffron Revolution represents perhaps one of the most notable manifestations of the new mass media model. Despite efforts by the government to control all media outlets, this attempted revolution demonstrated that the Internet does not lend itself easily to control. Seemingly benign technologies such as cell phones are sufficient for taking images and videos and passing them to the outside world through the Internet—something that was unimaginable under the old mass media model.

By the time of the Saffron Revolution, Internet penetration rates and interactive technologies had progressed substantially compared to the early years of the Internet. With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, users can also become publishers of text, audio, and video instead of just receiving text based information. Also, with advances in data compression software, large video and audio files can be uploaded and shared much more easily than in the past.

The new mass media model during the Saffron Revolution was characterized by citizen journalists, Internet cafe users inside Burma, pro-democracy bloggers from across the globe, and online newspapers based abroad. Digital activists in Burma took full advantage of the opportunities that the Internet offered. Despite high risks, they managed to anonymously upload images and videos from local Internet cafes, email them to friends and relatives outside Burma or pass them physically across the border to individuals in Thailand, to be uploaded to the Internet. Preetam Rai, a Southeast Asia editor of Global Voices Online, noted:

> It was surprising to see new blogs sprouting up [in Burma] in the initial stages of the protests and posting images, etc. There, kids

were smart enough to post anonymously and tech savvy enough to use alternative posting methods when the blogger.com domain was blocked. [40]

Bloggers from across the world flooded the global blogosphere with images, audio, and video from Burma. Burmese born blogger Ko Htike, based in London, reported to BBC News that about ten people inside Burma regularly sent him materials from Internet cafes, via free hosting pages, or sometimes by email. [41] Online news sites such as Irrawaddy.com quickly started compiling these images to form coherent visual supplements to their news and opinion sections about the events in Burma.

During the Saffron Revolution, the major source of information was content such as amateur video taken by ordinary citizens, instead of that created by professional journalists. Most traditional news outlets—including the Associated Press, Reuters, CNN, and BBC—regularly ran grainy video and images from citizen journalists and even tourists who were eyewitnesses on the ground. [42]

In a desperate measure to curb news from inside Burma leaking to the outside world, the government shut down the Internet completely and temporarily suspended most cell phone services on September 29. The Saffron Revolution is an example of the power of a Web 2.0-enabled Internet, which allows individuals to create news as it unfolds and to spread it rapidly to the global blogosphere and mainstream news outlets. However, the Internet infrastructure in many developing countries is still tied to telecommunication companies or utilities which are often state controlled and can be used to limit access to the Internet, or in the case of Burma, to completely shut it off.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN TRANSNATIONAL MOBILIZATION

It has been argued that the Internet has had an important role in cross-border mobilization around national or global causes. [43] Older information technologies such as the telephone or fax are expensive and often practically irrelevant when organizing international campaigns spanning several cities or countries. The distance between the campaign participants and the speed in which the organizers have to strategize and take decisions necessitates heavy dependence on the Internet.

Andrew Chadwick argues that the Internet has allowed for easier organization of international campaigns. He cites as an example the Zapatistas movement, in which Mexican separatists tried to garner support from international civil society through the Internet. [44] The recent history of the Burmese pro-democracy movement also presents an interesting case of transnational mobilization via the Internet. What is perhaps different about the Burmese case, as opposed to the Zapatistas movement, is the fact that due to severely limited Internet access inside Burma, much of the cyber activism surrounding democracy in Burma has originated outside the country with links to locally-based activists. [45] Preetam Rai, who has been closely following the Burmese blogosphere for the last two years, commented:

> The online population in Burma comes mostly from the bigger cities and mostly students and young professionals. Their blogs are generally about popular culture, technology and life in general and one would not expect political content. Once in a while some of these bloggers would touch on politics but they would always use vague terms and quickly change topics if the discussion becomes heated. Most people involved in anti-government postings were Burmese exiles. [46]

Ethan Zuckerman, co-founder of Global Voices and a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, backs up Rai's analysis, "Cyber activism inside a country can work if there is not a high degree of fear. In Burma, people are generally terrified about writing against the government due to the numerous cases of arrest and torture." [47]

Many Burmese dissidents in exile operate along Burma's borders, mostly concentrated in Thailand and India, who regularly monitor the junta's activities with respect to human rights violations, economic and social policies, and censorship. They use the Internet to send information to pro-democracy activists around the world through blogs and more formal media channels such as online

newspapers and magazines. Over the years, the Burmese dissidents have increasingly realized that the option to restore democracy in Burma through armed struggle is fading due to the rising strength of the armed forces and the support of neighboring countries that supply weapons to the regime. Consequently, they have increasingly attempted to defy the junta through diplomatic pressure and attempts to sensitize foreigners, including those in the United States and United Kingdom, to the plight of the Burmese in hopes that those governments will then exert pressure on the Burmese government.[48]

The Genesis of Digital Activism in Burma

The seeds of an international movement for democracy in Burma were sown in the 1980s by organizations such as the US-based Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB), which also has chapters in other parts of the world. After the 1988 revolution, many students and activists fled Burma and spread across the world and eventually formed the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) which began to connect with international political and pro-democracy organizations, raise humanitarian aid for Burmese refugees, and organize demonstrations and vigils in front of Burmese diplomatic outposts. [49] The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 provided a major boost to this international movement and helped attracted many non-Burmese to the cause. The emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s added a new dimension to trans-national mobilization.

By the mid-1990s, students at universities in the developed world had access to the Internet and email. With the spread of news about the reality of life in Burma through various Internet-based sources, digital activists around the world began to communicate through email, listservs, and usenet groups about strategies to organize protests and raise awareness about Burma. By this time, the Internet had become more than a source of news and information—it had become an effective organizational tool.[50]

The Free Burma Coalition (FBC) based at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and led by Burmese exiled dissident, Muang Zarni, was one of the global leaders in the Burmese pro-democracy movement. By 2000, the FBC, according to Zarni, had chapters in, "Roughly 150 colleges and universities, thirty high schools, over one hundred community-based Burma support groups, and individual supporters in twenty-eight countries scattered in Asia, Australia, North America, and Europe," from humble beginnings in the mid-1990s.[51]

The first concrete step that the FBC took was to organize an international event on October 27, 1995, which was publicized as the International Day of Action for a Free Burma. Combined with video documentaries and a Web site (http://wicip.org/fbc) dedicated to the cause, this quickly generated a significant interest about the situation in Burma at a number of universities in the United States. Many students joined the protest movement, which began to take the shape of full-fledged campaigns organized mainly through the Internet.[52] According to Zarni, a sense of loyalty, commitment, and camaraderie formed among the participants of this online campaign even though most had never met in person.[53]

The First Successful e-Campaign

Inspired by the success and reach of the International Action Day, several student groups across the United States launched a well planned campaign to persuade several large multinational corporations to pull their investments out of Burma. One of the most prominent online campaigns grew out of Harvard University when a group of students joined an ongoing campaign to convince PepsiCo, one of the largest investors in Burma, to divest. They started a boycott of Pepsi products on campus, pressured dining services to end their business with PepsiCo, repeatedly called relevant Massachusetts legislators, and attempted to make PepsiCo's shareholders aware of the Burmese junta's oppressive regime—much of it done through the use of emails, listservs, and newsgroups.[54]

On June 25, 1996, Massachusetts passed legislation that banned corporations with investments in Burma from contracts with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Soon afterwards, several large multinational corporations withdrew from Burma, despite criticism of the Massachusetts legislation by several countries.[55] It is difficult to assess exactly how much of an impact online activism had on this turn of events, but it did help to produce coordinated, global protests. Due to the reach of the Internet, it mattered little that Massachusetts itself had a small Burmese community.

The Rapid Growth of Digital Activism

Within the span of about a decade, Burmese dissidents in exile and digital activists from around the world have managed to turn a crisis in Burma, that relatively few outside Southeast Asia were aware of, into a global campaign. Much of it has been possible due to the reach of the Internet. According to Muang Zarni, "In as many as twenty-eight different countries, Burmese dissidents and their supporters have made use of the Internet to form coalitions and share strategies in their efforts to weaken the grip of the military rulers of Burma." [56]

One of the campaigns primary Web sites for coordination—freeburma.org—provides links to the major campaigns based in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. With full-time professional staff, the US Campaign for Burma (USCB) is one of the more established and active organizations dedicated to the creation of public and diplomatic support for democracy in Burma. Its board and staff include former Burmese student activists, former political prisoners, former Congressional staffers, and experienced human rights advocates. [57] Their activities range from mobilization of celebrities and information campaigns to visiting refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. The group also works closely with the US Congress on key diplomatic issues regarding Burma. [58]

The Burma Campaign UK (BCUK), established in 1991, is another one of the more active organizations in this space. The group's explicit goal is to restore democracy in Burma and to ensure the permanent release of Aung San Suu Kyi. BCUK's activities center around lobbying the United Kingdom and European Union governments to impose harsh economic and political sanctions on Burma. [59] One of their most widely publicized campaigns aims to pressure French oil giant Total Oil; one of the largest investors in Burma. The organization's online tools include an active blog (www.totaloutofburma.blogspot.com) and a Facebook group (www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6833508763). The BCUK has partnered with other organizations to create a 'Dirty List' of companies that have business interests in Burma and contact information for each. [60]

The Saffron Revolution and Transnational Mobilization

The Saffron Revolution resulted in a major online international campaign. As domestic protests intensified and grainy images and videos swamped the Burmese blogosphere, the Burma Campaign UK—with support from Amnesty International, the US Campaign for Burma, Avaaz.org, and other organizations—coordinated the Global Day of Action for Burma on October 6, 2007. This event included protesters in thirty countries and almost one hundred cities across the globe including Sydney, Ottawa, Paris, Hong Kong, Delhi, London, New York, and Washington D.C. [61] Protesters in each city organized peaceful rallies in strategic locations to increase awareness of the monk-led revolution in Burma.

The Global Day of Action was organized almost completely online. This included the more than three hundred thousand members of the Facebook group 'Support the Monks' Protest.' [62] To drum up support and awareness among bloggers before the event, an International Bloggers' Day for Burma, a 'blog blackout' day, was organized on October 4. Bloggers that took part did not write posts that day and displayed banners on their blogs with only the words 'Free Burma.' [63]

It is debatable whether an international protest of this scale would have been possible without the Internet. While there is no strong evidence that these protests have actually led to any major policy changes, it possible that they have created global awareness about Burma and may have prompted certain political leaders to take a more proactive and explicit stance against the Burmese regime. For example, as the Saffron Revolution was intensifying, the French President urged Total Oil to restrain itself from making any new investments in Burma [64] and Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced that the Australian government would, "…implement targeted financial sanctions against the military rulers of Burma." [65] The 'Dirty List' is also regularly used by activists to pressure companies with business interests in Burma and to lobby governments in the countries where those businesses are located.

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

There are a range of views on the impact of Internet on democracy. Optimists believe that the growth of the Internet will foster more democratic behavior among citizens and even weaken dictatorial regimes,[66] while skeptics argue that there is more hype than real change.[67] Although there is a positive correlation between measures of democracy and Internet diffusion in most countries, there is still no convincing evidence that there is any causal relation between the two.[68]

While scholars such as Benkler argue that the Internet has created an environment where it is increasingly difficult for governments to suppress democratic aspirations of citizens,[69] there are others such as Kalathil and Boas who argue that in extreme authoritarian regimes, the impact of the Internet on democracy is more nebulous. Kalathil and Boas claim that despite the fact that the Internet has an important role in communication and information flows, autocratic governments retain control over use and access to the Internet. The proliferation of the Internet does not necessarily create a significant challenge to the power base of authoritarian regimes. [70] The case of Burma lends itself to an interesting analysis with respect to this hypothesis.

State Control over the Internet in Burma

Since the introduction of the Internet in Burma, the regime has maintained strict control over personal access. Residential connections are difficult to obtain since applicants have to obtain a signed letter from the relevant 'porter warden' certifying that the applicant is not 'politically dangerous.'[71] Due to the prohibitive cost and bureaucratic hassle of getting individual subscriptions, average Burmese citizens usually access the Internet from a limited number of Internet cafes, which are heavily concentrated in urban centers.[72] Broadband Internet connections are available mainly for businesses and the government.

The state also maintains strict surveillance over electronic communications, including email, and blocks certain websites. The primary targets for blocking are political opposition or pro-democracy movements, e-mail service providers, free Web space sites, pornography, and gambling sites. The ONI report suggests that the pattern of Internet filtering in Burma indicates that the government's primary motivations for blocking content are political rather than moral or cultural.[73]

Table 1: Internet Filtering in Burma

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social				●	
Conflict/security				●	
Internet tools				●	

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency		●		
Consistency	●			

Source: OpenNet Initiative

The Burmese authorities shut down two independent Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in 1999, leaving only government controlled ISPs in the country. In 2000, the government stepped up its efforts to officially control Web content generated within Burma. It introduced new rules of online conduct under the 2000 Web Regulations, which prohibits any web content that is, "…detrimental to the current policies and secret security affairs of the government…," prohibits writings that are political in nature, and requires government authorization to create Web pages.[74]

The military junta's purchase of 'spy' hardware and software from a US firm is indicative of its continued determination to regulate Internet content, email, and other electronic communication.[75] It has also created a special Cyber Warfare Division within its secret police force to track online criticism of the regime.[76] Internet cafes are also subject to severe surveillance and engage in self-censorship. For example, cafe owners are required to take screenshots of user activity every five minutes and deliver these images to the government on a regular basis.[77]

The Burmese People's Counter Movement

Despite government blocking and surveillance of the Internet, Internet cafes have found innovative ways to circumvent these restrictions. They have installed foreign-hosted proxy sites including the popular Glite.sayni.net, which allows users to use Gmail and to access websites blocked by the state—a phenomenon that came to be known as the GLite Revolution. According to the site's India-based administrator, the GLite program has been downloaded by tens of thousands of Internet users and resides on hundreds of private and public servers in Burma.[78]

Other popular proxy servers are Your-freedom.net and Yeehart.com. Also, hyper-encrypted email services such as Hushmail.com were used to evade government censorship of email content. It is alleged that many local and exile-based journalists have been trained to use this technology, that, experts say, the junta has not been able to crack.[79] The wide proliferation of these circumvention technologies was perhaps one reason that the junta decided that no amount of legislation or blocking would prevent information leakage, leading to the complete shut down of the Internet at the climax of the Saffron Revolution.

The Government's Response to the Saffron Revolution

Soon after the Saffron Revolution began, the government began to put even heavier restrictions on the use of Internet cafes and there were occasional interruptions in Internet and cell phone service. It is believed that during this time the number of sites that were blocked in Burma also increased, including YouTube and Blogspot, which were not blocked during ONI testing in late 2006. International news services such as CNN and Reuters were also reportedly blocked. [80] However, information, images, and videos still continued to appear online as many found ways to smuggle them across the border and upload them from neighboring countries, including Thailand.

The protests escalated from the third week of September with an estimated one hundred thousand protesters on the streets of major Burmese cities on September 23.[81] Soon afterwards, the government crackdown became increasingly violent and led to the death of scores of civilians and monks. Citizen journalists continued their mission with increased determination as images of dead bodies of monks floating in the water, as well as a foreign journalist being shot, continued to shock the world as global condemnation intensified.[82]

The government shut down all international links to the Internet and temporarily suspended most cell phone services on September 29. The only other time this has happened was in Nepal in February 2005 when the King declared martial law.[83] Unlike previous attempts, which sought to block access to international media, this time the government sought to prevent images and information from within the country from reaching the outside world.

The government was able to shut down the Internet because it controls the only two ISPs in the country. From September 28 through October 3, international links were completely shut down. From October 4, the Internet was available only during certain hours of the day. After October 13, the Internet gradually came back online, but there were reports that the bandwidth available at public Internet access points was deliberately limited to make it difficult for users to upload images and videos. Some Internet cafes were also forced to shut down and their computers confiscated on charges of illegal use of

'freedom' software, bypassing firewalls, and use of other circumvention tools. [84]

The government's extremely defensive behavior may indicate that the Internet had an influence on the government's overall response to the Saffron Revolution. Otherwise, the government would not have made such a drastic move as completely shutting down the Internet. While any number of deaths is unacceptable, it is also possible that the government actually exercised restraint in the use of force against civilian protesters because of the Internet and international media attention. Comparing the crackdown of the Burmese military government in 1988 uprising with that of 2007, which were both similar with respect to scale and participation, it is worth highlighting the significantly lower number of deaths in 2007. It is plausible that the military felt it was under greater scrutiny because of the Internet, and that it was therefore more restrained in its use of force.

However, as the case of Burma indicates, it may be a stretch to conclude that the Internet has the ability to pose major threats to the power base of authoritarian regimes. The government put down the Saffron Revolution, not with policy changes but with the use of force. While the 1988 revolution precipitated the downfall of General Ne Win, the Saffron Revolution and Internet enabled global support does not appear to have impared the military junta's control of the nation. Nevertheless, there are indications that the Internet may have increased its accountability and lead to a more restrained response to citizen unrest.

DEBATING THE IMPACT OF THE BURMESE PROTESTS

The Internet, camera phones, and other digital networked technologies played a critical role in the Burmese protests, and in particular in transmission of news about those events to the outside world. Ultimately, the protests did not lead to political change within Burma, leaving many to call them a failure. However, the long-term impact of the protests is not yet clear, and includes some of the following debatable hypotheses:

• The military government in Burma learned that state control of ISPs and telephone ser-

vices gave them the ability to completely block access to the Internet, and to prevent unwanted news from leaving the country. This is an effective policy for dictators that want to control free speech. The protests in Burma may serve as a disincentive for other authoritarian regimes to expand internet coverage and increase access speeds.

• A devastating cyclone struck Burma in May 2008, approximately nine months after the Saffron Revolution. The Burmese government spurned international humanitarian aid and prohibited international media from covering the cyclone story. It is possible that, due to the protests and related negative press coverage, more people died following the cyclone since the regime feared the potentially destabilizing effects of allowing foreign humanitarian aid workers or journalists into the country.

• In a tightly controlled media environment, citizen journalism is even more important than in countries with a free press. Citizen journalists are able to report on government actions and provide a measure of accountability that would not otherwise occur. An example was the claim by the government that a Japanese journalist was not killed by Burmese troops; video proved that he was indeed shot by the military.

• Even the most authoritarian regimes are sensitive to international public opinion. There were far fewer deaths in 2007 than there were in 1988. It is possible that the Internet saved the lives of many protestors, because the Junta feared even greater criticism from images of troops killing monks and civilians. The presence of the Internet in a dictatorial regime may save lives.

Transnational networks successfully mobilized to pressure foreign governments to pass sanctions and publicly condemn the Burmese government after the 1988 protest. In 2007, looser coalitions such as the Facebook group in

support of monks also organized online—but they were not able to prevent the forceful shut down of either the protests or the Internet. It is unclear whether their future efforts will be more or less successful than the traditional groups that formed after the 1988 protests, or if they will survive the shifting of the world's attention to other crises. However, a unique aspect of Burmese transnational mobilization is that individual bloggers and digital activists worked together with permanent advocacy organizations with full-time staff such as the Burma Campaign UK or US Campaign for Burma. This combination of online and offline groups acting together is likely to have a more significant and sustained impact than purely online movements, which may have a more limited attention span.

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