

Will the Internet help trigger the next uprising in Burma?

Monday, 21 March 2011 13:44 **Mandalay Maung**



Rangoon (Mizzima) - As the Internet and social media spread news of civil unrest and demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, the military junta in Burma is afraid that the young generation here will follow suit. All news is suppressed and—as the best indicator of the junta’s concerns—Internet speed is down to a trickle.

But can the Internet-driven revolution in the Middle East really be replicated in Burma? If we take a close look at the situation in Burma, and look at its rather unique characteristics and backwardness, we see that there is little chance of the Internet playing a significant role in stirring up anti-government protests. If there is to be radical change, other factors will have to come into play.

Let’s look at the Internet and communications in Burma. Internet access is largely confined to the two major cities, Rangoon and Mandalay. Most of the Internet usage takes place in Internet cafes, which under government regulation have had to install URL-tracking software and CCTV cameras to keep customers under close surveillance. It goes almost without saying that all Internet outlets prohibit access to banned and blocked sites.

The number of Internet users reflects Burma’s depressing reality. In 2010, only 110,000 users or 0.2 percent of a population of 55 million Burmese used the Internet, whereas in China 30 percent of the population uses the Internet regularly. Even taking the most optimistic claim that there are a total of 500,000 users in the country shows the dire picture. And using the Internet as an information source is very limited. All sites and pages critical of the regime are banned and blocked, including the seemingly innocent pages of the *Financial Times* and the *Bangkok Post*, and, most importantly, Twitter and YouTube. Facebook can be viewed but being able to send messages from one’s Facebook account is like winning the lottery—mostly the sent messages do not get sent.

Internet Usage and Population Statistics:

YEAR	Users	Population	% Pen.	GDP p.c.*	Usage Source
2000	1,000	54,021,571	0.002 %	US\$ N/A	ITU.
2008	40,000	47,758,181	0.1 %	US\$ 479	ITU.
2009	108,900	48,137,741	0.2 %	US\$ 459	ITU.
2010	110,000	53,414,374	0.2 %	US\$ 469	ITU.

Note: Per Capita GDP in US dollars, source: International Monetary Fund.

Source: Internet World Stats, June 2010

Although young Internet users know how to access banned sites, government surveillance is frightening, the painstakingly slow Internet speed discouraging, and the frequent power blackouts very frustrating. Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who recently had installed what is advertised as a ‘high-speed’ broadband Internet connection talked of the need ‘... to increase the Megabytes’.

Glass-fiber cables are being installed in Rangoon but the advertised capacity of 30 Mbps has never been experienced. The installation fee of US\$ 990 and monthly charges of US\$ 35-110 for one line are clearly outside the reach of ordinary citizens who live of an average income of about US\$ 30 a month.

Other communication devices also illustrate the backwardness of Burma’s infrastructure. All around the world mobile phones are an essential part of daily life. Not so in Burma. The most favorable statistics estimate the mobile phone penetration at 3.7 percent of the total population, which equals 2 million phone users. This by any standard is ridiculously low. Mobile phones are prohibitively expensive and do not allow access to e-mail or the Internet. The few government controlled operators do not support international roaming and even the international SMS service is blocked. The market price of a GSM SIM card came down recently. A GSM SIM card without a handset is now US\$ 1,400-1,600 on the black market. The official price for a SIM card is about US\$ 170 but nobody is willing to sell at that price. A new scheme has been announced in which pre-paid CDMA

SIM cards will sell for US\$ 600. But let's see what the market price will be.

Even fixed-line phones are an unaffordable luxury. Only a small number of households have a phone line. The monthly rent for an average apartment in Rangoon is about 50 percent higher if it comes with a phone line compared to an apartment without an installed phone. The latest official data talk of 1 percent penetration.

The government does everything it can to keep its population in the dark by restricting what is shown on TV and in the press. As more than 80 percent of Burma's GNP is generated in the agricultural sector and most of the population lives in villages and agricultural areas, no sources of information are available other than the government approved TV and press. Of course, the national press and the government TV do not report anything about the protests and uprisings in the Middle East. Fortunately, in the major cities and hotels across the country satellite TV is available although it is not officially allowed. The subscription costs are about US\$ 400 a year.

Given these depressing statistics, the Burmese government does not have to be afraid of an uprising triggered by the Internet and social media.

Given the unlikelihood of an Internet-sparked uprising, what will it take to bring Burmese onto the streets as seen in 1988 or the monk-led "Saffron Revolution" of 2007?

It is dangerous to make comparisons with the Middle East. The major differences between the Arab countries and Burma make it very hard to imagine another uprising in Burma in the near future. Although the share of young and unemployed is higher in Burma than in the Middle East, the culture and education could hardly be more different. Western and Islamic nations have grown up in the Christian or Islamic tradition of violent conflict solution over the last 1,000 to 2,000 years. In contrast, 90 percent of the Burmese population is Buddhist, a culture that at heart is more peace-loving and less violent.

Many of the leaders of the Middle East protests have been educated at schools and universities in Britain, France or the United States, whereas only a handful of Burmese students have studied abroad and even fewer are willing to return home after finishing their education. The formal school education in Burma has gone downhill since the private and missionary schools were nationalized in 1965. The quality of school and university education is catastrophic and has resulted in generations of poorly educated students without any political mindset.

Most importantly, the violent military crackdowns of the earlier uprisings in 1988 and 2007 have left the Burmese population in fear. Many Burmese were afraid to listen to Aung San Suu Kyi's first speech after her recent release from house arrest. They were afraid of being filmed by secret police, identified and later arrested at home at night as happened in the weeks after the 2007 demonstrations. Many young people refrain from any open defiance of the regime as their arrests could be followed by the arrests of 'complicit' family members. And the 2,200 political activists who still linger in prison are a constant reminder of the brutality of the regime.

Many Burma experts claim that cracks, discontent and envy among the military ranks might topple the ruling junta. But as past experience in Burma shows, a new military dictator is more likely to follow a military coup than a democratic revolution. The military has established a parallel society and economy with its own schools, universities, hospitals and living quarters. The military officers feel they are an elite class who are the only ones who can prevent the Union of Myanmar from disintegrating. They feel superior and look down on the people as lower class citizens.

The Burmese have learned after the mass demonstrations in 1988 that it is very hard to get rid of an old dictator, Ne Win, without inviting in a new one, General Than Shwe. This still echoes in a common Burmese saying: 'Be careful when you kick out the old ruler, the new one might be worse'. This is certainly true for Burma. Will this be true for Tunisia, Egypt or Libya?

There is hope that the people in the Middle East will ultimately replace their authoritarian regimes. But in Burma, it is hard to look to the 'new world' of Facebook and Twitter to inspire a new uprising. If there is a spark, it may be more grounded. After all, it was a dramatic rise in petrol and food prices that sparked the revolt in 2007.

Mandalar Maung is a pseudonym for a foreign resident in Rangoon.

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