Elections during Myanmar's digital coup

Introduction

The digital space plays a crucial role in modern electoral processes, especially in contexts like Myanmar, where the media landscape is tightly controlled, and online platforms remain one of the few avenues for free expression. The military, which seized power in a 2021 coup d'état, plans to hold an election in 2025, which it claims will be free and fair. The accessibility, freedom, and integrity of the digital environment will be critical in enabling the public to understand the military's actions and decide whether or not to participate.

Human Rights Myanmar's submission addresses the UN Special Rapporteur's inquiry into freedom of expression and elections in the digital age, focusing on issues likely to emerge in the upcoming military-controlled elections. These include barriers to electoral information, challenges faced by journalists, the impact of disinformation on public trust and democratic integrity, and the role of digital platforms in supporting credible electoral processes.

Electoral background

Myanmar's electoral landscape has been shaped by political turmoil and systemic repression, casting doubt on the credibility of future elections. The National League for Democracy (NLD) secured a decisive victory in the 2020 elections, defeating the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). However, the military rejected these results, citing baseless claims of electoral fraud and preventing the NLD from assuming office.

On 1 February 2021, the military seized power in a coup, claiming the need to restore order and oversee new elections. They declared a one-year state of emergency, repeatedly extending it beyond constitutional limits, contravening domestic and international norms. Despite asserting that elections are necessary to restore democracy, the military has postponed them, citing ongoing conflicts with pro-democracy groups and ethnic armed organisations.

In 2024, the military conducted a limited census to revise electoral rolls and announced plans for the 2025 elections. However, ongoing conflict, restricted control, and widespread suppression of dissent ensure these elections lack credibility. Military-aligned parties dominate the process, excluding meaningful democratic participation and violating political rights.

Digital barriers to electoral information

The digital space is essential for the electorate to access diverse, independent information, enabling informed participation in elections. However, since the 2021 coup, the military has imposed severe barriers to the free flow of information online, underscoring the lack of credibility in the elections planned for 2025.

A key barrier is the military's extensive use of internet shutdowns, which prevent public access to independent information and communication. Particularly in conflict-affected areas, internet access has been either temporarily or permanently cut. These shutdowns isolate communities, obstruct communication, and prevent the dissemination of political information, including updates on the planned elections. Such actions directly violate the right to freedom of expression and information.

Additionally, the military has blocked access to social media platforms and independent media websites. Platforms such as Facebook—a primary information source for many in Myanmar—have been restricted, along with independent news outlets providing critical coverage of political developments. Individuals using virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass these restrictions face significant risks, including arrest, harassment, and severe penalties. These measures aim to control public discourse and suppress dissenting voices, violating principles of media freedom and transparency.

As the 2025 election approaches, the military will likely escalate barriers to independent information, aiming to suppress criticism of electoral credibility. For instance, the new Cyber Security Law, adopted in January 2025, further criminalises normal and legitimate online activities. The public will increasingly be forced to rely on military-controlled sources, particularly offline, such as state-operated broadcasters.

Attacks on reliable information

To make informed decisions about whether to vote and, if so, when to cast their ballots, the electorate must access reliable, balanced, and timely information. Independent sources, including journalists, civil society actors, and human rights defenders, are vital for this purpose. However, the military has targeted such voices, curtailing press freedom and cracking down on civil society.

Journalists in Myanmar face arbitrary arrest, harassment, and violence. As of this submission, at least 56 journalists remain in military prisons, with over 200 detained since the coup. Many face charges under broad, vaguely defined laws, often linked to terrorism, with sentences ranging from 15 to 25 years for practising journalism.

Civil society organisations, traditionally crucial in promoting voter education and public mobilisation during elections, have also been targeted. Numerous groups have been blocked online, de-registered, or subjected to severe restrictions on their activities. Members engaging in election-related work risk arrest and detention, stifling civic engagement. In 2024, the military ordered all civil society organisations to keep over half their assets in State banks, and only use remaining cash flow for activities, significantly undermining their operations. These

coordinated actions form a systematic effort by the military to deny people their right to participate in public affairs.

This hostile environment is likely to worsen as elections approach. While the military may allow limited reporting or civil society involvement to feign legitimacy, critics of the election's credibility will face severe repression designed to create a chilling effect.

Propaganda and unreliable information

A substantial portion of digital information in Myanmar is unreliable and generated by the military and its allies. The military uses propaganda and disinformation to manipulate public opinion, showcase electoral processes, discredit opposition groups, and suppress criticism of its legitimacy.

State-controlled media and military-affiliated private broadcasters dominate the media landscape, controlling nearly all television, radio, and printed media and maintaining a significant online presence. These outlets disseminate pro-military narratives, leaving little room for independent voices. Propaganda will likely intensify as the 2025 elections approach, portraying the process as credible and opposition groups as threats to national stability.

Disinformation campaigns targeting pro-democracy groups will also escalate. These efforts aim to delegitimise opposition forces and justify continued repression. The spread of false information undermines the electorate's ability to make informed decisions, compromising the integrity of the electoral process.

This manipulation damages public trust in democratic institutions. By controlling information and delegitimising opposition voices, the military erodes confidence in democratic principles. This strategy risks disillusioning citizens, leading them to view electoral participation as futile or accept the military as a stabilising force, further entrenching authoritarian rule.

Role of the digital platforms

Digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse during elections. Private platforms, particularly Meta, have a significant responsibility to safeguard electoral integrity by ensuring access to reliable information and preventing the spread of harmful disinformation.

Meta's content moderation policies significantly affect freedom of expression in Myanmar. While moderating harmful content is necessary, algorithms prioritising emotive and divisive material threaten democratic discourse. Addressing algorithmic bias and promoting credible information over sensationalist content should be prioritised.

The recent announcement by Meta owner, Mark Zuckerberg, of the upcoming global removal of fact-checkers is especially concerning in Myanmar, where disinformation is rampant. Fact-checkers are essential in countering false narratives. Meta's Human Rights Impact Assessment on Myanmar emphasised the importance of supporting fact-checkers and independent media. Ensuring robust fact-checking mechanisms protects electoral integrity. Localised policies

developed in consultation with affected communities are also critical to ensuring platform changes do not inadvertently suppress vital information.

Meta's previous decision in 2022 to deprioritise current affairs content globally also had adverse consequences in Myanmar. Given the severe restrictions on traditional media in the country, online platforms are often the primary source of news for many people. The initial deprioritisation policy reduced public access to critical information. Although Zuckerberg has recently announced that they will be reversing this policy, the decision underscores an ongoing Ameri-centric approach that fails to account for local contexts through the consultation and development of localised policies.

Striking a balance between free expression and protection from harm is particularly complex in Myanmar. Discriminatory speech targeting vulnerable groups has previously contributed to severe human rights violations and will likely increase during elections. Digital platforms must implement context-specific measures to curb hate speech and protect marginalised groups without stifling legitimate expression.

Conclusion

Myanmar's electoral landscape remains plagued by significant barriers to freedom of expression, access to information, and civic engagement. While the digital space offers potential avenues for democratic participation, it is also a battleground for disinformation and state-sponsored repression. Robust action by digital platforms, civil society, and the international community is essential to safeguard freedom of expression, promote electoral integrity, and uphold democratic principles. Human Rights Myanmar urges the UN Special Rapporteur to prioritise these issues in the upcoming thematic report and recommend concrete actions to ensure digital platforms fulfil their human rights responsibilities in electoral contexts.

Recommendations

- Urge digital platforms, particularly Meta, to strengthen transparency and accountability measures regarding content moderation and algorithmic amplification in Myanmar. Remind them of the importance of their due diligence processes and reject any policy decisions that fail to consult with the global majority.

- Encourage the international community to pressure all States, including the Myanmar military, to defend and restore internet access, including in conflict-affected regions, and lift restrictions on independent media.

- Recommend that the UN, its member States, and donors increase support for independent journalists, civil society organisations, and human rights defenders in high-risk countries such as Myanmar. This includes providing asylum, financial assistance, and resources to those at risk, as well as monitoring and documenting violations against these groups to ensure accountability for the junta's repression.