

The Role of Social Media in Myanmar's CDM: Strengths, Limitations and Perspectives from India

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Summary

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military seized power in an unconstitutional coup, overthrowing the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy government. Following the coup, the country experienced mass protests against the military, which continued offline and online despite the detention of about 8,000 citizens by the military since February 2021. Social media has played an integral role in this citizen-led protest movement, also known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

This paper examines the ways in which social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, has influenced the CDM, as well as its strengths and limitations. Additionally, it discusses India's response to the coup and the CDM – both the official response as well as reactions from netizens.

Introduction

Myanmar's "Spring Revolution", a culmination of citizen-led protests against the military takeover of power on 1 February 2021, has continued despite the authorities' efforts to suppress it. The sudden takeover of power resulted in vociferous public anger against the military (also known as the Tatmadaw) and an outpouring of public support for Aung San Suu Kyi, the de-facto head of the overthrown government. Suu Kyi, also known as "The Lady", has long been a symbol of hope for the people of Myanmar under decades of military rule, and her arrest produced a wave of social media-fuelled protests, known also as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Like other protest movements in recent times, social media has also played a crucial role in the genesis and persistence of the CDM. In this paper, we examine the ways in which social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter, has influenced the movement, as well as its strengths and limitations in sustaining the movement. Further, India has been closely watching the events unfold in Myanmar, and we look at India's response to the coup and the CDM – both the official response as well as reactions by netizens — against the backdrop of an ongoing power struggle between the Indian government and tech/social media companies.

To begin with, we provide some contextual information about the problematic role of social media, particularly Facebook, in Myanmar vis-à-vis democracy, elections and human rights, and how this influences the current protest movement. We also examine Twitter for two reasons: a) it has been less studied as a social media platform in Myanmar; and b) it has served as an alternative to Facebook since the coup, emerging as a preferred platform for activism and dissent.

The Problematics of Social Media in Myanmar

Internet penetration has been growing rapidly in Myanmar with the number of users increasing by 3.5 million between 2019 and 2021, bringing the total to 23.65 million internet users.¹ More than half of the Burmese population actively used Facebook as of January 2021.² Such a rapid uptake of social media within a short period of time certainly comes with issues.

Some of the most prominent challenges have been a) voter suppression; b) hate speech; c) misinformation; d) lack of transparency; and e) problematic political ads. These issues are directly linked to the lack of critical digital literacy (CDL), a key skill that goes beyond digital literacy to instil critical thinking skills about technology usage, including the authenticity of content, and how it is consumed and shared.³ Social media's rapid rise in Myanmar was not accompanied by a commensurate effort to impart CDL to the netizens. Myanmar's multi-ethnic society, coupled with the military's dominance over Internet and telecommunication companies, exposed social media companies' inability and unwillingness to handle these problems.

Facebook was synonymous with the Internet in Myanmar until the CDM, resulting in a unique set of benefits and challenges. Access to the platform empowered Burmese citizens to freely receive and share information, forge a sense of belonging and self-expression and allowed for greater political communication between the people and government.

Conversely, Facebook failed to control the issues that accompanied its rapid uptake, such as hate speech and misinformation, which has had serious repercussions, most notably the displacement of more than a million people since the military crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in August 2017. Since then, Facebook has introduced measures to address these multi-layered issues, including the identification of networks of accounts, pages and groups of users masking their identities to promote misleading content, as well as the use of artificial intelligence technology along with human review to combat hate speech.⁴ Additionally, a 'verified' feature was introduced to help identify authentic content and segregate it from military-run Facebook groups.⁵ To act against misinformation, the

¹ Simon Kemp, "Digital Myanmar: 2021", *DataReportal*, 12 February 2021, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-myanmar>.

² As of January 2021, there were 28,780,000 Facebook users in Myanmar in January 2021, which accounted for 51.8 per cent of its entire population. <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-myanmar/2021/01>.

³ Anuradha Rao, "Social media and critical digital literacy in India's general elections", ISAS Brief No. 643, Institute of South Asian Studies, 29 March 2019. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ISAS-Briefs-No.-643.pdf>.

⁴ Facebook categorises hate speech as a direct attack against people on the basis of characteristics: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease. The company defines attacks as violent or dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal, cursing and calls for exclusion or segregation. https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/hate_speech.

⁵ Rafael Frankel, "How Facebook Is Preparing for Myanmar's 2020 Election", Facebook, 31 August 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/preparing-for-myanmars-2020-election/>.

company worked with three fact checking partners in Myanmar – BOOM, AFP Fact Check and Fact Crescendo – to fight misinformation.⁶

Facebook’s efforts in these areas, as well as its immediate actions on user-reported pro-military pages and accounts⁷ weakened the military’s social media presence and influence. Nonetheless, problematic issues persisted and reappeared during the November 2020 elections and again during the CDM,⁸ highlighting the complexities involved in controlling and maintaining a free and fair internet via social media.

Soon after the Myanmar military banned Facebook in early February 2021, Twitter saw a significant rise in new users from the country.⁹ According to *Frontier Myanmar*, on 2 February 2021, #AungSanSuuKyi_Government had just 10 tweets, but on 4 February 2021, it had over 40,000. Overall, there were more than five million posts on Twitter that used the hashtag.¹⁰ As of August 2021, Twitter was among the top 10 social media platforms used in Myanmar after Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Bigo Live.¹¹ However, due to its nascent presence in Myanmar, Twitter lacks infrastructural support to handle issues of misinformation or content verification.

Anatomy of the Protest Movement

Social media has played a visible and critical role in Myanmar’s domestic politics since the coup. The CDM, launched as a non-violent resistance movement by government healthcare workers refusing to show up to work, mushroomed into a nation-wide protest movement largely organised over the Internet. The protests have also served to highlight the crisis in the international arena, with the hope that foreign intervention could possibly change the generals’ minds.

In the initial stages of the movement, protestors were able to circumvent attempts to block the Internet and social media. For instance, the ban on Facebook resulted in a migration of Internet users to Twitter who were able to share details of their new Twitter accounts on their Facebook accounts during the several hours it took for Internet providers to enforce the ban.¹² Protestors were also able to access the Internet via free tools that require little

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ International Crisis Group, “Myanmar’s military struggles to control the virtual battlefield”, Report No. 314, 18 May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/314-myanmars-military-struggles-control-virtual-battlefield>.

⁸ Fanny Potkin and Poppy McPherson, “Spreading like wildfire’: Facebook fights hate speech, misinformation before Myanmar poll”, *Reuters*, 6 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-election-facebook/spreading-like-wildfire-facebook-fights-hate-speech-before-myanmar-poll-idUSKBN27L300>.

⁹ “Twitter and SMS: Myanmar’s new frontiers of fear”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/twitter-and-sms-myanmars-new-frontiers-of-fear/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Top Charts: Myanmar Social, <https://sensortower.com/android/rankings/top/phone/myanmar/social?date=2021-08-09>.

¹² Ibid.

skills or knowledge, such as encrypted messaging services, free virtual private networks (VPNs) and censorship circumvention applications.¹³

One of the consequences of the social media thrust was that it allowed for an inclusive and nation-wide movement, as most communication on social media was in Burmese. A United States (US)-based Burmese academic pointed out that Burmese netizens from all walks of life had shed their ethnic identities, struggles and prejudices to unite against a common enemy. This is a hugely significant event in a country wracked by ethnic strife and perpetuated by the military's old divide-and-rule tactics.

In April 2021, despite more than 700 civilian deaths and the Internet crackdown, protests continued to erupt across the country, and military excesses were shared widely across social media.¹⁴ Repertoires of collective action and protest largely followed the social media playbook of the past decade and invoked more recent symbols of resistance adopted by protestors against authoritarian rule in Asia or the "Milk Tea Alliance",¹⁵ such as the three-fingered salute.¹⁶

Protest actions have included the flower strike, a garbage strike, candle-light vigils, doxing and naming and shaming tactics, particularly of those linked to the military or those who resumed official or professional activities, as well as social punishment, which involves pressuring people not to resume official duties.

In the next section, we examine how Facebook and Twitter have played a role in the CDM, taking a closer look at the interactions on these platforms, and identifying salient patterns. Although this preliminary analysis is based on observations of social media pages in English, it provides useful insights and experiences of the crisis and activism in Myanmar.

Social Media as Sites of:

Resistance

Dozens of Facebook pages and groups devoted to the CDM sprung up, ranging from those with a handful of likes to groups such as the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)-CDM Supporting Team¹⁷ – with more than 400,000 followers. While some of these groups such as the CRPH-CDM Supporting Team were created in direct response to the

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's military struggles to control the virtual battlefield", Report No. 314, 18 May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/314-myanmars-military-struggles-control-virtual-battlefield>.

¹⁴ "Myanmar coup: The people shot dead since the protests began", *BBC*, 13 April 2021, Accessed on 22 July: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56636345>.

¹⁵ The Milk Tea Alliance originated on social media by a transnational network of youth from Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan engaged in a battle against authoritarian rule in China and its aggression in its neighbourhood. Read more at <https://time.com/5904114/milk-tea-alliance/>.

¹⁶ "First Thailand, now Myanmar: Asia protesters borrow three-finger salute from Hunger Games", *The Straits Times*, 4 February 2021, Accessed on 1 September 2021.

¹⁷ Facebook Page, Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH- CDM Supporting Team), created on 15 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/crph.cdm.support/>.

coup, other pages such as the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma),¹⁸ formed by former political prisoners from Burma in exile, and Justice for Myanmar,¹⁹ both build on pre-existing covert activism and advocacy.²⁰ Then there are, of course, the Facebook accounts of ordinary citizens which were converted into sites of activism and resistance.

Facebook, Twitter and even Telegram became key sites for the uploading and circulation of *images and videos* of protests across the country, as well as military excesses against protestors and journalists. Further, as sites of *debate and discussion*, they were also used strategically as a platform to gain international attention to the issue, as well as raise international support. This was done through extensive sharing of *political cartoons*, mostly targeting the Tatmadaw.²¹

The platforms also served as a repository of *information and resources* to assist protestors in and for their personal safety. For instance, there were posts and articles about whom to contact, what to do and who to call if someone gets arrested; how to get VPN access; best practices for social media behaviour; and crowdfunding options.

Social media also became a site for *digital literacy*, with more seasoned users helping new arrivals to Twitter learn how to quickly navigate and use the platform. It also became a site for spreading *critical digital literacy*, with information on identifying fake news and misinformation; how to avoid sharing inaccurate information; and being civil and courteous online, among other things.²²

Solidarity

Since the movement became increasingly broad-based and cut across ethnic divides, the Facebook groups and activity reflected a cross-section of society, and prominent online actors included members of civil society, youth and university students as well as the Burmese diaspora. The increased involvement of the youth was a ray of hope, particularly for the diaspora, who marvelled at their courage and creativity in fighting the regime. In the early stages, *pop culture* (such as the three-fingered salute) was incorporated into the protests, as were song and dance routines, shared online to influence and encourage supporters.

¹⁸ Facebook Page, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), <https://www.facebook.com/burmapoliticalprisoners/>.

¹⁹ Facebook Page, Justice for Myanmar, <https://www.facebook.com/justiceformyanmar.org/>.

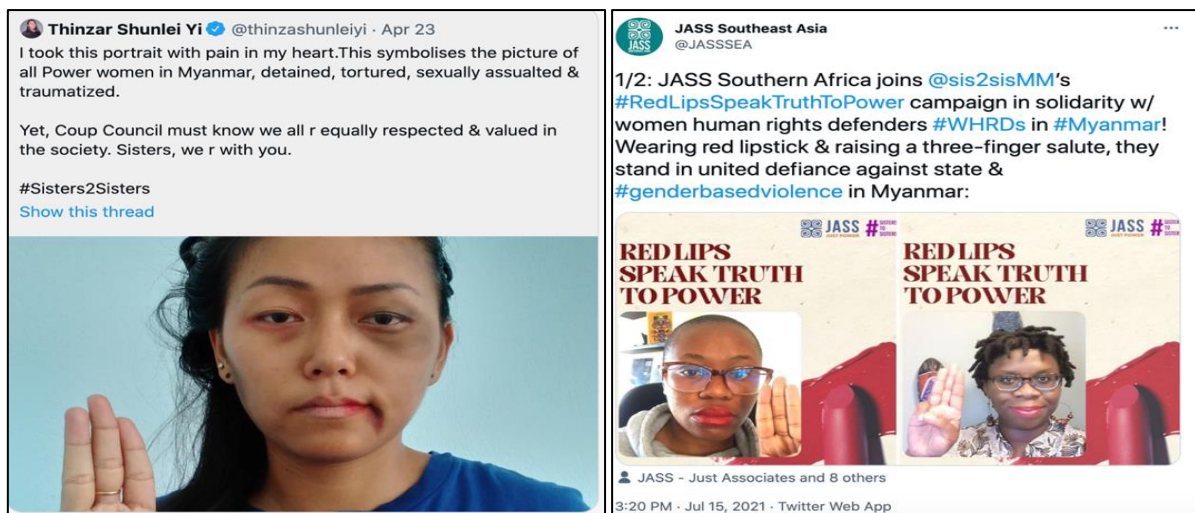
²⁰ Lisa Brooten, "Myanmar's civil disobedience movement is built on decades of struggle", *East Asia Forum*, 29 March 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/29/myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-is-built-on-decades-of-struggle/>.

²¹ One such cartoon was tweeted by Deputy Asia Director Human Rights Watch Phil Robertson on his Twitter account. The cartoon depicts Myanmar military's human rights violations. <https://twitter.com/Reaproy/status/1361160699171377152/photo/1>.

²² A Burmese academic in the United States who has been closely following the protests noted that while there was recognition that some protest tactics didn't fall in line with critical digital literacy best practices, the larger goal of freedom outweighed these considerations. Particularly when seen against the military excesses, it was not the right moment to raise this issue, as protestors were already sacrificing too much.

On Twitter, international non-governmental organisations working for Rohingya rights, journalists, diaspora and activists expressed outrage and support using #whathappeninginmyanmar against the military. Journalists working on Myanmar, who lived outside the country, shared live information of military atrocities and amplified the voices of locals. They posted images of the protests taking place in remote areas of various states in Myanmar. May Wong, a senior Indo-China correspondent for *Channel News Asia*, amplified videos of the military’s seizure of a Yangon-based general hospital refusing to let people, including paramedics, inside.²³

Women from various backgrounds and feminist groups on Twitter shared images of three-fingers on #sisters2sisters to encourage the international community to stand up against sexual violence and exploitation of Burmese women by the military.²⁴



Source: Twitter

In the next section, we analyse the similarities and differences in the ways Twitter and Facebook were used to sustain the movement.

Twitter vs Facebook: Different Feathers of the Same Cap

As we can see, there arise several similarities in the ways that Facebook and Twitter have played a role in the CDM. As mentioned earlier, many of the tactics and strategies used by both protestors and the regime have followed the social media-fuelled movements in the past, with local adaptations. While Facebook as a company has played a visible role in supporting the protest movement, Twitter certainly emerged as an alternative platform to protest and garner international support to oppose the military’s actions.

There are, however, some differences as well. Twitter, as a platform, functions differently compared to Facebook with respect to user engagement. For example, by using the hashtag

²³ May Wong (@MayWongCNA), *Twitter*, 17 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/MayWongCNA/status/1416424878891175939>.

²⁴ Umayma Khan, “The women of Myanmar: ‘Our place is in the revolution’”, *Aljazeera*, 25 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/4/25/women-of-myanmar-stand-resilient-against-the-military-coup>. Accessed on 30 July 2021.

feature, users can locate a variety of perspectives with few formal constraints and follow the discourse from all parties, including experts, NGOs, activists, journalists and the general public.

A key difference highlighted by observers is the role played by Twitter in uniting Burmese netizens with the global community. As the Burmese academic highlighted, on Facebook, netizens were connected largely with other Myanmar citizens. Particularly for those belonging to the lower socio-economic groups, this had resulted in echo chambers and perpetuation of the social media filter bubble effect. Its corrosive impacts were clearly witnessed in the Rohingya crisis.

On the other hand, the migration to Twitter allowed for exposure to global communities and diverse perspectives, including ideas of equality and human rights, and an understanding of the Rohingya issue from a new lens. Especially for the youth, this was an eye-opening and transformative experience, triggering feelings of remorse, unity and solidarity on a scale not witnessed before.



Source: Twitter

This new sense of solidarity reinvigorated the CDM and has given greater impetus to resistance efforts on the ground, both in cities as well as to armed protests in the country's far-flung corners. A prominent example is the protests on 13 June 2021, where thousands of anti-*junta* protesters posted pictures of themselves wearing black under the #Black4Rohingya campaign.²⁵ This is a far cry from previous years, where the majority Buddhist, ethnic Bamar population showed little to no concern or outright hostility to the plight of the Rohingyas.

Limitations of Social Media

One of the challenges that limits the role of social media vis-a-vis protest movements is the nature and deficiencies of the platforms themselves. For instance, though social media

²⁵ "Myanmar protesters show support for Rohingya with viral social media campaign", *South China Morning Post*, 13 June, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3137162/myanmar-protesters-show-support-rohingya-viral-social?module=perpetual_scroll&pgtype=article&campaign=3137162.

enhances the reach of information, it lacks regulation. In Myanmar, over the years, Facebook's algorithm amplified the military's pages, violating its own community standard policies.²⁶ Having one such page that incites violence or spreads misinformation shared by the junta leads to a (re)direction to multiple pages of that kind.²⁷ Additionally, in one such page, an image of protests in Myanmar with black flags were misrepresented as the terrorist organisation, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.²⁸

The coup led to migration of Internet users from Facebook to Twitter, which subsequently exposed a similar incapability of the latter to verify information easily and quickly. For instance, from our observations, Twitter does not have a mechanism to verify sources of videos or images on its platform. For instance, it was unclear in some instances whether images of dead people wrapped in sheets that were circulating on the platform resulted from military atrocities or the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁹ Like Facebook, Twitter's inadequacies in the areas of content moderation and fact-checking are highly problematic in the context of the CDM.³⁰

The CDM also highlighted the limitations of social media use against the backdrop of prolonged Internet shutdowns. The shutdowns undoubtedly impacted the momentum of collective action, as not all users managed to connect to VPNs. This prompted reliance on short message service (SMS) or even phone calls to communicate, which impacted the protest in various ways. For example, while SMSs allowed protests to continue to some extent, the information forwarded via SMS is difficult to verify, making this an unreliable or unsustainable solution in the long run.³¹

Nonetheless, while social media was not the only factor driving the CDM, it has played a crucial role in the origins and sustenance of the movement. It has kept the issue alive at the international stage, as well as given its supporters a lifeline to continue in their advocacy and resistance, both nationally and globally.

Perspectives from India

India has been closely watching developments unfold in Myanmar. Of particular interest are the stalled democratic process and rule of law, as well as the implications of the protest movement on economic and infrastructure development, and implications for trade. While China still has considerable influence in Myanmar, India will also be watching with interest

²⁶ "Digital Threats, Algorithm of harm: Facebook amplified Myanmar military propaganda following coup", *Global Witness*, 23 June 2021: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/algorithm-harm-facebook-amplified-myanmar-military-propaganda-following-coup/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Official Myanmar COVID-19 Deaths Exceed 10,000, *The Irrawaddy*, 3 August 2021. Accessed on 25 September 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/official-myanmar-covid-19-death-updates-exceed-10000.html>.

³⁰ "Twitter and SMS: Myanmar's new frontiers of fear", *Frontier Myanmar*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/twitter-and-sms-myanmars-new-frontiers-of-fear/>.

³¹ Ibid.

Russia's more pronounced presence in Myanmar's internal affairs since the coup.³² According to a national security expert, increased Russian friendship with the Myanmar military is seen as a foil to China, and is in India's interests at this troubled period in Myanmar. Finally, India will continue to be anxious about the impacts that prolonged civil unrest and military force will have on the Rohingya crisis. In addition to the human rights and humanitarian implications, the security implications are immense.

There is another important issue that New Delhi will be observing closely. In terms of Internet infrastructure and cybersecurity, Myanmar is said to have received technical assistance from China to build firewalls to block search engines, social media sites and VPNs.³³ This once again tips the balance of power in Myanmar in China's favour.

For these reasons, the Indian government's response has been to express concern about the situation, while arguing for upholding rule of law and democratic processes in Myanmar and asking for the release of detained political leaders. Unlike Western powers, New Delhi has stopped short of condemning the military, nor has it supported the reimposition of sanctions.³⁴

Some political and defence analysts have argued that India's muted response to the coup is a balanced approach, an attempt to balance its democratic values with long-term strategic interests. On the other hand, the appeasement of the Tatmadaw has angered people in India's north-eastern states, who have an ethnic affinity to Myanmar. The Indian government will also have to be careful not to anger Myanmar's masses, losing the popular goodwill it enjoys there.³⁵ It is important to remember that this official response is against the complex background of an ongoing power tussle between the Indian government and tech/social media companies.³⁶

On social media, particularly on Twitter, the reactions have ranged from expressing solidarity towards Burmese citizens to how the Indian government must respond to the crisis in its neighbourhood. There were videos of residents of the North-eastern state of Mizoram (bordering Myanmar) protesting against the military and asking for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar.³⁷ On the geopolitical front, Brahma Chellaney argued on Twitter that the US sanctions against top Myanmar generals, including the commander-in-chief, had led to the coup.

³² P M Heblkar, "Deciphering Myanmar—A Challenge. StratNews Global", *StratNewsGlobal*, 26 July 2021. <https://stratnewsglobal.com/neighbours/myanmar/deciphering-myanmar-a-challenge/>.

³³ "Burmese Expert: China Helping Military Establish Cyber Firewall", *Voice of America*, 12 February 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_burmese-expert-china-helping-military-establish-cyber-firewall/6201972.html.

³⁴ Udai Bhanu Singh, "Post-Coup Myanmar and India's Response", *IDS Comment*, 21 May 2021, <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/post-coup-myanmar-indias-response-ubsingh-210521>.

³⁵ Sudha Ramachandran, "India's Dangerous Myanmar Policy", *The Diplomat*, 26 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/indias-dangerous-myanmar-policy/>.

³⁶ Anuradha Rao, "When social media, personal freedom and cybersecurity collide: India's new digital media rules", *South Asia Newsletter*, Issue no. 31, (Jan – Jun 2021), p. 12-13, Institute of South Asian Studies, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ISAS-Newsletter-Jan-to-Jun-2021-V4.pdf>.

³⁷ Bikash K Bhattacharya (BikashKJourn), Twitter, 21 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/BikashKJourn/status/1373598717647876098>.



Source: Twitter

The coup also sparked an important debate about whether to let refugees, including Rohingyas, into India. Twitter netizens criticised Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga’s take on allowing in refugees from Myanmar. The Chief Minister’s move split the users into two camps: a) expressing solidarity with the refugees, and b) raising concerns over the influx of extremists into the state. On Facebook, various videos and images of Myanmar citizens entering India were circulated, with similar arguments for and against their entry.

Conclusion

Myanmar is at a critical crossroads, politically and democratically. The country remains in a dangerous impasse: despite more than 1,100 civilian deaths and more than 7,000 still detained as of 2 October 2021,³⁸ the military has refused to cede power or release Suu Kyi. This has had several disastrous consequences, including continued resistance that has gone underground; a refugee crisis, both internal as well as through an influx into neighbouring countries; and severe economic damage – all compounded by a worsening COVID-19 crisis that peaked in July 2021.

Several factors have affected the outright success of the CDM, particularly the military’s attempts to control the Internet. This has included partial measures like social media bans, Internet Protocol address filtering, to full-blown Internet shutdowns, which significantly affected the ability to mobilise and organise street protests – and in the absence of real-

³⁸ Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup, 2 October 2021, <https://aappb.org/?p=17971>.

time information, to stay safe. A related factor is online repression via legal measures to suppress free speech and gain access to user data to locate and prosecute opponents.³⁹ Additionally, intimidation tactics, online and offline, and violence against opponents – be it political actors, civil society actors or ordinary civilians – have spread fear and deterred online criticism and offline activism.

Nonetheless, this has not stopped the movement, which has continued with civilians taking up arms and going underground, and the diaspora playing a big role in fundraising and in keeping the movement alive through various creative online events to build solidarity and continue the resistance.⁴⁰

However, moving forward, challenges will remain for social media companies in Myanmar. Although Facebook has begun to take greater responsibility in Myanmar, issues such as fake news and disinformation are rampant on the platform. Similarly, Twitter has not acted on disinformation in Myanmar along the lines of its response to the 2020 US elections.

In such a situation, social media companies are on a collision course with governments for several reasons. First, they are spaces of hope and for freedom of expression for embattled citizens, as we are seeing in Myanmar and India. On the other hand, their lack of power and accountability makes governments uncomfortable – and rightly so. Social media companies have a huge responsibility in ensuring the Internet remains free, open and accurate, and haven't lived up to this responsibility very well. However, excessive restrictions, such as Internet shutdowns in Myanmar and the new information technology rules in India, are indicative of government overreach and efforts to control media narratives, weaken opposing forces, stifle free speech and endanger users' privacy. These measures erode the government's legitimacy and move it further away from the democratic goals and aspirations of its own people. As the Myanmar military has realised, it cannot just put the social media and Internet genie back in the bottle and has certainly lost the war in terms of winning the hearts and minds of its people.

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³⁹ International Crisis Group, Myanmar's military struggles to control the virtual battlefield, Report No. 314, 18 May 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/314-myanmars-military-struggles-control-virtual-battlefield>.

⁴⁰ Suyin Haynes, "Myanmar's Artists Captured the Spirit of the Resistance. Now They're Continuing the Fight from Abroad", *Time*, 22 June 2021, <https://time.com/6074482/myanmar-artist-resistance/>.