commons amid contrast

Stories on Internet Governance in Burma and Singapore

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Stories on internet Governance on Burma and Singapore

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About the **SEAPA Fellowship**

The SEAPA Fellowship Programme started in 2002 and, as of 2013, has 108 alumni - with 46 of them women journalists and 62 men. Through the program, SEAPA supports mid-level journalists in the Southeast Asian region to write thematic stories based on investigations and fieldwork in a second country within the region. The program begins with a selection process, overseen by independent judges. Once selected, the successful fellows meet for an orientation session, followed by field work to their respective locations, and then a debriefing, story writing and editing phase. The Fellowship is a part of SEAPA's effort to strengthen SEAPA's network in protecting and promoting media freedom and freedom of expression.

Commons amid contrasts

Two countries, six fellows, twelve stories.

Burma and Singapore are obviously different: from economic development levels to political structures, they sit on opposite ends of a scale. Yet, they represent some of the fundamental challenges, and, of hope, in understanding the media landscape in the region and the discussions related to internet governance in Southeast Asia.

Internet governance has become an important global policy issue, with the United Nations hosting an annual global forum annually since 2006, following a mandate from the World Summit on Information Society in Tunisia in 2005. The forum does not provide legally binding decisions but allows for multi-stakeholder debate on governance open to representatives of governments, corporations, and civil society, technical and academic communities, This year's meeting will be held in October in Bali, Indonesia.

This is a compilation of stories by six fellows from the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, four of whom traveled to Yangon, and two, to Singapore, during the three-week 2013 SEAPA Annual Journalism Fellowship in August.

Working on the theme *Freedom of expression challenges to internet governance in Southeast Asia*, the fellows explored the issue from various angles and how politics, access, legislation, education, civil society, poverty and development have an impact on the way the internet is regulated, and vice versa.

SEAPA's 2013 Fellows: (from left) Chen Shaua Fui, Ulisari Eslita, Marlon Alexander Luistro, JefryTupas, Nanchanok Wongsamuth, and Ayee Macaraig.

Internet Penetration in Southeast Asia, 2012 (%)

Burma, Timor Leste, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei

■ Internet Penetration (%)
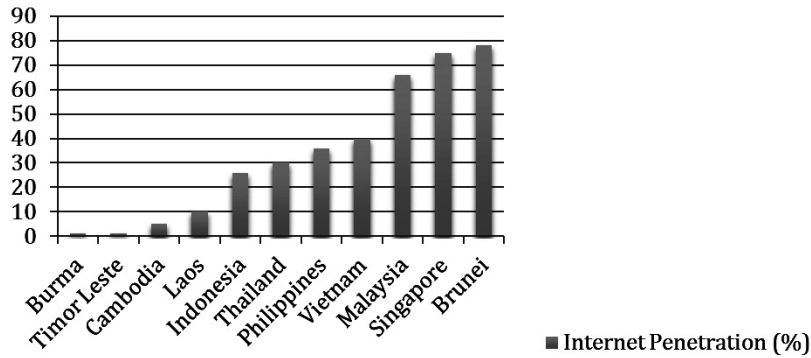
With one of the highest internet penetration figures in the Southeast Asian region, Singapore has also one of the tightest controls over expression, and in particular online expression. The Burmese people, on the other hand, struggle to keep up with only one percent internet penetration throughout the country but demonstrate a stronger desire and movement to change and reform.

Net issues in the region

There are some 150 million users out of a combined population of 600 million in Southeast Asia, a region characterized by diverse political and economic systems. Internet penetration figures vary with the highest in Brunei and Singapore (>75%) and the lowest in Burma and Timor Leste (1%). Investments in information communication technologies have been steadily increasing, with chunks of the sum going to infrastructure and security. Contributions from investments in ICT to the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was USD32 billion or 3% of combined gross domestic product in 2012, according to the World Economic Forum's network readiness index.

For the ordinary citizen, often seen as the end user, the tangible is often more important – speedy services, access, and affordability – while the intangible such as rights, privacy and freedom of expression are given little attention. Businesses hope to reap the benefits from the expanding opportunities along the supply chain from hardware, software, delivery and dissemination.

States, on the other hand, tend to be more concerned with the issue of security, in the context of national security given the borderless nature of the technology, online dissent, and crimes online. Interestingly, ASEAN, together with APEC, the IGF, the International Telecommunications Union and NATO, is among the top influential agenda setters where cyber security is concerned. In light of global revelations on surveillance and filtering, one wonders about the extent to which governments here are making decisions about the internet that could adversely affect its citizens.

One of the major concerns of free expression advocates is the excessive state controls in the form of censorship and legal action over online expression, often under the guise of protecting national security. Netizens and intermediaries have been at the receiving end of lawsuits and jail sentences, with concerns that these have overshadowed the fight against real crimes perpetrated online.

Hope for the internet

Against this backdrop, journalists writing about Burma highlight the ever-present contradictions in the low levels of telecommunications infrastructure and the vibrant demand for the technology for expression and mobilization. Both Chen Shaua Fui (Malaysia) and Jefry Tupas (Philippines) raise the issue of whether the lack of infrastructure and connectivity could be a deliberate decision by the government, which controls the communication and energy sectors. Both also highlight the opportunities and challenges faced by communities outside the capital in using the internet, either for getting information, or in disseminating them.

Ayee Macaraig (Philippines) highlights the weak legal environment in Burma on media and telecommunications, citing the challenges faced by the civil society in ensuring good laws are in place to support the changing landscape for expression. The media community resorted to the online spaces to mobilize themselves in the wake of laws being proposed, with mixed results given that information is still at low levels due to years of restrictions to expression and access.

Nanchanok Wongsamuth (Thailand) explores the use of the social media by the youths to encourage debates about key topics, which can be a challenge given the typical user is more interested in personal communication and entertainment. But the new wave of youth movement has found uses for social networking sites to educate and mobilize themselves.

Chen, Nanchanok and Jefry also show that the different communities they focused on agree that the benefits of an unregulated internet on freedom of expression can be seen in facilitating the free flow of information, dialogues and debates even where certain topics are considered sensitive. From peace to youth empowerment, the internet can become a critical opportunity for pushing the democratic agenda ahead.

In Burma, one gets the impression that Facebook is the internet. But it is more than that, as Ayee Macaraig reports on the importance played by the formerly exiled media that have relied extensively on the internet to disseminate their news content. Now back in the country, they need to overcome the transition challenges in terms of credibility and capability to reach out to the millions in the country who are not yet connected.

Ulisari Eslita and Marlon Alexander Luistro, from Indonesia and Philippines, respectively, describe the extent of control using legal tools against critics in Singapore, where a recent policy has been introduced to regulate websites carrying news content. They write that while it has been a challenge for citizens to express themselves, there is a sense of hope that the online platform will provide an alternative space for a society that is inching towards political openness. Ulisari's focus on the impact of the recent Media Development Authority's licensing rule, also discusses the future of independent online media in the country with new sites being set up to fill in the gaps by the mainstream media.

With the next IGF being held in Southeast Asia, it will be interesting to see how the key players such as governments, businesses and civil society negotiate their interests and agendas in relation to the internet.

National symbols: the Singapore's Merlion and Burma's Shwedagon Pagoda [opposite , photos by Ulisari Eslita and Chen Shaua Fui]
Popular pastimes: Both countries have strong reading cultures. [above, photos by Marlon Alexander Luistro and Chen Shaua Fui]

Internet: A New Tool to Change Burma's Old Laws

Story and photos by **Ayee Macaraig**

Five years ago, Nay Phone Latt tried to kill time by reading, doing yoga, and writing letters, short stories, and poems. But on a recent gloomy Monday morning, the blogger could hardly answer a phone call as he rushed about before he took a bus to Burma's administrative capital to help change the law that sent him to prison.

"I only have 20 minutes," he said with an apologetic smile to a visitor at his office in the ramshackle city of Rangoon before braving the rainy Monday morning for the four-hour bus ride to Naypyidaw. Making final arrangements on his phone, he paced to and fro the room with a wall bearing photos of Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and his other technology idols.

Judging from photos taken right after his release from prison in January 2012, Nay Phone Latt had visibly gained weight. Once he finally settled on a couch, he began explaining why he is now working with the former military junta that sentenced him to 20 years and six months in jail.

"We got some extent of freedom but the thing is the Electronic Transactions Law by the military government is still valid and everybody can use the Internet freely but we are not free because the law is still there," he said. "If they want to, they can sue everybody with this law. You can say we are free, but we are not safe."

Nay Phone Latt was only 28 when he was jailed for his ties to the opposition and pro-democracy movement in 2008. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the monk-led

A man logs into Facebook at an Internet café in Rangoon.

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anti-government protests, bloggers like him were a key source of information as the junta cracked down on dissidents and eventually shut down the Internet.

Despite his days in the notorious Insein prison and the Pa-an prison, Nay Phone Latt is now hopeful about the sea change in his country. He said much has changed since he witnessed the 1988 uprising as an eight-year-old boy, when the government brutally went after students and activists, killing 3,000 people.

An online crusade

In 2011, after 50 years of repression under the military regime, the former pariah state began opening up. Political and economic reforms have since earned President Thein Sein's nominally civilian government unprecedented praise from the international community. The release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners like Nay Phone Latt was one such change.

Yet Nay Phone Latt and many activists, bloggers, and journalists in Burma, also known as Myanmar, are worried about the transition. With draconian laws still in place and similar bills in the making, they fear that the government will backslide on its commitment to democracy.

Formerly in exile, under censorship or behind bars, Burma's wired citizens are now using the latest addiction in the country to ensure that the generals-turned-politicians will not take back their newfound freedoms: the Internet. They are wielding this weapon not only to engage a growing smartphone-savvy audience, but also to liberate an outdated legal framework that threatens, among other things, the freedom of expression.

Saying many netizens do not know about laws and the risks they face because of these, Nay Phone Latt and his Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) plan

Blogger and former political prisoner Nay Phone Latt lobbies for free expression in ICT bills as executive director of the Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation.

to use Facebook among different platforms to get them on board.

Burma is expecting a boom in Internet and smartphone use, with Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo just recently clinching 15-year mobile operating licenses in one of Asia's last unconquered frontiers. The government aims to increase the mobile penetration rate from less than 10 percent at present to 80 percent in 2016.

Currently, Burma has a low Internet penetration rate estimated at one to three percent of the population (there are no official government figures). But MIDO has apparently taken note that the government regularly makes announcements and parliament actively updates its Facebook page. Beyond social sharing, Burmese netizens have also turned the social network into a news portal and content aggregator.

In a country of 55 million where Internet connection is notoriously slow and power outages are a normal occurrence, Facebook has managed to overtake blogs in popularity. IT experts say the social network dominates the Burmese cyberspace so much so that for its 600,000 to 800,000 users, Facebook is the Internet.

That Deputy Minister for Information and presidential spokesman Ye Htut announced the winning bidders on his Facebook page in June is a testament to how the social network has become a new space to communicate with policymakers.

The journalists' story

In another apartment-type office in Rangoon, freelance journalist Myint Kyaw is also often on Facebook. Typing on a MacBook (with the sticker "Give Freedom to Media Law, For the People to get truth") while trying to entertain visitors, he talked about the whirlwind of meetings of the Interim Myanmar Press Council (MPC) composed mostly of journalists and media owners that the government tasked with drafting a media bill last year.

Myint Kyaw and his Myanmar Journalist Network (MJN), a media group with members mostly aged 20 to 30, had also recently launched a signature campaign to urge parliament to revise the Printing and Publishing Enterprise bill that the Lower House approved in July.

Local and international human-rights and media groups then denounced the Ministry of Information (MOI)-drafted bill as a form of prior restraint and censorship.

Gathering over 10,000 signatures in Rangoon, Mandalay and other cities, MJN called on parliament to revise the ministry's printing bill and to consider the media bill the press council filed before the Upper House in mid-August. The MPC's bill is a code of conduct covering all forms of media.

MJN took its campaign to cyberspace, discussing the bill in its closed Facebook group and public Facebook fan page. It also uploaded minutes of its meetings and shared the campaign logo on the social networking site.

In late August, the Upper House approved the printing bill with most of the MPC's recommendations. Press Council secretary and spokesperson Kyaw Min Swe said the parliament deleted the clause on the MOI's registration officer, authorised to issue and revoke licenses of print publications for violations as vague as "aggrieving races and religions,

portraying obscenity, and abetting and instigating crime."

The bill will be discussed again in the Lower House before parliament makes the final decision.

Myint Kyaw of the Myanmar Journalist Network.

A Net effect?

For now, it remains unclear how much of the journalists' initial success can be attributed to online efforts, which were done simultaneously with lobbying offline through MPC press conferences, meetings with the MOI and members of parliament, and critical news reports on the issue.

Days before the sudden passage of the bill, however, Myint Kyaw had explained why it was natural for MJN to bring the media bill debate to Facebook.

"To some extent, because the Internet users, the government officials and some NGOs are there, the online network here is also effective in terms of our needs and our views," said the chief editor of the now-defunct Yangon Press International, the first news organisation in Burma that operated purely on Facebook.

Myint Kyaw added, "They are

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Back in Burma, exiled media face own transition

RANGOON, Burma – Toe Zaw Latt needs a new press ID. He did not change jobs and there is no typographical error in his name. He whips up his new business card and points out the difference between his organisation's name on it and his frayed ID: "Democratic Voice of Burma, now DVB."

The switch from four words to three letters seems minor. But it reflects significant changes for Burma's exiled journalists who made their way home. After decades of working in Chiang Mai, Thailand or India, they are resettling in a country whose fragile political and economic transition is deeply affecting their own.

In his company's one-year-old office in Burma's largest city Rangoon, DVB bureau chief Toe Zaw Latt tells the story of his calling card. "We've been compromising especially with the Ministry of Information," he says. "In the Constitution, the country is already called Myanmar. We agreed we will not spell it out but keep DVB

Multimedia Group. For others, it's not so important, but it's been our brand name for 21 years."

Compromise has been inevitable for Burma's returning exiled media who had established a formidable reputation for their independent reporting on the then military junta's abuses.

Kyaw Zwa Moe, editor of the English Edition of the *Irrawaddy*, also had to shift from using Burma to Myanmar in the monthly magazine that any newsboy here now sells without fear of a 20-year jail sentence. But Kyaw Zwa Moe says the concessions are minimal.

"I think here you are supposed to be more critical

DVB Rangoon bureau chief Toe Zaw Latt's old press card and new business card . The the broadcaster had to shorten its name from Democratic Voice of Burma to DVB.

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doing their own business. They are also aware of what is happening in the media, what are the issues. Facebook, social media, is one of the best media to get in touch with the other sectors."

In the case of the printing bill, though, Myint Kyaw admitted that the discussion on MJN's public Facebook page was not vibrant, gathering only a few general statements

of support. Other journalists and IT experts themselves say many Burmese netizens prefer talking about entertainment, lifestyle, and the raging ethnic and religious conflicts.

"They think the law is boring," said Myint Kyaw. "Some journalists, they don't read about the law. Even the journalists don't read."

Nay Phone Latt made the same observation based on MIDO's efforts

to crowdsource online reactions to the technology bills it is helping draft.

"Most of the people in our country and most of the netizens, they don't know about the law and they think the lawmaking process is not their duty," Nay Phone Latt said. "Actually it's not like that. The parliament members are not skillful in the lawmaking process. They don't know everything so if they do something, we need to participate and if they do the law concerning the ICT, the people from the ICT sector should participate."

As he takes part in the lawmaking process, the 33-year-old civil engineering graduate has noticed that members of parliament are still stuck in the old paradigm.

Daily newspapers are now a dime a dozen in Rangoon after the abolition of pre-publication censorship. Dailies face fierce competition, with 12 newspapers now in circulation.

than ever," he says. "In the past, Burma had black and white, no other colours. If something bad happens, that was because of the government and that's it."

"Now, for example, the monkhood," he says while flipping the issue with the cover story "A Radically Different Dhamma". "We have to be more critical of our own people, their behavior, and mentality as well."

The man who read smuggled copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* in prison until the pages were worn out says he prefers reporting on ethnic and religious conflicts than figuring out how to make money. Yet he has no choice but to start thinking like a businessman as well, now that international donors that used to support ventures like *Irrawaddy* are cutting funding as they set up their own offices and development projects in Rangoon.

It is a change the former non-profit organisations are adjusting to, albeit uncomfortably.

Toe Zaw Latt, who was in the jungle after the bloody 1988 uprising, says he is now facing a different kind of battle.

"We have to find some money, expand our programmes to entertainment, some movies," he says. "DVB is popular because of our reporting. At the same time, we can't find lots of money from news."

DVB and the *Irrawaddy* entered the local market at a time when the number of private daily newspapers in circulation expanded from zero to 12 following the abolition of censorship. The competition is also stiff in broadcast where state-owned or linked companies dominate airwaves and access to the President's office.

Calling DVB's business model a hybrid, Toe Zaw Latt says the TV and radio broadcaster sells its content to FM stations and daily newspapers to augment donor money. He says selling does not mean selling out.

He explains why DVB trained the staff of the state-owned MRTV last year, a decision some of its reporters protested against. "Is there anything DVB doesn't report?" he points out. "DVB is full of land-grabbing stories, unfair economic stories, the clashes. News is news as before but at the same time, we engage. The state wants to change. Do you want to be part of change or stay away from change?"

But he concedes that some things did change in news reporting. "There is no new news," he says. "In the past, it is with the source and connections, very secret, very closed country. Now something happens, everybody knows. It's as if 'exclusive' disappeared in this country."

"Most of the people in the government are from the military and their thinking is based only on safety," he said. "Whenever they think of something, what they are thinking is safety and actually to think only of safety is not enough. We should think also of the freedom of expression and freedom of the people."

Continuing concerns

But bad habits may be proving hard to break. Under the military junta, the Internet in Burma was in tight control. The government blocked the websites of exiled and international media, and opposition and human rights groups. It also banned social networking sites and Skype. Owners of Internet cafes were even required to take screenshots and get personal information of users.

During politically sensitive times like anniversaries of the 1988 uprising and the Saffron Revolution, the junta slowed down Internet access. A 2010 report of Reporters Without Borders (RWB) and the Burma Media Association also showed that Burma's ISP system was configured in such a way that different servers catered to the government ministries while another was for civilian users. The report said this gave the military "an exclusive ability to control the country's Internet system".

Burma earned the distinction of being an "Enemy of the Internet" in the RWB 2012 list while the U.S.-based Freedom House categorized it as "Not Free" in the same year. This year, the country retained the Freedom House label but made headlines as it moved up ahead of China.

Indeed, despite the reforms, the laws of the past remain in place and Nay Phone Latt is now busy working to help repeal them. With the controversial Electronic Transactions Law, he asks why the government requires users to register every electronic device like radios and phones. "For the telecom company, they will register, but for the end-user, they don't need to do that kind of thing," he said.

The blogger and former cyber-café owner is also lobbying for lower penalties and clear definitions. The law imposes a prison sentence of seven to 15 years for the use of the Internet and digital technology to receive or send information relating to state secrets or security.

"What is the meaning of *receive*?" he asked. "The mail in your inbox is not 'receive'. Everybody can send to your inbox if they know your e-mail address but it's not your responsibility. So we need to define what is the meaning of receive, what is the meaning of *send*, what is the meaning of *distribute*."

Besides being wielded against Nay Phone Latt, the Orwellian law made prisoners out of his friend,

Toe Zaw Latt has reason to long for the days of the exclusive. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis in 2008, DVB's underground video journalists provided the world a rare look into the junta's brutality.

More adept with this global audience, Kyaw Zwa Moe says trying to sell the English magazine in Burma remains a challenge. *Irrawaddy* had to lay off staff in July. Despite his scepticism, he has relented on accepting ads and money from military cronies.

"You have to compromise with this political reality," he says. "For us, if our editorial policy is not to be interfered by any investors or donors or advertisers, I think that is okay. Like in the past, sometimes donors came and talked to us, 'You shouldn't report this and that.' We never accepted it."

Beyond print, Kyaw Zwa Moe sees potential online. The *Irrawaddy* website boasts of over 80 million hits monthly, with readers from inside Burma tripling since 2012. *Irrawaddy* is developing apps for smartphones. The "likes" on the Facebook page of its Eng-

Formerly banned in Burma, the Irrawaddy is now openly sold in the streets of Rangoon following the country's media reforms.

lish version, now nearly 60,000, exceed its circulation of 7,000.

With a staff of just 40 people, the *Irrawaddy* has not yet maximised social media. "We have to do it ourselves," says Kyaw Zwa Moe. "The reporters – sometimes I even – upload the pictures. We have one webmaster for the English site. He is quite busy

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actor and comedian Zarganar, and 88 Generation activists like Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi.

Nay Phone Latt was reportedly convicted partly for storing a cartoon of General Than Shwe in his e-mail account, and possessing a banned video.

While in prison, he earned the RWB press freedom prize in the Cyber Dissidents category, the PEN/ Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award and was part of the 2010 *Time* magazine 100 list in the Heroes category.

A web of laws

Thaung Su Nyein, managing director of IT and media company Information Matrix, shares the concerns of Nay Phone Latt and many journalists. After all, he is a member of the Myanmar Press Council, the Myanmar Computer Professionals Association, and the Myanmar Computer Federation, which along with MIDO helps draft ICT bills.

The son of former Foreign Minister Win Aung is the publisher and editor of *7Day News*, the *Internet Journal*, and other publications housed in a new and sprawling office in a city where the influx of foreign investors are jacking up real estate prices.

The different hats Thaung Su Nyein wears allow him to see the connections and implications of the various bills.

"When you give an authority the power to license something, it basically means he also has the power to remove the license," he remarked. "Even with the best intentions of the current government, who is to say these intentions won't change in the next few months especially leading up to the elections, so we're going to make sure those freedoms of expression are kept in place."

In ensuring free speech, journalists had looked to political parties like Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to champion their cause. Yet contrary to expectations, the repressive version of the printing bill passed the Lower House without any opposition from the democracy icon and her partymates.

The Press Council's Kyaw Min Swe said the group's meeting with Suu Kyi and the NLD in Naypyidaw in mid-August was surprising.

"She looked very much like a politician," he said. "She didn't say definitely she will support us. She said every issue has a win or lose but 'I want to see the people win.' If the people win, she will support. So that's very general, very popular opinion. It sounds pleasant to hear."

Asked about the journalists' criticism, Suu Kyi's NLD co-founder and adviser, longtime journalist Win Tin, chuckled in his Rangoon home, a small shack on his friend's property. Five years after his release, he still wore a blue shirt, the colour of his prison uniform. He has vowed not to wear any other colour until all political prisoners are free.

Win Tin was the lone NLD voice rejecting the printing bill. His criticism though does not extend to Suu Kyi and his party. Sitting on a chair underneath an old RWB poster with the greeting, "Happy 75th Birthday

uploading the story on the website and we say, 'Hey, we need the story on Facebook too. Why don't you upload there?' We don't really have the human resources here."

DVB's reporters and producers also multitask. They run a programme called *Talk 2 DVB* using messages sent via GChat. DVB just started a program in August called *DVB Debate*, an interactive show aiming to promote an "agree to disagree" culture in a country generals ran for 50 years. Topics range from politics to the hazards of chewing Burma's favorite betel nut.

"Our focus changed," says Toe Zaw Latt. "If you have good Internet connection, you don't need a television. In Japan only few people watch TV. It is smartphone or multimedia so we focus the development of these particular communication areas."

He says making money online is still a question because of low connectivity and the absence of electronic banking in Burma.

The bigger question though is what happens after 2015. Both DVB and *Irrawaddy* are keeping their Chiang Mai bureaus at least until then as they navigate Burma's shifting political terrain.

In December, the country will host the Southeast Asian games and chair the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 2014. This early, power players including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi are preparing for the 2015 election by starting to review the Constitution, which bars The Lady from being president and guarantees military representation in parliament.

Despite the uncertainty, Kyaw Zwa Moe says *Irrawaddy* is here to stay. "Everyone from the government side, the opposition side has to cultivate our rights," he says. "That is very important for all of us. The *Irrawaddy* will flow with the current of the political reform in the coming years."

Like their country, the former exiled journalists are grappling with their own identity crisis.

"Are we local?" asks Toe Zaw Latt. "We do Burmese news. Not quite. Are we exiled? Not quite. Are we legal? Seemingly legal. There are a lot of things we have to clarify at the moment."

"It is a process," he says. "It is just the beginning of the beginning." *[by Ayee Macaraig]*

Win Tin, in prison for the past 16 years", the 84-year-old defended his colleagues. He said that Suu Kyi and other members of parliament value press freedom but are not able to read all bills.

But Win Tin admitted that Burma's main opposition party is trying to address shortcomings in training young leaders, especially in using technology.

"We have this saying that we cannot cut the umbilical cord," he said. "We have youth group leaders, some of them over 50 years old, grandfathers. So we are trying at the end of the year to have a youth conference. Another thing is now they are limited but very soon, they will use the Internet so it will be helpful to enlighten our party members. We are giving party members media classes, training, and how important it is to give news out."

Ex-soldiers in parliament

It is not just the NLD that is in need of training and young blood, however. At a bustling newsroom of the DVB Multimedia Group in Rangoon, Toe Zaw Latt wonders if his news organisation can afford to fully operate in Burma.

"We pay very serious attention on what the new broadcasting law will look like," said the DVB's Rangoon bureau chief. "Look at the parliament. I doubt many of the parliamentarians know about specific media law, to be frank. They are former soldiers."

Burma's Constitution reserves a quarter of seats in parliament for the military while the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is also the ruling party.

In exile, DVB was known as the Democratic Voice of Burma. It had to change its name when it returned home last year. But Toe Zaw Latt said DVB is keeping its Chiang Mai office partly because of legal uncertainty.

Veteran journalist and National League for Democracy co-founder U Win Tin admits his party needs to train young leaders, especially in using the Internet for communication.

He said technology and lawmakers' knowledge of it are a key concern. Toe Zaw Latt also said, "If there's a law saying about some control over content, we have to think about it. Because for example in your content, how many percentage do you have to cover this and that? That is very likely. On top of that, you have to uplink from a particular place. What if something goes wrong and the pictures on television do not come out? People don't know the reason behind it."

This is why besides lobbying, training members of parliament and ministry officials in ICT is part of Nay Phone Latt's advocacy. He and MIDO conduct workshops for government leaders.

But is he taking it to the next level. "We try to make the connection between the government sector and ICT-related NGOs," he said "For 2015, we will try to push some of the IT guys to run for parliament. It should be like that because they want to make the law and the regulation for the ICT sector but if they do not have enough knowledge, they can't do that."

Cybercrime law still needed

Yet while he promotes free speech and the rights of Internet users, Nay Phone Latt believes in the need to regulate the Web. He is pushing for the passage of a cybercrime law to address hacking, phishing, and online theft.

"Cybercrimes will increase in the near future and if somebody committed the cybercrime, there will be victims," he said. "There are so many people who are online but when they go to the police station, the police will say they don't know about ICT and they cannot take responsibility. We need a cyber law and cyber police who are very skillful in ICT."

Zaw Ye Naung, broadcast and online media editor of Eleven Media Group, supports the move. He said the *Eleven Media* website, one of the most popular news sites in Burma,

has been hacked at least four times in the past two years.

In the past, cyberattacks were blamed on the state. But now Zaw Ye Naung said he has no idea who has been targeting Eleven Media's site and Facebook page, with the IPs traced to places as diverse as Hong Kong, the United States, China, and Russia.

In late August, the *Irrawaddy* reported that the so-called Blink Hacker Group attacked Burma's official Southeast Asian (SEA) Games website, as well as that of Eleven Media, the Iron Cross rock band, Myanmar Gamers, Yatanarpon Teleport, Red Link, and the web store of the *Irrawaddy* news agency.

"What if they hack a payment system?" asked Zaw Ye Naung. "We're not a payment website, just a news website, but if we were, what do you have to show to your customers? How can we sue the person? Who is he?"

Rangoon homes and offices get to watch DVB via satellite. Satellite dishes are ubiquitous in Burma.

On to self-regulation

But he and other journalists are against government proposals to regulate Facebook to prevent the spread of hate speech amid violence pitting Buddhists against Muslims, and clashes between the military and ethnic groups.

Deputy Information Minister Ye Htut said in July, "Our department is willing to develop regulations and public service media training for that. The government has no intention of blocking people, but we are ready to stop people who are diverting from the law."

Nay Phone Latt said he does not like government regulation either. "I want to have the regulation by the people, " he said. "We regulate ourselves. We will check and balance our own society. We will make our own regulation, like a self-regulation system. That is the solution. If we can regulate ourselves, the government need not regulate us."

He paused, then continued: "Actually, the long-term solution is in the education system. If we can put the ICT sector in the curriculum,

every student will know about the nature of the ICT and they will know how they can use ICT effectively and for their own development and for society's development."

Nay Phone Latt knows he has his work cut out for him. As it is, the poor infrastructure and various sectors' lack of awareness and capacity have limited the Internet into being just a supplement to direct lobbying for now.

He and other free speech activists are also aware that like the changes in Burmese cyberspace, the country's democratic transition is still premature. So even now that he was already running late, he said he would still be taking that bus ride to Naypyidaw.

"I worry for the future," said Nay Phone Latt. "But at the same time, we try to cooperate with the government and the military and the solution is how we can persuade everybody: the hardliners, the military, everybody. The destiny of our country is how we can persuade them to go forward in the democratic society."

A new political battleground in Burma

Story and photos
by **Chen Shaua Fui**

At a street corner in Kamayut Township, Yangon, a young man does what would be seen as freakish in his country just three or four years ago – he lowers his head, fixes his eyes on his smart phone, swipes the screen and smiles at it.

He is probably in his 20s, dressed casually in a black striped shirt and dark jeans, which makes him stand out in the crowd of people wearing the traditional *longyi* (cloth worn as a long skirt). Still, he is not uncommon among the Burmese of his generation, especially those on the streets of downtown Yangon these days.

More and more young Burmese are joining their smartphone-toting peers elsewhere in the world: a generation that cannot imagine their lives without their all-in-one gadget.

Amidst the traditional or even nostalgic atmosphere, a traveller would get the feeling that Myanmar is finally catching up with the outside world after strict military rule of over five decades.

The opening up of the telecommunications services has presented opportunities for the people to connect to the global village. There is a strong hope that access to information and having-the-right-to-choose values can help the democratisation process, especially during this important transition period.

However, this new and exciting online platform has also been used by some groups who, many fear, are trying to set malicious agendas by posting insensitive hate speeches or remarks.

The inherent divisions in the country between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims and Rohingyas (also known as Bengali by most Burmese), as well as the majority Burman and other minority ethnic groups, have driven online users to take sides, resulting in inflamatory views on the sectarian clashes that flared up in March last year.

Political observers, drawing lessons from history, suspect that religious clashes were following the pattern in the past: They hap-

Old meets new. A newspaper vendor checka his smart phone.

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pened when those in power felt threatened or challenged. This was common during the British colonial era up till the military rule after Independence.

The prevalent view is that the old dogs of the regime may want to further divide the deeply fragmented country, while the pro-democracy movement is trying to hold it together.

Facebook, the most popular social media site in Myanmar, is believed to have become a new political battleground for the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the biggest opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD), which are gearing up to the 2015 presidential election.

It may come as a surprise to an outsider who finds it easier to contact a Burmese friend through Facebook than email, as many are able to access the site using smartphones.

It is estimated that around 1% of Myanmar's population of nearly 60 million are Facebook users, according to Nay Phone Latt, the executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO).

For Ye Naing Moe, director of Yangon Journalism School, although the internet penetration is just 1% of the population, those who have access to the internet are influential people. Online activities are increasing among the ruling elites, media practitioners, military officers, educated monks – people who can change the political and social landscape in the country.

"Online people are influential people. They are able to shape the society. In small towns where only a few people can go online, those who can, serve as the eyes and ears of their communities," Ye said.

Among the big-name Facebook users is President U Thein Sein who actively communicates with the populace through his Facebook page, which features photos of his official events and statements. He has 11,800 followers.

Another popular USDP leader, Deputy Minister of Information Ye Htut, has 47,000 Facebook followers. Opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi's party National League for Democracy (NLD) official page has 221,000 followers.

The mood is vibrant as shoppers look at smartphones sold on sidealks on a street adjacent to Bogyoke Market. Vendors use fish nets as a safeguard from thieves.

According to the statistics from various sources released last year, 29.7% of global Facebook users are mainly young people in the 25-34 age bracket, while 50% of users who are 18-24 go to Facebook when they wake up in the morning. Myanmar's statistics are unavailable, but internet usage is defnitely coming on strong in the country.

Thinzar Shunlei Yi, 21, is among those riding this wave following the opening up of the telecommunication services. She surfs the internet using her smartphone, and checks her Facebook or email account in the morning.

However, the online life remains a distant reality for the majority of the society.

Many in Yangon earn a meager US$1 a day, while a desktop computer with an LCD screen and operating system ready is about 400,000 kyats (about US$ 400) and a Lenovo Thinkpad US$ 1,300.

Even for Shunlei, a fresh graduate of Institute of Education who comes from a military family, can only own her very first phone with Android 2.1 Eclair version. It cost a relatively moderate US$ 100 and was given to her by her uncle as a gift this year.

"Unfortunately, it is version 2.1. I can't use it as well as those belonging to other youths," Shunlei said. She had to fork out about US$ 10 for an initial sign-up of 2G service.

Currently, Android phone users are using the 4.3 Jelly Bean version.

A stroll down on a street adjacent to the Bogyoke Aung San Road, one couldn't help but notice the vibrant mood in the air. People squatted in front of a line of mats displaying goods, looking for scrap computer parts or testing out the latest smartphones on sale.

Before 2010, an individual needed to pay almost US$ 3,000 for a subscription identity module or SIM card. Now, they can buy one with 3G access for slightly over US$

Khin Lay, founder of Triangle Women Support Group has likened the nature of online space to a toilet wall, where people want to write dirty words.

400. Although this is still unbelievably expensive, many are able to own a SIM card now.

As the mobile Internet service becomes more commonly available, many issues related to the internet usage have also arrived at Myanmar's doorsteps.

A double-edged sword

While Myanmar may be seen as a "late bloomer" in terms of online connectivity, it has caught on fast and furious. And like the rest of the world, it is a major player in determining the political climate – spreading news, influence and fuelling emotions.

The hatred between the Buddhists and Muslims which turned ugly and violent in Rakhine state and spread to central Myanmar since March last year has wormed its way to the online space.

The hate speech circulating on Facebook has raised the eyebrows of many. Buddhists and Muslims are attacking each other openly online, at times inciting people to commit violent act against those of other faiths.

And the failure of the government to contain the violence has also raised questions.

As of end-August 2013, another clash has erupted in the Sagaing region, an hour's drive from Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city after Yangon, where a Muslim's house was burned down.

According to the Physicians for Human Rights, some reports released in May and June 2013 showed that anti-Muslim clashes and reprisal attacks have displaced more than 250,000 people, and destroyed over 10,000 houses, scores of mosques and a dozen monastries.

"People say that social media or Facebook is like the walls of a toilet. You know in the very poor areas in our country, the toilet walls are very dirty. People write whatever they want on the walls," said Khin Lay, founder of Triangle Women Support Group.

Cheaper Internet access and mobile phones have provided a "licence" for people from all strata of society – any background, any education level – to post "dirty" words

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online, Khin said.

Many online users who have harboured deep hatred towards people of other faiths now have a channel to vent their anger, provoke and stir sentiments, albeit irrationally.

Online hate speech is a worrying trend, and many media practitioners or social activists who talked to the writer in Yangon felt that something else was also at play. Could it be a pre-planned scheme to set back the democratisation process in the country?

Nay Phone Latt, the executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO), pointed out that there are big groups with huge funding and backgrounds that intentionally create these hate speeches to incite violence around the country.

"Our constitution states that the military can seize power when there is violence," said Nay.

Real or manufactured?

Nay expressed doubts over "sources" of the hate speeches, as whenever a certain user posted some inflammatory remarks, he or she will get 150 shares within two to three minutes, which is unbelievably fast.

"The first source (of hate speech) is not from the ordinary people," he added.

Thiha Maung Maung, project coordinator of Yangon Journalism School, noticed the *modus operandi* of certain Facebook pages which confirms his belief that many hate speeches are pre-planned.

He explained that some Facebook pages were camouflaged as football fan pages, or with humourous content to attract followers. The pages then change their "personalities", incorporating more and more nationalistic content as time goes by.

"These kind of Facebook accounts and pages are very alike.

The status they have or photos they posted are similar. It seems like the work of the same person or the same group of people," Thiha observed.

Shunlei felt uneasy when she saw a doctored photo of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Daw is an honorific, literally meaning "aunt") with her face attached to the body of an exposed woman.

"There are two types of people – those who support the government and those who support Aung San Suu Kyi. They are fighting each other. The president and Aung San Suu Kyi are big figures. When someone post something on Aung San Suu Kyi's side, the pro-government users will say something nasty. They really hate her," she said.

Coming from a military family, Shunlei has two groups of friends on her Facebook. The critical university friends consisted of Burman and other ethnic groups, and her

"Magic show" in rural Burma

The thin line between magic and latest technology is even thinner in rural Burmese areas.

Nay Phone Latt, the Executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), recalls the wide eyes and dropped jaws that greeted his computer and internet trainings in remote areas of Burma.

"Whatever we said, whatever we shows to them are almost perceived as magic," Nay laughs.

He was particularly touched by a group of teachers, living in a remote Alal Yay Kyaw village, located at the Irrawaddy region, which requires a night and half a day boat ride from Rangoon along the Irrawaddy River.

The teachers, who have no knowledge about the computer before, took the initiative to secure three computers and tried to get internet access to continue their learning after Nay's team conducted a basic computer training in the village.

"We have to create that kind of knowledge and mindset that they could use the ICT to reach out to the world for personal development and also to support their profession," he said.


However, this is not without challenge. The villagers can only use electricity at night, Nay said. Training could not be conducted in the day time, but at night generators were humming at the background.

Ironically, during the interview at the MIDO office near Botahtaung Township, Rangoon, the power was disrupted a few times.

high school friends who enjoy their social status as members of military families who study at the military high school.

As she has been involved in organising the International Day for Peace (IDP), and had participated in
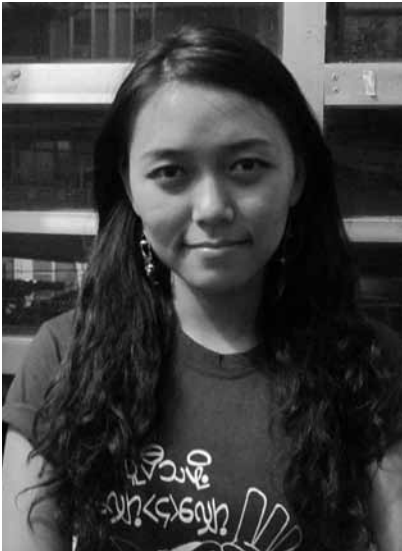
Thinzar Shunlei Yi

a peace march last year, some of her old friends questioned her activist work. Once, a junior left the group she led as he felt that it was better to stay away from politics.

"He might think it was better not to be involved with the group I led. It's not that he was frightened, but in his mindset, it was best to get away from politics.

"His parents are still government workers, but so are my parents. Sometimes, I feel guilty too if my activities affect my dad's work. I'm not sure yet. Thus, I decided that I won't show up in media or public though I can't help but to be involved in political affairs as an active youth," Shunlei shared her dilemma with the writer.

Peter, 33, a civil society member is also troubled by the hate speeches online that had inflamed the emotions of people, and he was attacked (on cyberspace) when he called on others to discuss issues rationally.

However, Peter believes that it is not all bad on the virtual world. People from different religious and political divides can use online media as a platform to engage and negotiate, instead of hurling abusive words at one another in an attempt to express themselves.

"They could use online media to find some common ground amidst their differences, but it hasn't happened that way.

"They can't find any common ground on internet. They just post abusive things and when some people try to rationalise, they will just say 'Don't talk rubbish, I don't believe in that,'" he added.

Peter, who studed in the United Kingdom, pointed out that religious and political crises, natural or manufactured, are common since the colonial days.

"Whenever people resisted or there was a political change, the government would start a Bud-

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To Nay, the computer and internet trainings carried out by MIDO around the country, except in Rakhine and Kachin states, have opened a window for the people in the rural area to connect with the world.

The trainings included basic computer use; internet surfing and email usage to connect with others; and social media orientation including the use of Facebook, etc.

Internet is very important for democratization and development, Nay says, as in remote areas, people don't have other ways to communicate with others.

He felt that the ICT should be part of the rural development agenda. In addition, it must be included in the school curriculum.

Khin Lay, founder of Triangle Women Support Group, truly believes that internet is important for the democratization of Burma, because the flow of information is fast and largely unrestricted.

"We don't even need to wait for the printed media or radio. We can get the news information within seconds. We are not being duped and cheated anymore. We can get updates from other countries' sites when we can access the internet. This is really nice.

"Also, on national events, we can get the news about Egypt. This is a very big role of media and internet in democratization," relates Khin.

Her organization provides basic computer and internet training for young women in Rangoon. However, most of them don't get to use the computer after the class.

"Now the young people in the urban areas just use the internet for chatting. In most of the places, internet penetration is very low. People don't know how to use social media usefully, and that's why in the computer course, we focus on the internet, Gmail and Facebook," Khin said.

As most of her students, 80 of them so far, do not have computer at home, she encouraged them to go to use the internet cafe. The charge is 400 Kyats (US$ 0.40) an hour, in a country where most people only make a meager wage of $1 a day.

Even though Rangoon is one of the main cities of the country, the internet service in many areas is still bad. Some restaurants provide free internet access, but it is still limited to those who can afford it.

However, when compared to the tight control before 2010, many political sites,blogging platforms or email services are relatively accessible, though with limitations.

Many have seen the limits as a deliberate way of government control.

According to Aung Bar Lay, an Information

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dhist and Muslim crisis. If you study our history, in the 1930s and after independence, there were many religious and political crises.

"That's why we suspect the recent religious crisis was created by some groups who don't want political changes in Myanmar. And online media have become a tool for such unscrupulous acts,"said Peter.

The deep-rooted problem between the Buddhists and the Muslims could be traced back to the economic power struggle, in which the rich Muslims were suppressing the poor Buddhists, Khin said, citing the cases of many Buddhist women marrying Muslims and converting to Islam to uplift their living standards.

Also, the blend of nationalism and Buddhism by the outspoken 969 Movement leader Ashin Wirathu, who claims that Muslims are outsiders and thus should be driven out from this Golden Land, has successfully stirred up the emotions of the people.

"These days, what the majority Burmese say is that we don't want democracy, we want our religion. In the past, the popularity of NLD is high but currently is going down. Why? It (online hate speech) can be a tool and weapon of government or opposition of NLD to bring their dignity down and reduce their popularity.

"Before crisis, especially in 2012

A a daily scene at the National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters where people will often walk in in and relate their problems to party workers.

Technology engineer who had just resettled back in Rangoon after returning from Singapore, the government is still controlling the bandwidth of the internet through the only internet gateway in the country.

He said that a few months back, when the government's gateway backbone had problems, the internet slowed down tremendously.

Aung opined that although the government had awarded the telecommunication projects to two foreign companies - Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo - to provide internet service in the country, the government will not allow these companies to set up their own gateways.

"I don't think the government will let them (Telco companies) to have their own gateways because the government still want control of the internet here," said Aung in an interview recently in Rangoon.

He believed the government will opt for selling the bandwidths to the telco companies they awarded.

Currently, the state-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunication (MPT) and private owned Red Link Communication are the main players in the market.

"As long as the government does not change the policy, no matter how many players there are in the market, the situation will be the same," Aung said.

It may be all rosy on the surface when one looks at the level of freedom the Burmese are enjoying now since the quasi-civilian government took over in 2010, but many challenges remain: from lack of basic infrastructure, capacity and empowerment building, to the willingness of the government to opening up.

However, the story of the rural teachers who went extra miles to learn new technology and online skills shows that there is light at the end of the tunnel. It just goes to show that once people have experienced awakening, it is not easy to put out the flame in them. *[by Chen Shaua Fui]*

Convenient religious divide? A Mosque in downtown Rangoon (left), and the iconic Shwedagon pagoda (right).

by-election, NLD won a lot. And the Rakhine crisis happened just after that," he said. NLD won more than 90% of the seats in the by election.

Ye also observed a similar trend. For many years, he said, the people were very critical of the ruling party, but now the monks were ironically rallying in support of them.

According to Peter, there's growing criticism against Daw Suu for her and NLD's silence on the religious conflict spreading around the country, and that has affected her popularity as many expected her to be the voice of the conscience.

Some analysts believed that her silence is due to the coming presidential election because the majority of the electorate are Buddhist.

President U Thein Sein had acted quickly to suggest the Rohingya Muslim be deported from the country, a stand that won the approval of 5,000 monks in Mandalay who had marched openly in support of his statement.

However, NLD spokesperson U Nyan Win denied that the crisis has affected the party's popularity.

Growing pains of going online

While were irked by the hate speeches, Nyo Ohn Myint, a peace facilitator of the Myanmar Peace Centre, a centre set up under the President's Office, defended the online exchanges.

The Burmese people are merely exercising their new found freedom online after five decades of political suppression, Nyo said.

"Myanmar people are socially conservative but prefer liberal ideas politically. They are outspoken and do not look at the consequences, thus these are not actually hate speeches, because they have no hidden agenda .

"Many people are using their freedom of speech now to express their feelings," Nyo said.

However, he did express concern over the nature of social media through which unverified information spread like wildfire.

The budding but fragile democracy that Myanmar is experiencing, as well as the nature of the online platform and social media are the "growing pains" of this Golden Land.

And this begs serious discussions on maintaining social harmony

while allowing a bigger freedom of expression at the same time.

Striking a delicate online balance

"We are freer now, but we are not safe."

This is the observation of Nay Phone Latt, the executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO).

Nay opined that the Telecommunication Bill that provides for an establishment of a regulatory body for the ICT industry is a reflection of the old mindset of the "new" government who sought to extend control and harsh punishment for end users.

The bill is copied directly from the 2004 Electronic Transaction Act (ETA) that prescribed severe punishment of the users who posted content that may affect national security or the people's interest. And the related terms are vague and open for interpretation, he said.

Nay was arrested by the former regime for disseminating information about the 2007 military crackdown on the "Saffron Revolution" to the outside world. He was sentenced to 15 years of jail term under the ETA but was released in 2012 after receiving a presidential pardon.

MIDO submitted its input to the government on the draft bill, hoping to push for an independent regulatory body, as well as the removal of the 7-15 years jail term punishment.

The bill has been passed by the Lower and Upper Houses recently and will become law after the president signs it. Nay has not seen the final draft yet.

In a brief email reply to this writer, Deputy Minister of Information Ye Htut of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) said: "The Government notices that when we lift restriction on the internet, the emergence of racial and religious hate speeches is becoming

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a social problem and are a factor in recent communal violence.

"Now we are working with civil society organisations for social awareness campaign for internet users about hate speech."

However, Ye Htut did not elaborate if the government will exercise its control over the social media.

Asked about Rohingya Muslim activist Than Shwe who was arrested in mid-August for posting a photo of security forces clash with Muslims in Rakhine, he said under the penal code, it is a crime to spread religious hate speech or actions. Hence action was taken againt Than.

"We prefer an awareness campaign, and not another law to control social media," Ye Htut added, noting that the Ministry of Information and the United States Embassy in Myanmar jointly conducted a workshop on hate speech on social media in July.

Although the level of maturity of the general internet users leaves much to be desired, Nay is of the

view that the government should not control online expression, as the people can regulate themselves.

"We can regulate each other. we can create an online culture among ourselves.

"I have 5,000 friends on Facebook. If they make any hate speech, I will give them a warning; if they do it again the next time, I will 'unfriend' them. Now I can safely say that my friends are not among those making hate speeches," Nay said.

On the other hand, Nay also believed that Myanmar's law enforcement and justice systems are not yet equipped to handle cases related to cyber crime.

"If you are a victim of a cyber crime and you tell the police, they don't understand what you are saying," Nay said.

Due to the relatively small online community in Myanmar, some would say the impact of online hate speeches remains minimal.

However, the lack of institutions or organisations to respond to the

growing challenges could seriously affect the country's online space in view of the boom of the telecommunication industry.

Norway's Telenor will launch its voice and data services in the second quarter of 2014, covering 78% of the population while Qatar's Ooredoo will build 10,000 public access points nationwide putting 84% percent of its population online by 2019.

To some, the internet is a gateway to the world; to others, it is a political weapon. With the low internet literacy of the people, the online space could be dictated by a small group of people, serving their own interest.

The opening up of the cyber space should not be done on a piecemeal basis, critics say. It has to be something open and transparent that would empower the people constructively. All parties are equally responsible in deciding whether the online space is a platform for engagement or a battleground for ruling elites to gain political mileage.

Mobile phone connections in Rangoon are far from satisfying. This young man has to make his call at the balcony to get a better connection for conversation.

Is Burma's 'Disconnectivity' Deliberate?

Story and photos
by **Jefry Tupas**

Two years ago, Freddy Lynn was spending most of his time at a public access centre in downtown Myitkyina in Kachin State. There he was introduced to a world that he did not learn in his university or heard about in his community that had been slowed down by more than six decades of armed conflict.

It was a discovery often interrupted by frequent power outages and news of violent clashes between ethnic groups and the military across Burma. Yet Freddy Lynn knew he should keep at it, because it kept him connected to a world outside Kachin, a western Burmese state that lies on the boundary of China and India. And unlike his friends who had to have at least 400 kyats ($0.41) per hour to have the same privilege, Freddy Lynn was getting his information about the 'outside world' for free as he worked at the public access centre, known elsewhere as an Internet café.

These days, the 24-year-old physics graduate from Myitkyina State University is still going online mostly for free. Now in Rangoon do-

Care for a virus? Anyone? This Internet café in downtown Rangoon must have run out of a better name to brand itself. Then again, using 'Virus'—something dreaded in the online world—could be a marketing ploy.

Is Burma's 'Disconnectivity' Deliberate?

The Burmese in general have a friendly countenance. But critics worry that what lies underneath its government's friendly face could be far less pleasant.

ing volunteer work for the Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO), Freddy Lynn is one of the measly 500,000 Burmese, out of an estimated 55 million population, who has access to the Internet — somewhat.

University professor Ajarn Ubon-rat Siriyuvasak, co-founder of the Bangkok-based Media Inside Out, has argued that communication, while it is enshrined and guaranteed in the constitution of almost every nation around the world, is a human-rights issue. Today, especially among citizens in democratic countries, Internet as a communication plat-form and a new space for freedom is being seen as a basic need.

Burma is a country still strug-gling to break free from a dark and despotic past. But since opening up two years ago after decades of military rule, many of its citizens, including activists, are now enjoying the space and freedom to express and exchange information with each other—even reaching out to the outside world.

Wary observers, however, say this may just be an illusion. The

reality, they say, is that the Burmese government continues to deprive its citizens of the right to informa-tion and free speech. In a country that has yet to prove it can carry out reforms, communication—and the Internet—is a commodity trapped under the monopoly and control of the state.

The problem of monopolised and controlled Internet distribution is also being exacerbated by power outages that sometimes last for a day at a time.

State and Crony, Inc.

The state-owned Myanmar Post Telecommunication (MPT) exclu-sively handles the communications sector, providing telephone lines to households, business establish-ments and government offices. MPT also operates the street phone booths across Burma.

MPT operates under the Ministry of Communications, Posts, and Tel-egraphs. The ministry's tasks include the following: to arrange communi-cation services for smooth and easy usage by the public; to satisfy com-munication needs of commercial,

social and administrative infrastruc-tures; to establish communication centres and routes in accordance with work requirements; and to monitor communication services in accordance with laws, rules and regulations.

In 2010, MPT allowed Red Link Communications to run fiber optic-sourced Internet connection, which is distributed mostly around Rangoon and Mandalay. Red Link is owned by the sons of the former regime's third topmost military of-ficial, Shwe Mann, currently speaker of the Union Parliament.

The other Internet players in Bur-ma are Sky Net MPS and Yatanarpon Teleport. While Yatanarpon Teleport is a state firm, Sky Net is owned by business tycoon Shwe Than, a close ally of President U Thein Sein.

Outside of frequenting Internet cafes or securing a free (if elusive) WiFi signal, connecting to the Net in Burma necessitates having a landline. To secure one, an applicant must only show the government-issued national identification card, pay around $500 and be armed with overflowing amount of patience as the process would usually take around one month to three months. Those who are only renting homes are less likely to be approved.

Not surprisingly, a February 2013 report by Radio Free Asia says only 6.7 percent of the population or just nearly four million Burmese have landline connections.

Next comes applying for an Internet service connection, which with Red Link would mean an installation fee of $1,000 to $1,500 for fiber-optic Internet. There is also a monthly fee that is around $600 to $700. This may help explain the low Net penetration rate of Burma, where the average monthly worker receives only 80,000 kyats or $82.47.

If one decides to have the land-line connected 'Internetly' through the asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), one must pay an instal-

lation fee of at least $100, plus a monthly payment of between $50 to $70.

A paucity in Internet speed devils

But that is only the start to litany of woes for those who want to go online in Burma. One information technology professional who asked not to be identified explained that because communication is under the MPT's control, it could well be "playing god all over Burma, implementing capping—where it can impose a specific limit of speed to a certain users".

Another IT professional, Aung Bar Lay, supported this, saying one only needed to experience the varying speed of Internet connection in downtown Rangoon. The speed, he said, can be improved if one is willing to give grease money.

In a budget inn along Botataung Pagoda Road downtown Rangoon, for example, the Internet download speed is only 0.13 megabits per second and the upload speed is 0.15 megabits per second. In a restaurant just a hop and skip away, the download speed is 0.55 megabits per seconds while the upload speed is 0.87 megabits per second. The restaurant is owned by a known crony of the military regime.

The Internet speed in Burma is way behind that in nearby Thailand and Vietnam, as well as in the Philippines. In mainland Southeast Asia, Burmese Internet speeds even fails to beat that of Vientiane, capital of Laos, a socialist state that is one of economic laggards in Asia.

In a hotel in Bangkok, a speed test shows that the Internet download speed is 0.98 megabits while the upload speed is 1.02 megabits. In Manila, a phone line-based Internet has 0.91 megabits per second upload speed and 5.54 megabits per second download speed.

In Vientiane, the download speed is 1.69 megabits per second and the upload speed is 0.60 megabits per second. But in Vietnam, a Communist state that initiates Internet connectivity even in the countryside, the download speed is 31.24 megabits per second while the upload speed is 27.21.

While it only takes a split-second to load the "Applause" video of U.S. pop phenomenon Lady Gaga, in Manila and Bangkok (without the video stopping mid-play as the computer downloads data to buffer), one needs at least 30 seconds to get it playing in Rangoon. Factor in the buffer time of about more than a minute, and a Rangoon-based Lady Gaga fan would have to wait almost five minutes for the 3:35-minute video to finish downloading and finally play.

In Vietnam, where a citizen only pays 4,000 dong or about 20 cents per hour, the same video takes just three seconds to load.

"No SIM City, this"

RANGOON— Even with the slow-motion connections, it's still possible to get addicted to the Internet in Burma. And those who like to get their fix more quickly usually turn to the mobile phone, which in this country inexplicably allows faster online access compared to other devices.

But first, of course, one must have a smart phone. And even before that, a SIM or subscriber identity module card.

That first step, however, is what stops many a Net addict here to just give up and head for an Internet café. After all, to get a SIM card in Burma, one must literally win a lottery.

Nowadays in Burma, securing a SIM card (which enables a mobile phone to connect to a service provider) means first filing an application with the government. Then comes a wait of at least a month for the announcement on whether or not one has been lucky enough to be among the chosen few new SIM card owners. Lucky—yes, one must be a lucky local to get a SIM card as the government conducts a lottery-style distribution process for SIM card applicants every month. Only about 100 to 120 are chosen

Foreigners arriving Burma can rent out this analog phone and a non-data-capable SIM for $70 for 10 days.

during each round.

It's not certain how many Burmese currently have mobile phone subscriptions. According to a 2012 report by Nomura Equity Research on Asia Telecoms, the figure can range from just between 1.3 million to 2.5 million. But there is another 2012 report, this time by the International Telecommunication Union (a 'special agency for information and communication technologies' of the United Nations), which

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Communicating in slow motion

"The speed can be fixed," Aung Bar Lay said. "You only need to have good connections with the government. I have heard people talking about giving extra amount of money under the table just for them to have better Internet connections."

Aung Bar Lay believes that the Internet 'disconnectivity' all over Burma is deliberate as the speed is being controlled by the state.

"If the government really wants to improve the speed of the Internet, it can," said the IT professional. "It is using fibre optics so it must be reliable and fast."

A professor in one of the universities in Rangoon said while the Burmese government has provided them with Internet connection, the snail-paced speed renders the facility almost useless. The professor, who asked to be identified only as Zey, suspects that the slow connection, which usually turns off students, is yet another form of censorship.

"What else can you call that?" she asked. "That definitely is still censorship. We are still being deprived of the right enjoyed by citizens of other countries. We are being censored here."

International aid agencies and nongovernment organisations in Burma have commented that that the current communication facilities in the country will affect its growth and image as a free nation.

Saying that the Burmese government is only "putting up a show", Canadian Jessica Stevens, who works for the grassroots nongovernment organisation Burma Partnership, noted that the pace of the Internet and the state of the communication in Burma show exactly what the direction of the country is. And this direction is something worrisome, Steven said.

"On the surface it looks open and in many ways it is more open compared to years ago," she said in an interview in a hotel in Rangoon. "But all the factors are there that would indicate what the real Burma is now and what it intends to be in the future. In reality, nothing is really changed."

She said the government is now "wearing this mask of a democratic country, but under the surface it is still the same".

Some Burmese journalists agree with this view. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a couple of journalists had too little of good things to say about the current government, just as they had trouble being positive about the previous one.

"Communication is something that remains to be fully given to us," said one of the journalists. "Many might have not seen it or have felt it but the fact that communication is moving in 'slow-motion' here is something that speaks of level of

says there are about 5.4 million Burmese mobile subscribers.

The reports don't say how many of these subscribers connect regularly to the Internet, but according to Radio Free Asia, "majority of Internet access in Burma is obtained through Internet enabled mobile devices".

SIM cards in Burma are all under the care of the government-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunication (MPT). It came up with the lottery system just this year, after being overwhelmed by the thousands of applications for SIM cards.

Last April, the government had offered SIM cards that cost around $2 to the public.

Just two years ago, SIM cards could be had in Burma only if one could part with 2,910,000 kyats or about $3,000. Mon, a local journalist, described the price as "insane".

No wonder then that people fell over themselves trying to buy the $2 SIM card – in so large a number that an apparently unprepared government thought a lottery would be a good way to go about distributing it.

But then the government suddenly stopped the lottery for the cheap SIMs. No one can actually tell exactly when that decision was made, but by June, neither locals nor foreigners could find one.

"I don't know what happened," said a businesswoman downtown Rangoon. "The government just stopped it—no explanation. The government never explained."

And so while one could easily get a prepaid SIM card in the Philippines for as low as P40 or less than a dollar, the Burmese were back to having to fork over between $150 to $170 for one—that is, if someone at the black market was willing to sell a SIM.

Foreign visitors were forced to rent handsets and SIM cards at the airport, where the state-owned Yatanarpon Teleport runs a small booth.

This writer rented a SIM for 10 days and paid $90. To activate the SIM card, a top-up call and text card was needed. This writer bought two top-up cards amounting to $28. For 10 days, the communication cost while in Burma was $118, equivalent to two months of unlimited data plan in the Philippines.

Even locals said this SIM card and mobile phone rental at the airport—and operated by a government-owned company—is nothing short of a money-making scheme.

A 'product value and check list' says SIM card rental for data costs $100, an analog handset for $30, a charger for $5, battery for $5, adapter for $1, bag

freedom of the Burmese people."

"How willing and ready the government really is in freeing the country can be gleaned from how it is giving us access to information," commented his colleague. "The facilities are there, the infrastructure are there, but why do we feel like we are still disconnected from each other?"

ICT in shambles

Nay Phone Latt, executive director of the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), said the present condition of the information communication technology in Burma puts the country and its people on the margins.

"The world looks like a global village," said Nay Phone Latt, a political blogger who was jailed for four years by the military regime. "But because of the lack of ICT knowledge and infrastructure, some of our villages do not know of the other world. The gap between Burma and the developing countries is so huge."

He lamented over what he said was the government's lack of regard for the importance of ICT, which is not even taught in public schools. For Nay Phone Latt, apparently, it is not enough that several private schools are offering courses in computer science.

To fill in the gap, Nay Phone Latt's group has been going around Burma conducting workshops on ICT. Most of the participants are from nongovernment and community-based organizations, as well as women's and youth groups. One of MIDO's clients is the opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Nay Phone Latt admitted that their efforts have so far not reached the states of Kachin and Rakhine because of the pervading condition of unrest in those areas. The

The Burmese have a distinct reading culture. One can always see people reading newspapers and magazines everywhere. This cab driver browsed through the pages of a local newspaper while waiting for the green light.

for $5, and something called 'hand free', $5.

"You guys are being robbed in broad daylight," said a cab driver.

That could be how the mother of Randt (not his real name) felt as well when in 2006 the government blocked her cell phone number and then confiscated her SIM card. This was after Randt used her mobile phone to share reports on the human rights situation in Burma.

The confiscation shattered the former public school headmistress who was then earning $8 dollars a month. The $3,000 she had paid for her SIM card had come mostly from her retirement benefits.

But Randt's mother, who had served the military regime for more than three decades, refused to suc-

cumb to the order of the day. She fought it out and found herself even seeking the help of the United Nations to get her SIM card back.

Randt said the SIM card was finally returned to his mother a few months ago, after five years of fighting it out — and after the Burmese government began instituting reforms.

"When she finally got it back, it was as it she had her freedom," Randt said. "We celebrated—we claimed it as our victory, as well."

In the meantime, it looks like the government is also back to selling cheap SIMs. Mon's boyfriend, for instance, recently won a SIM card, paying 1,500 kyats or $1.50. He waited two months before he was notified as being one of the winners in the SIM lottery.

"Selling the SIM card for $3,000 was crazy enough," commented Mon. "Now, we have this lottery. I cannot believe it."

She said she was happy for her boyfriend. But she seemed to be unhappy about the entire setup. "We should celebrate this no matter how twisted this policy is," Mon said. "But I still maintain, this is simply insane."

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farthest area reached by MIDO was Chin State. The larger the distance between a place and Rangoon, the worse conditions become.

Interviewed at his office—ironically with the Internet connection discontinued by the server over a subscription problem—Nay Phone Latt said most of their trainees are first-time computer users. This showed the level of ICT literacy of most Burmese, he said.

The training given by MIDO includes basic computer literacy, basic introduction of Internet and the use of search engines, social media, blogging, and social networking.

"They do not know anything about computers at all," said Nay Phone Latt. "Another big problem is Internet connection in these areas." Then again, even in areas that are relatively peaceful, government-provided Internet connection can be spotty, especially outside of Rangoon and Mandalay.

Making do in the regions

It's a situation that has led Kachin-born Freddy Lynn to constantly think of the disparity between his hometown and Rangoon. "There are opportunities here as communities is better compared to my city," he said. "Transportation is also better here."

He said he could only "wish for everybody, particularly the people of Kachin, to be able to touch the world".

For sure, those in Kachin State are trying to do this, with or without help from the Burmese central government. While many Burmese do not have access to mobile-based communication, many

residents of Kachin easily get it, and cheaply -- from China. A Chinese SIM (subscriber identity module) pack can only cost 20,000 kyats or $20.60 in 2008 while an MPT-distributed SIM cost around 2,913,000 kyats or $3,000.

With the Chinese SIM, Kachin

From faraway Kachin State's Myitkyina, Freddy Lynn is now in Rangoon, volunteering for MIDO.

A shopper looks at smart phones sold by a sidewalk vendor. [photo by Chen Shaua Fui]

To be sure, there was an earlier drop in SIM card price, although the cost was still pretty steep. In March, government media had announced the distribution of "cheap" SIM cards that cost 200,000 kyat or $ 250 to 250,000 kyat $312.50. Foreigners were also allowed to buy these lower-priced SIMs.

Before the end of March, President U Thein Sein praised the Ministry of Communications and Infor-

mation for being "pivotal for comprehensive development" after the surge of SIM card sales.

"Telephone density so far only covers seven percent of the country," Thein Sein said in a press release issued by his office. "It is targeted to cover 50 percent at least in 2014."

The former military general also called for "equitable distribution of SIM cards in regions and states".

In addition, he promised to have low-cost handsets to be available to the public. Indeed, there are now China-made Huawei handsets for Burmese that can be had for 22,000 kyats ($22.70) to 25,000 kyats ($25.80). These phones can be used only for calls and text, though.

Net-capable handsets are still out of reach for most Burmese. Samsung smart phones, with prices ranging from 445,000 kyats ($459.24) to 520,000 kyats ($536.64), and IPhone models, which can be bought from 660,000 kyats ($681.11) to 990,000 kyats ($1,022), are popular, but only among the middle class and rich Burmese.

"People are at the mercy of the government," Mon said.

"But we do not have a choice but to wait and be patient and play their game." *[by Jefry Tupas]*

residents can make calls within Kachin and even overseas. But they cannot make calls or send text to Rangoon. And while Chinese-SIM users can access the Internet, they cannot log onto Facebook as it is banned in China.

If they want to access Facebook, they need to go to an Internet café and pay 400 kyats for an hour, a rate that has been steady through the years in Burma's far-flung areas.

"We can see and we will be in touch with other people, we will be able to see what is happening around the world, through the Internet," Freddy Lynn said, stressing how vital getting online is even to his people. "ICT is very, very important."

That conviction most probably helps drive him in his volunteer work at MIDO. Yet for all the idealism of the likes of Freddy Lynn and Nay Phone Latt, another challenge lies in how the communities they have taught would be able to use what they have learned given the lack of equipment and infrastructure.

The absence of computers, for instance, was the main problem of teachers in the Irrawaddy village of Alal Yay Kyaw, which can be reached after a half-day boat ride from the town of Maw Kyung. Luckily, the leader of the teachers found a donor who gave them three sets of computers. These, however, are run only at night—when the community generator set is turned on.

In Chin State in western Burma, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has shelled out $831,630 for the Chin Consultation Process and IT for Chin Schools. The fund will be used to provide computer centres and Internet connections to 30 Chin High Schools in different villages in Chin.

At a meeting with donor agencies in Rangoon on 20 August, Dr. Sui Khar, assistant secretary general of the Chin National Front (CNF), said the assistance, as with the other

kinds of aid given to Chin by the Norwegian government, will "not only be political but will also promote the livelihood of the people."

Peace and the Net

Dr. Sui Khar's group is a political and armed group in the Chin State and a key ethnic armed group in Burma. The group has entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese national government and is now a recipient of two 'small' projects from international donors.

At the meeting, Dr. Sui Khar also noted that "communication is very important" and underscored that "these projects are all linked to the establishment of sustainable peace in the future".

Internet connection, in fact, is crucial to one of the projects of Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI), which initiates projects in areas where ceasefire between armed groups and the Burmese government is being observed.

MPSI has set up what it calls the 'Ethnic Peace Resource Project', an online database resource centre. The project is aimed to provide information on the peace situation around Burma, giving details of the peace process, ceasefire agreements, and projects related to MPSI engagements with ethnic armed groups. But MPSI consultant Allan Smith said the database's function is hampered by the fact that Internet connection all around Burma is slow, if not none at all. (And just like MIDO, Smith's group has conducted computer and Internet workshops

in 'disconnected' area, such like in villages of Loikaw, the capital of Kayah State.)

Charles Petrie, chair of MPSI, said Internet in Burma is something that "needs to be developed".

"It is an untapped potential," he said. "And that is one of the things that needs to be developed and we want to explore."

Petrie is a former United Nations official who was kicked out from Burma in 2007 after writing a searing report on the human-rights abuses perpetrated by the military junta. He said that the Internet, if given much attention, can be a "significant platform, a driver, and we have not used it yet".

In the context of what they are doing in Burma, Petrie said an efficient communication services would be useful "in order to create transparency."

"In terms of peacebuilding, I don't think we have done enough," he said. "We are yet to explore how it can be used enough."

Plans and predictions

Officially, of course, the Burmese government is all ready for that kind of exploration itself.

In December 2011, President U Thein Sein had told the ministers of

Charles Petrie, head of the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, was kicked out of Burma in 2007 when, as a UN official, he wrote a searing report about the human rights situation in the country.

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Telecommunications and Information Technology from the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN)-member countries that the "government is expanding basic infrastructure, including ICT for national development".

"The government is also establishing more transparent and visible democratic system as well as implementing market economic system for our country," U Thein Sein said at the gathering of ASEAN ministers in Burma's remote capital, Naypyidaw.

The ASEAN Economic Blueprint itself underscores the importance of a "secure and connected information infrastructure" that is needed "for sustaining the region's economic growth and competitiveness". In addition, the regional plan gives "equal emphasis" to "improving trust and confidence in the use of the Internet and security of electronic transactions, payments and settlements".

In 2014, Burma will be the chair of ASEAN.

Last June, the government awarded licenses to two foreign companies to provide telecommunication services in Burma. The two companies—Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo—edged out 11 other telecom companies, including Singapore Telecommunications, KDDI Coporation, Digicel, Axiata, Bharti Airtel, MTN, Viettel, Orange, and Millicom International Cellular.

But IT professional Aung Bar Lay, said the entry of the two telecommunications companies is not yet a reason to celebrate.

"As long as the government will not change the policy here, it will be the same," he said. "No matter how many players are in the market, it will be the same. It would appear that there are many choices but it will always be the same."

Will the government give up control over the telecommunications sector?

"No," he said. "The government will not let go."

MIDO's Nay Phone Latt meanwhile challenges the government to allow telecommunications services to be run by independent companies. He also said that an independent commission must be created to oversee the business of telecommunications in Burma.

"Some of the military people, they are afraid of the freedom of expression," said Nay Phone Latt. "I say there is no need to be afraid. Freedom of expression is very important in a democracy. They can also take advantage of it. They can be a player in a free society."

Facebook equals the Net

For the moment, though, such concerns are way above the heads of many urban Burmese. At the Maha Bandoola Garden in downtown Rangoon one drizzling Saturday afternoon, lovers claim the freedom to be together—away from the crowd.

Ar Kar, an 18-year-old physics student at the Dagon University, and his girlfriend, were among them. Asked what he thought about Internet freedom in his city, the young man appeared surprised. But speaking through an interpreter, he said, "I think things are normal here. I think there is nothing wrong here." His girlfriend just smiled and refused to comment.

Ar Kar said he has never used the Internet to surf for information or read news. But he said he is free to use the Internet however he wants to.

"I only need to have 250 kyats (26 cents) and I can do whatever I want," he said. Asked to elaborate on this, Ar Kar explained that he used the Internet only because of social networks and to communicate with other people. He said most of his friends use the Net this way as well.

Because he does not have phone, Ar Kar said, he goes to the Internet cafe to check on his girlfriend, or set a date with her, just as he had done earlier that rainy day.

BizNet, an Internet café in Rangoon, indeed usually teems with young Burmese around the age of Ar Kar. The default browser for all 15 computers displays Facebook.

Several years ago, one had to register to be able to use the Internet in Burma. Internet café operators also had to take photos of the users as part of the regulation imposed by the MPT. A check with BizNet showed that this policy is no longer being followed.

"*Set lote par, register lote yan ma lo par* (Go ahead. There is no need to register)," said the woman at the counter.

On one wall of the Internet café, though, is a prominently placed poster that reads: "Dear all customary, We are prohibit and restricted for all political website and adults site. Thanks, BizNet."

Burma's youth power strives for maturity

Story and photos by
Nanchanok Wongsamuth

In 1989, visiting a roadside bookstore in downtown Yangon was not something as simple as it sounds. Unless the vendors recognized your face, that is.

Yan Myo Thein, now 44, knows how tough political activism among Burmese youth used to be. The former medical school student had to use his familiar face to get rare reading materials when dropping in bookstores.

"When they recognize me, they show me political or history books written in English regarding Burma whenever they have some," said the political commentator, who also listens to radio news from the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation for at least three hours per day since the age of 14.

At that time, books written about the Burmese opposition movement were not allowed to be sold in public, so bookstores were one of the important places promoting government revolution.

Books like these, which were sold at around 200 kyat, were passed on from one person to another, exchanged and discussed among friends.

24 years later the number of youth participating in various movements are higher than in the past, but Yan Myo Thein, who was jailed for almost three years when he was 18 for participating in the 1988 uprising against the socialist government, remains skeptical about

A roadside bookstore in Yangon.

how much influence they can actually assert in terms of political change.

One of the new blood was sitting down cross-legged in front of me with jeans and a black-and-white checkered shirt. You don't always see the eyes of the former rock star when he looks down, hidden behind the strands of hair revealing black stud earrings.

For someone who once led a wild life, 32-year-old Moe Thway is not the average freedom fighter.

Known for expressing their political views through hip-hop songs and graffiti, the change in Burma since the 2010 elections has enabled Generation Wave to openly conduct awareness raising campaigns, roam the streets to collect signatures and explain to

Moe Thway talking at the Generation Wave office. The red thumbs up sign is their logo.

people that the political war is not yet over.

"During those years of dictatorship, we couldn't do anything, so we did a lot of art forms such as distributing music, publishing poems and

drawing graffiti on street walls," said Moe Thway, who has been president of the youth group since its setting up in 2007.

But now, Generation Wave deploys different tactics; their website and Facebook page is used to update their activities, mobilize people and organize protests.

Although there is a lot of skepticism, small political forces like this have benefited from greater access to the internet, which has brought a new side to the online community after decades of heavy censorship.

With over half of the country's population under the age of 30 (33.67 million out of 59.78 million in 2010, according to the Department of Population), the internet has

To young Burmese, IT's both toy and tool

A year ago, walk into a club in Yangon and the sight of a mobile phone was a rarity.

Today, it's not uncommon to see Gen Y men and women flashing the latest iPhones, Galaxies or tablets.

Fun, work and politics are all parts of the nascent online life in Burma.

According to the latest official data from the Myanmar Post Telecommunication (MPT), there were a total of 5.44 million mobile subscribers as of December 2012, or a 9% penetration.

Penetration rates are much higher in urban areas with 30.2% in Nay Pyi Taw, 25.3% in Yangon and 11.7% in Mandalay.

Data compiled by the Myanmar Information and Communication Technology Directory 2013-14 indicated that five years ago, it was around US$2,000 to buy a postpaid sim card. In 2012, the MPT reduced the price from around $500 to $250. 350,000 cards were then distributed each month throughout the country by MECTel.

This enabled 23-year-old Aung Aung Myat to use

the internet on his mobile phone, which he uses to read local news and chat with friends for a cost of 2 kyat per minute.

Since opening up a Facebook account six months ago, the bank employee now has 50 friends.

MPT statistics as of March 2011 indicated there were a total of 380,000 internet subscribers compared to only four in 1998, and every person under the age of 30 that were interviewed on the streets had a Facebook account.

But still, 21-year-old Thu Htet Zaw, a cell phone repairer, spends nearly the whole day on the internet seeking new applications on his iPhone 4 because

Thu Htet Zaw

been a critical tool for the country's youth in expressing their views on politics and democracy.

In May, Generation Wave spent one month collecting signatures for a campaign to stop the "civil war" and start a political dialogue. With the help of the internet, Facebook and e-mail, they were able to gain more than 60,000 signatures.

Last year, they managed to gather around 2,000 people to march for 10 miles on the International Day of Peace.

Since September last year, Moe Thway is now faced with 19 trials for demonstration without permission (article 18) and acts against the state or public tranquility (article 505 (b) of the Penal Code).

His weekly routine consists of paying visits to the court, which he estimates at over 170 times during the time of the interview.

"May I?" Moe Thway asked, reaching his hand out to hold my iPhone, which acted as a torch light during a blackout in an apartment in downtown Yangon as I was jotting down details.

"Are you calculating how many years I might have to spend in prison? I have 16 cases related to article 18, which has a maximum punishment of one year in jail; and two cases related to article 505 (b) with a maximum of two years. So that's 22 years maximum," Moe Thway said with a smile that makes his nose wrinkle.

Since the group's formation, 27 members have been arrested, but all are released now.

Still, the 15 full-time group members know that they might be arrested at any time.

"Even now [the police] might come and arrest us at this very moment, including you," said Min Yan Naing, co-founder of Generation Wave.

The battery on my iPhone went out, and Moe Thway pulled out his Huawei phone to provide the light.

Huawei and Samsung are the top mobile phones used in Burma, he said.

On a rainy Saturday evening, Moe Thway and I met again at the 50th Street Cafe to talk about liberation, ethnic groups, history and geography over a glass of tomato juice.

Since returning to the country in December 2011 after fleeing to Mae Sot in Thailand in 2008, he told me he has stopped drinking alcohol.

Working with Generation Wave to fight injustice in the country, he is also working closely with the National Youth Congress to encourage the youth to lead the country themselves.

The subject of political science has changed during the 15 years Aung San Suu Kyi has been kept in house arrest, so she does not have the capacity to rule the country,

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the data is "so slow to load".

Some, like two 25-year-old female software engineers who asked not to be named, use the internet on both their Samsung smartphones and on their personal computers (PCs) for sending e-mails, reading local and international news and sharing them on Facebook.

According to the Myanmar Computer Industry Association, there were around one million PCs in the country as of May 2012 compared to 430,000 in 2006.

7Day News is one of the newspapers that publish public comments from Facebook on a daily basis since April this year, when the government allowed private-owned newspapers.

Referencing the original poster, every edition usually has three subjects ranging from issues of demonstrations, the floods in Yangon, celebrities to criticism of the government.

According to *Socialbakers*, a provider of social media analytic tools, there are currently 1.04 million Facebook users in Burma.

7Day News is the number one Facebook page in the country, with around 320,000 fans.

But *7Day News* estimates the figure to be 800,000, with half of them fake or duplicate accounts in order to make "extreme comments", which the newspaper avoids publishing.

Politics is also a widely discussed issue, with a column on August 22 featuring a caption of a cartoon drawn by Maung Shwe Win on his Facebook account.

The caption explained how a 20-year-old male failed a job interview because he had eight years of work experience at a teashop, reflecting that young people have to work instead of going to school.

One of the editors, 27-year-old Aye Mya Kyaw, has had 10 years of experience working as a journalist despite her young age.

7Day has over 30 reporters, the oldest being 40 years old. Most are under 30, with one having over 30,000 followers on Facebook. There are around 100 staff alto-

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Moe Thway boldly claimed, referring to the pro-democracy icon.

"We need Daw Suu to build the foundation, but for future leadership we must build ourselves and not depend on other people," he said.

But Moe Thway does not have any plans of entering politics in the 2015 election.

For him, democracy is not just about elections but other forms of participation by the people. And to raise participation, civil society is essential.

He might consider doing so in 2020, though, together with the youth of today.

"I want to go with the wave of the generation," he said.

At 3 PM in an apartment on the second floor of a building on Zayyar Thiri road, 17 people – nine male and eight female aged 20-35, were sitting on the floor

discussing ways to organize a movement on the International Day of Peace on September 21.

Facilitate. Inclusive. Peace documentary. Facebook.

The fact that almost all of them could use English terms like these throughout their discussions enabled them to connect to other international organizations through social media.

When 26-year-old Salai David got his own Facebook account in 2008 – also the time when he moved from the Shan state to Yangon to study, sim cards cost at least US$2,000, so he had to use the cyber cafe for internet usage.

Last year he purchased a sim card for $500, and now Salai, who is also a freelance researcher on youth policy in Burma, uses the internet on his mobile phone for posting updates on the Chin Youth Network page, which he cofounded in 2012.

The Chin ethnic group is among one of the 135 ethnic groups in Burma, covering a population of around 500,000.

The network is one of the 13 youth groups in 13 townships in Burma, with 20-70 members per group. Each state also has their own youth networks for different ethnic groups, and they meet every year at the national youth forum.

In July this year, the Chin Youth Network met members of parliament in Nay Pyi Taw to submit a policy paper discussing ten issues, including the lack of access to telephone lines and technology across the Chin state.

This is the third time Salai has attended the meeting, which continues to be dominated with words like framework, democracy, motivation, solution and 88.

The 1988 pro-democracy uprising was led by young people, which

gether.

Its weekly version has the highest circulation in the country of 140,000, while its daily version has a circulation of over 20,000. The papers cost 600 kyat and 200 kyat respectively.

Its weeklies have a commodity watch section, which apart from construction material and oil prices, it includes the prices of mobile phones such as Samsung, HTC, iPhone and Huawei; as well as laptops such as MSI, Asus and Acer.

But Aye Mya said although it is good that the young people want to be involved in politics, they are sometimes emotional, have a lack of knowledge and read less books than in the past.

The *Journal of Human Rights and Democracy*, which is now in its second issue, uses social media to request for articles by young scholars and writers.

Sold at 1,500 kyats per publication, the academic journal has regular scholarly articles on analysis, case studies, culture and politics.

"We are more willing to pave way for the younger generation. If an

older contributor's perspectives can't go along with us, it will be difficult to use them [their articles]," said 32-year-old editor Wai Yan Phone.

"The advantage for the younger generation is that they have a chance to look at interesting issues online even though they use Facebook for fun. You can't run away from other people's posts. Even though they [the youth] are not interested in politics, they read the shared posts and have knowledge about it," he said, estimating that 90% of posts shared on Facebook today are issues related to the country as opposed to five years ago when the censorship was not yet lifted.

In one way or another it has some effects on general users in terms of political awareness, but Wai Yan noted that internet itself does not bring about democracy – it is merely a medium.

"When you look at the history of some countries changing from an authoritarian to democratic regime, they had no internet at that time. Only power of the people. Now only the will of people can restore [democracy]," he said. *[by Nanchanok Wongsamuth]*

Wai Yan Phone holds up a book he is currently reading.

A youth group gathers at an apartment to discuss ways to organize a movement on the International Day of Peace on September 21.

is why some people like Seng Gu remain optimistic about the power of the youth.

"Now youth groups are leading the democratization process, but the problem is our government doesn't mention the history very well. School curriculums don't mention the 1988 uprising and the democratization process, which leads to a gap between seniors and the youth," said the 35-year-old, who is a member of the Community Response Group which was set up in 2010 to provide peace module training to civil society.

Highlighting the point of political maturity, Yan Myo Thein reiterated that without having good education and without reading political ideas like his generation did in the past, one cannot be a politician.

"You can be an activist without studying or reading works, but our country needs a lot of mature politicians. Without them, the future of our country will be in a bad condition," he said.

Typing away on his black Huawei smartphone, Yan Myo Thein, whose profile picture on Facebook is a peacock – a symbol of the student movement, has 1,500 friends who follow his posts on politics published at least three times a week as commentary articles in local newspapers.

Now he has daughters aged 13 and 10 who are keen to set up Facebook accounts.

"I will allow them to open [a Facebook account] at the age of 14, because sometimes I think some posts aren't very good for children," he said.

"Here, most of the youth only read short posts on the internet and Facebook instead of reading books. They fail to educate themselves. Most of the youth here can't read in English, so most have to search for translated posts in Facebook and on the internet. Because of that, they are not very well updated," said Yan Myo.

A group of young debaters, however, aim to dismiss this notion.

At 2:30 PM on a weekday in 2008, around 20 people gathered at the ground floor of the two-storey building at the American Center Debate Club (ACDC).

The motion for the day - "Environmental conservation and economic development, which is more important?", was released one day ahead on the noticeboard opposite to the entrance of the room. Fifteen people signed their names to participate.

A male in his twenties stood up to make his stance.

"The government is exploiting natural resources out of the country and selling them to China and other countries. While they are putting money in their pockets, our people are still in poverty," he said.

After the event ended, five of the participants were taken away by military intelligence. Luckily, they were only put into custody and questioned for a short period.

Although they were asked, the five participants did not mention Nyein Zarni Naing, who was leading the activity that day and is one of the founding members of the ACDC, which was scrapped a year later due to the risks associated with the activities.

"Before that day, someone noticed people have been following us. But I thought it was very common in Myanmar," said Nyein Zarni.

Today, 28-year-old Nyein Zarni is the head of advocacy and consultancy at the Myanmar Debate Education Society (MDES).

Set up in 2011, the MDES is a non-profit and non-political association aimed at promoting debate culture in a country where the practice has long been extinct.

Nyein Zarni said Burma seriously needs a debate culture to bring successful peace dialogue.

"If the peace process is led by young people, it would be successful because they are really realistic and have no agenda behind. But they need experienced people. So why not bring young people into the dialogue?" he asked.

33-year-old Peter Pyaezone, who is a member of the MDES, also sees

Burma's youth power strives for maturity

debate as a form of dialogue.

If the debate culture really takes off, then spaces like Facebook can in fact be useful.

"If you had a problem in the stone age, you would solve it by using force and weapons. With debate, we use our rationalized thoughts and see their perspectives with respect and we can find some common ground," he said.

If young people are well educated from the perspective of debate education, they can go online on Facebook, read the comments and identify the fallacies that exist.

This includes over-generalization, irrelevant reasons and improper premises, said Peter, adding that identifying fallacies are important because often times people tend to participate in discussions by using emotion rather than rationale.

The MDES, which claims itself to be the only debate group in the country, estimates around 500-1,000 youth participating in activities since setting up.

41-year-old Saw Thet Tun, who was also involved in the 1988 democracy movement, was kept in prison for 17 years, and recalled how officials did not hesitate to punish and beat prisoners.

At 8 PM in a prison cell in 1995, he was playing chess with another prisoner.

Wai Moe, who was 18 years old at that time, was sitting right behind the door in the same cell and was beaten for no reason.

"Why did you beat me?" asked Wai Moe.

"I'm a superintendent. I can beat you."

"I know you have authority. But you don't have the right to beat any prisoner. You have to give rightful punishment if they do something wrong. I'm a prisoner, but not a criminal," said Wai Moe, refusing to apologize.

Unlike 20 years back, Saw Thet said the youth nowadays do not believe in physical struggle anymore, and neither does Wai Moe.

When Saw Thet left prison in 2011, he set up Sky Age, an education center to educate poor young people for free.

In the academic year 2010-2011, there were a total of 39,519 schools, 273,346 teachers and 8 million students in Burma, according to latest figures released by the Department of Educational Planning and Training.

To Saw Thet, the government is not interested in improving the country's education system, with a large amount of the budget used for military purposes.

"They pretend to be interested in issues such as human rights, ethnic conflicts and religious conflicts because they are afraid of international pressure," he said.

A one hour drive from downtown Yangon, there is a small house situated in the Southern New Dagon Township.

Nineteen students aged 16-41 all come from a poor family outside Yangon - five of which do not have electricity.

In a country of 60 million, statistics by the Department of Electric Power indicate that there were only 2.2 million consumers of electricity in 2011, with a consumption of 6.3 billion Kwh.

At that time, 486 town and 2,250 villages had access to electricity.

Education in their home town is expensive, so when Saw Thet roamed the states outside Yangon, he attracted over 500 students who were eager to learn. But Saw Thet was an NGO, not a money-maker, so he chose 19 students to study with him at the study center which he rented out.

English is the main subject taught here, with eight volunteers who teach the students ten hours per day.

The English language is like a weapon, said Saw Thet, and it can be used to communicate with the international community and bring development to the country.

21-year-old Bhamo Mee Chan earned only 1,500 kyat per day when she was in her home town in Pathein district in the Ayeyarwady region, where there was no electricity and the house of five had to use

Bhamo Mee Shee, 21, talks about her life in Pathein, her hometown.

candles as the source of light at nighttime.

She has been with Sky Age for almost two months because costs for continuing her education were too high.

Saw Thet said the students, especially women who live in the countryside, lack confidence and are afraid of expressing their feelings.

"They think that it is not good for students to ask questions to their teachers. I would like to change this mindset. Every morning I would encourage them to ask questions," he said.

When I went to the school again to observe Wai Moe sharing his experience in prison, a 20-year-old girl raised her hand, stood up and asked to be dismissed, amidst protest by other students.

She walked to the back of the room and sat down directly in front of me.

"Excuse me, why are you not talking today?" she asked.

Later on, a whole group of girls followed the same pattern, asking questions related to what I thought about the country, the difference between Thai and Burmese culture and about my experience.

At the end of the day, Mo Mo Aung, the same girl who stood up earlier, handed me her notepad and asked me to write down my motto.

For people like Charles Petrie, who heads the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, the internet is an untapped potential that can be a significant platform to help facilitate the peace process among ethnic groups in different regions.

"If political dialogue starts, peace will be sustainable. Those who have agreed to stop fighting will now start to talk about their political future. But assistance is only one side of what is needed. You need justice and predictability in law," he said.

Meanwhile, political parties are also attracting young people into politics in order to bring them into their party.

Out of the 1.2 million members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), around 40,000-50,000 are under the age of 30, estimates party spokesperson Nyan Win.

"Compared to the older generation, the youth are capable of looking at things in a broader sense," said the 70-year-old.

Over 2,000 people have graduated from the NLD's training center located right beside the office, with topics covering politics and business.

Most of the students are less than 30 years old and come from places outside of Yangon.

The Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) also has a youth branch, with people aged 15-32 years old.

They used to have around 200,000 members in 1990, but now they are working with around 500 party members as they try to regroup their organization.

"Because of them [the youth], we are surviving. They are our envoy in different communities," said party leader Aung Moe Zaw, who has been in exile for 24 years.

Although the government acknowledges that there has recently been a lot of hate speeches, discrimination and campaigning on Facebook, Thaung Tin, Burma's deputy communications and technology minister, stressed the importance of technology in encouraging the democratization process at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Nay Pyi Taw in June this year.

Even democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi is optimistic about the youth movement in the country. Her first few words before her actual reply to a question asked by a Brazillian on the last day of the WEF brought out a large cheer from a small part of the crowd where all the young people were sitting.

"May I say that my session with the YGL [Young Global Leaders] this morning was the most enjoyable I've had in this forum. It really was," she said.

Burma

Graffiti painting on walls surrounding the 88 Generation office in Yangon.

Shaking off the fear of state censorship –youth hold out hope

Story and photos by
Marlon Alexander Luistro

Twenty-two-year-old Wendy (not her real name), on her first day as a Hospitality Intern in a budget tourist hostel in Chinatown in Singapore, speaks surprisingly frankly on a seemingly taboo subject, much to this writer's relief.

Clad in a colorful traditional gown, the native Singaporean is taking a break from washing dishes and chatting with guests to talk about how free people and media in her country are to criticize the government – a subject which senior Singapore-based journalists were extremely reluctant to discuss with the writer.

"Actually I don't think Singapore has much freedom of speech. I mean, compared to America, they don't really have," she says as we talk, surrounded by Western tourists having breakfast.

"In Singapore, they don't allow protests, they don't allow riots… you will get arrested. Singaporeans are generally quite well-behaved. We don't do those things because we know the consequences," she speaks, a smile on her face

Wendy's candid views were a refreshing response after a week of frustrated efforts trying to know first-hand, the views of Singaporeans and media professionals on free speech in a country known for its heavy-handed treatment of public criticism of government policy.

"Sorry, we're not mature enough to talk about that," responded a teen whom the writer tried to query in a coffee shop in the Indian-dominated Bugis district.

Experienced media professionals were equally evasive. "I'm afraid I'm not available this month to assist you. In any case I rarely cover 'sensitive' areas," a senior foreign journalist replied in response to an emailed request for an interview.

A Philippine national, working with a well-known Singaporean corporation, advised against trying to interview people on the streets on the subject, cautioning that this exposed one to the risk of being arrested on suspicion of being a terrorist.

No right to claim 'fourth estate' status

In his recently published book, *OB Markers*, one of Singapore's senior-most journalists, former *Straits Times* Editor-in-Chief Cheong Yip Seng emphasizes how Singapore's rulers, starting with the nation's founder and first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew have consistently refused to recognize the media's watchdog role. "The political leadership holds fast to the principle that Singapore journalists have no right to be members of the fourth estate, a status enjoyed by the media in the West," writes Mr. Seng.

"The PAP (ruling People's Action party) case for this policy is simple: the media does not subject itself to

In a 1971 speech at the International Press Institute General Assembly in Finland, Singapore's first prime minister was quoted as saying "Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore and to the primary purpose of an elected government."

The 2013 *Freedom of the Press Report* published by Freedom House rates Singapore media as "not free" and places it 153rd in a global press freedom ranking, tied with Iraq, Afghanistan and Qatar, the last being a country where criticizing either the government, the ruling family or Islam is illegal and punishable with a jail sentence.

popular will by contesting an election, therefore it cannot claim the mandate to speak on the public's behalf," he elaborates.

This is why media is "deemed to have interfered in politics", which is unlawful, when it criticizes policies approved by Parliament.

Judicial intimidation

Over the decades, the Singapore government has silenced political foes and the media using the country's courts. The elder Mr. Lee and

The 'economics' of defamation

In 2002, global business news agency *Bloomberg* made headlines when it issued a public apology and paid substantial damages for a contributor's article which suggested nepotism in the appointment of then Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's daughter-in-law Ho Ching as Executive Director of state-owned investment company Temasek Holdings, Inc.

The *Bloomberg* apology acknowledged that the article implied then prime minister Goh Chok Tong put the Lee family's interests above those of the country in Ho's appointment and that her husband Lee Hsien Loong, and father-in-law were guilty of nepotism. The apology added that the writer could have implied that Ms. Ho's appointment was made not on merit "but in order to indulge the interests of the Lee family or for some other corrupt motive."

"We admit and acknowledge that these allegations are false and completely without foundation," said the *Bloomberg* apology published on its website and subscription service. The offending story was also removed.

With the Lees having won several defamation cases against opposition politicians and media organizations, involving large monetary compensation, *Bloomberg*'s apology and the S$595,000 it paid in damages to the Lees without the case even reaching the courts, came as no surprise to media observers who said it actually was good economic sense.

Bloomberg joined a long list of international media giants – *Financial Times*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *The Economist*, *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Time* and *Asia Week* – which have been at the losing end of expensive legal defamation actions by Singapore's rulers. In 2010, the *International Herald Tribune* apologized to former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and his son and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, paying US$114,000 in damages, rather than trying to contest a defamation charge. In 1994, the *Tribune* had paid a record US$678,000 in damages to the Lees in another out-of-court settlement over an allegedly defamatory article.

Leading Singapore media freedom advocate Professor Cherian George says Singapore's courts tend

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his son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, have won public apologies and monetary damages in several defamation and libel cases.

Similar pressure tactics are now being used to silence criticism of authorities in blogs and social media.

Earlier this year, blogger Alex Au had to apologize and take down an article he wrote, alleging corruption in the sale of town council computer systems to a ruling party-owned company. In April this year, cartoonist Chew Pen Ee, popularly known as Leslie Chew, was arrested for alleged sedition over two cartoon strips published last year on the "Demon-cratic Singapore" Facebook page which describes itself as a "100 % fictional comic series about a country that does not exist" and has over 28,000 followers. In its December 17, 2012 notice to the cartoonist, the Attorney General Chambers (AGC) said the cartoon "scandalizes our Courts

through allegations and imputations that are scurrilous and false."

Chew was released on bail on April 21. Three months later he apologized and took down the cartoons. The AGC has since withdrawn the charge.

Leading Singaporean press freedom advocate and Professor of Journalism at the Nanyang Technological University, Cherian George recognizes the harsh reality of the limits to media freedom in his country. "The main reason why they decided to just apologize was maybe because their lawyers advised them they had no chance at all to win their case," he says. Battling out the charges in the courts to stand up for their principles would be financially ruinous for the defendants, especially in the absence of a wider ecosystem of supporting groups such as well-resourced free speech non-government organizations, he explains.

Self-exiled political blogger and disbarred Singapore lawyer Gopalan Nair who lives in the United States after renouncing citizenship and becoming a US national, is no stranger to the government's use of the law to silence critics. Mr. Nair was jailed for three months after he wrote in a May 2008 blog post that a senior judge had "prostituted herself… by being nothing more than an employee of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew and his son" and ruling in their favour in their defamation case against an opposition politician.

"My passport was confiscated and I was held in solitary confinement for about eight days and interrogated every day, several times a day, many times in the early hours of the night," he told the writer in an emailed reply. "I was mentally tortured with sleep deprivation. They tried to intimidate me into confessing. I did not." Another contempt of court charge case was filed against

to disregard the standard defense against defamation that it is justified in the public interest. Based on previous judgments, he says, the courts in Singapore tend to side with the public official's right to protect his or her reputation rather than need for open and vigorous public debate. "It's very hard to find an argument to defend your client. In Singapore, the public interest argument has not been taken seriously by the courts," he says.

In most cases, lawyers simply advise defendants to apologize and reach an out-of-court settlement. Nowadays, foreign publications find it makes economic sense to apologize and pay damages rather than contest the charges in court, says Prof. George. A prolonged legal battle, which they know they will almost certainly lose, will be far more expensive.

In a September 2002 report in *The Australian*, Sydney lawyer and journalist Stuart Littlemore who has studied several defamation cases in Singapore, said that no foreign publisher has successfully defended a libel action against a Singapore politician and when these leaders win their case, the average monetary compensation awarded is usually S$450,000, which is 12 times that when the defendant is a Singapore citizen.

In 1988, *Far Eastern Economic Review* paid

him while he was in the final week of his sentence. Mr. Nair eventually apologized. However, he told the writer, he had "no intention in my mind of actually apologizing." In his blog, Mr. Nair later retracted his apology.

"They isolate and marginalize critics simply by making sure that once you are identified as a critic and you persist, you will be denied jobs, denied a career and you will be harassed and victimized all your life. This naturally will dissuade anyone from becoming an open Singapore critic," he said.

Climate of fear and self-censorship

Such horror stories, say rights activists, have not only increased media self-censorship but also created a climate of fear among people, effectively preventing public criticism of government policies.

Braehma Mathi, executive director of Singapore-based human rights group MARUAH says that the use of defamation suits is "big psychological warfare, which we haven't overcome yet because of all

these horror stories of the past".

In 2006, Chee Soon Juan, Secretary-General of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) was declared bankrupt and barred from running for public office, after he failed to pay S$500,000 in court-awarded damages to former Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong over remarks Dr. Chee had made during the 2001 election campaign.

"It's a difficult time for me and my

Chee Soon Juan

family. But you have to remember that the only reason why autocrats are doing these things to you is that you have something important to say," Dr. Chee told the writer.

The series of government-initiated defamation and contempt-of-court charges over critical online posts have bothered alternative website *TR Emeritus* columnist Gilbert Goh who admitted, in an interview, that bloggers like him do "self-censor whenever someone's being sued." He does feel "enraged", though, whenever he hears about bloggers being sued and forced to apologize.

Self-exiled blogger Mr. Nair knows very well the limitations faced by Singapore-based anti-government bloggers. "Singapore only goes after those whom they can bully within the island. They cannot bully anyone outside Singapore because their courts, unlike Singapore's, are not Kangaroo Courts," he said.

The Real Singapore website tries to get around this by allowing anonymous user postings. "Self-cen-

US$175,000 after the court ruled the magazine had defamed the Lees. Eleven years later, the *Review* paid US$290,000 again to the Lees in an out-of-court settlement for an allegedly defamatory 2006 article. *The Economist* has paid a total of US$352,000 in damages in two separate defamation cases brought by the Singapore government.

International news organizations also do not want to risk expulsion from Singapore, a key global business and financial news hub, says Prof. George. "For most foreign journalists and most foreign media operating in this region, we are one of the easiest countries to work from. I don't think they feel that's a problem."

"Also, what's happening is that the foreign media has become more commercial. The nature of foreign media has also changed. In the past, before the 1990s, these decisions of whether to challenge authoritarian practices in Southeast Asia were more of a professional and principled decision. So you fight on principle," he added.

"Now, it's more of a business decision. They ask themselves, 'Does it make economic sense?' Does it fit in with our future plan for expansion in Asia," Prof. George explained.

A memo from *Bloomberg*'s New York-based chief editor Matthew Winkler to its news staff in Singapore after the agency's apology, expressed concern that the welfare of the company's 180 employees in Singapore was "at risk" and that the agency's 3,000 subscribers in Singapore "might lose the *Bloomberg* service."

A 2009 Court of Appeals decision upholding a High Court ruling, which had stated that "only Singapore citizens are entitled to enjoy constitutional free speech", seems to have made it even more difficult for foreign media outfits to defend themselves in defamation cases.

Defamation is punishable with up to two years of imprisonment or a fine or both under Singapore's Defamation Act and Penal Code.

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sorship is an issue as people are still afraid to be critical (of the government). We at *The Real Singapore* try to overcome this by allowing users to post anonymously. Of course this also brings in other problems like some individuals not showing enough restraint or careful thought before posting, but we attempt to strike a good balance," the website editors told the writer in an emailed response.

Speaking to the writer on condition of anonymity, a local journalist said there was "very little press freedom in Singapore" and self-censorship was common. "I know what's going on because I work for the mainstream (media)," he said.

This was evident in media coverage of the June 2013 protests against new restrictive licensing restrictions imposed on Internet-based media by the State online regulator, Media Development Authority (MDA). Mainstream media coverage of the protest rally organized in Singapore's Hong Lim Park

by the #FreemyInternet bloggers group and attended by thousands of people, was "carefully angled" so as not to offend the government, the journalist said.

He does not, however, worry too much about working in a heavily-regulated environment. "You know where your limits are. If you feel stifled, then don't work for the mainstream. I'm here to earn a living. (If I had been troubled enough), I wouldn't have lasted so long," he adds. He insists there is minimal government intervention in mainstream media compared to China.

Not all journalists are reconciled to the heavy-handed government regulation. "We can criticize the government here but we can only do it gently and that's the difficult part of it. They only want to present one view but you want to present more views," another local journalist told the writer, shaking his head.

The fear of criticizing authority extends to ordinary citizens. Back in the tourist hostel, the writer's con-

versation with hospitality trainee Wendy was interrupted by the hostel manager wanting to know what we were discussing. When told it was about free speech issues in Singapore, the increasingly suspicious manager advised against taking the trainee's views to be those of the hostel as "this is just her personal opinion". Wendy also sought an assurance that her identity would be kept confidential.

Internet enables and empowers citizens to speak up

The Internet has, however, made it possible for ordinary citizens to speak their minds on issues rarely discussed publicly in the past.

In a speech at the Asian Media Conference held in 1998 in the US, Singapore founder Lee recognized that with the emergence of Internet and 24-hour international news channels, governments can no longer stop reports disagreeable to them. Those who "try to fight the new technology will lose", he had said.

In his book, *Freedom From the Press* published this year, media freedom advocate Prof. George says it is not easy for the Singapore government to shield itself from "watchdogs in the cyberspace."

"Within a decade, it was clear that the internet was transforming Singapore's political culture. The government could no longer so easily set the national agenda by silencing dissenters, who now had the ability to magnify their voices well beyond their economic or institutional heft," he says.

Since its launch in 2006, *The Online Citizen* (*TOC*) has become a highly popular website in Singapore with an average of over 100,000 hits, *TOC* founder Choo Zheng Xi told the writer. The TOC gained recognition after it organized political discussion forums for poll candidates during the 2011 parliament election.

Its popularity has soared with its

Despite being branded and dissected by critics for its pro-government bias, The Straits Times publication remain the longest running and most widely read English daily newspaper in Singapore and to date has a circulation of 365,800 and a readership of 1.43 million.

coverage of socio-economic issues neglected by mainstream media. These included stories about poverty and homelessness in Singapore and slave-like working conditions of foreign domestic helpers, most of them women from Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The *TOC*'s sustained coverage of the issue forced the Ministry of Manpower to act.

For Mr. Xi, this was a manifestation of the growing power and influence of online media in Singapore.

Socio-political blogs like Alex Au's *Yawning Bread*, Roy Ngerng's *The Heart Truths*, Martin See Tong Ming's *Singapore Rebel*, Gopalan Nair's *Singapore Dissident* and websites such as *TR Emeritus*, *Public House* and *The Real Singapore* are also popular.

Facebook has also opened up the space for political satires such as Leslie Chew's *Demon-cratic Singapore* featuring cartoon strips that indirectly criticize the government and its policies.

The We Believe In Second Chances website launched by an anonymous youth group is trying to raise awareness about the mandatory death penalty in Singapore.

A major event in Singapore' alternative, online-based media landscape was the June 2013 launch of the *Independent Singapore* which aims to professionalize independent online media, according to the website's Legal Advisor Alfred Dodwell.

Opposition parties have also been actively using cyberspace, particularly Facebook and YouTube, to reach out to voters and sidestep government control of mainstream media.

The Internet has been a welcome development for opposition parties in a country where election rallies are limited to government-designated areas over a nine-day-period.

Unlike in the past, when even a little-known candidate put up by the ruling party had an easy walk-in

Decreasing levels of trust and confidence in the mainstream media has prompted some Singaporean citizens to establish their own "alternative" blogs and websites to freely express their opinions.

to Parliament, vigilant netizens have raised the bar on the acceptability of lawmaker aspirants. In his book, Prof. George tells how the PAP bid to woo young voters with a little-known, 27-year-old woman candidate backfired when a Facebook photo of her holding a new designer handbag in "girlish glee" went 'viral' with commentators describing her as an "immature social climber."

Cyberspace has also been used to mock self-censorship by the mainstream press such as by the defunct website *Sintercom*'s 'Not The Straits Times' section, which used to publish letters "mysteriously rejected" by Singapore's leading newspaper *The Straits Times*.

On July 27 this year, the Facebook page *Fabrications by the PAP*, having more than 1,000 'likes', posted excerpts from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2004 oath-taking speech in which he emphasized an "open and inclusive Singapore" where people should "feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply be different".

The posting drew sharply critical comments with one visitor writing: "I think he has forgotten what he said." Others labeled PAP as "cold and heartless" and wondered why, despite the prime minister's failure to keep to his promise, "a significant number of Singaporeans still refuse to wake up".

"Cyberspace has provided the third dimension to information sharing. We used to only read from one source, but now there are variant sources to read from which enhances one's knowledge and perspective of what is right and wrong," *TR Emeritus* columnist blogger Gilbert Goh told the writer. "When you only read from one controlled source, after a while you get sick and realise that they are all half-truths," he adds.

Wendy, the hospitality trainee in the Chinatown tourist hostel says social media has indeed changed ordinary Singaporeans' lives as it enables people to "share ideas and their feelings and your response as well".

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Youth standing up to state regulation

Wendy's frankness on freedom-of-expression issues in Singapore gives rise to hopes that the country's youth may be beginning to shed fear of state regulation.

A recent survey by the government-led public outreach committee Our Singapore Conversation, which queried 4,000 citizens found that a majority of Singaporeans prefer some media censorship in the public interest and rejected gay lifestyles, although the younger generation tends to be more liberal when it comes to freedom of expression.

In recent years, Singapore youth have been getting active in advocacy of the right to free speech. In 2008, student journalists in the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), working on the campus newspaper *Nanyang Chronicle*, staged a public protest on the campus after the university president ordered the paper to censor a news report on the visit of key opposition leader Chee Soon Juan to the campus.

The *Chronicle* editor also expressed his protest against censorship by setting up an independent NTU students-run website *Enquirer.Sg*. "On its first anniversary, he penned a stinging rebuke of the culture of censorship and self-censorship that he claimed had routinely neutered the Chronicle even before the Chee Soon Juan case," Prof. George writes in his book.

Fast forward to August 9, 2013. Twenty-one-year-old Han Hui Hui who is facing a charge of defamation over emailed remarks to the Council for Private Education (CPE), Singapore's statutory private sector education regulator, appeared at the Singapore National Day celebration in Hong Lim Park with thousands of others to share her views and make a demand for free speech in the country.

Unlike senior journalists, the young woman has courageously answered charges against her in court and has stood up to political pressure to apologize. "I was only 21 years old and I was puzzled. How can the CPE, a government body threaten to sue me, a Singaporean citizen for defamation? How is asking questions defamatory? Where is our freedom of speech?" Han said boldly during her speech, much to the audience's applause.

The video recording of her speech, uploaded to YouTube, has been viewed 5,865 times. Viewers' comments praise her courage: "We need more people like her" and "Seeing the video, you made me feel there is still hope for Singapore. I'm impressed by your courageous stand against the Goliath threat".

Two weeks after her Hong Lim Park speech, Ms. Hui Hui lambasted Prime Minister Hsien Loong on her Facebook page for his remarks that he was "flame proof" when it comes to nasty online comments against him. Made during an interaction with students after his August 18 National Day Rally speech, the prime minister's remarks were widely reported in mainstream media.

"Then why am I being sued for defamation by the Singaporean government?" asked Ms. Hui Hui on her Facebook page.

Mr. Xi of *The Online Citizen* says that the fact that Singapore is a "very materialistic society" makes people wonder whether this creates an environment where citizens are apathetic and unwilling enough to assert their right to free speech.

For hospitality trainee Wendy the choice seems to be easy. Asked if she would have the "freedom to shop" or "freedom of expression", she answers, after a short pause: "Shopping!" with a giggle. But she quickly adds that she has changed her mind and will go with the other option. "If the government will only listen to us, yes, I'll choose the other one to be able to voice out. I just wish that the government would be more responsive," she says.
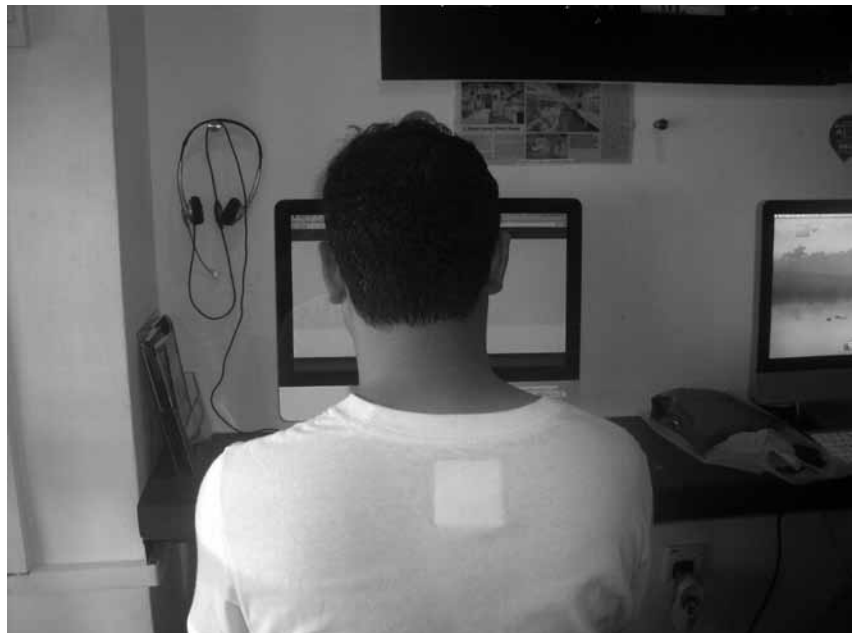
Singaporeans are beginning to turn to the Internet in their hunger and thirst for news and information different from what the government wants them to read.

Singapore:
Constricting the space for online expression of opinion

Story by **Ulisari Eslita**

If freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.

– George Washington, first US first president

I t is past 10 pm and I am walking along the dimly lit street, looking for the headquarters of Singapore's main opposition Workers Party (WP). Cars parked on both sides leave almost no space for vehicles to pass through the narrow road. Two-storey shop houses, some of them Chinese restaurants, line my side of the street while on the other, cigarette-smoking young women in skimpy dresses and high heels, their faces covered in thick make-up, are 'negotiating' with potential clients.

Nervously, I walk on, thinking, surely I have lost my way while following directions to his party's office at 216G Syed Alwi Road #02-03, given me by Gerald Giam, a Non-Constituency WP Member of Singapore's Parliament. After walking back and forth past the shop houses for half an hour and asking people for directions, an old woman working in one of the Chinese eateries, finally showed me the way to the WP office located above a Chinese restaurant and across the road from the street walkers. The party logo on the shop house wall is barely visible in the dark and the office is a single, medium-sized room on the second floor, reached after climbing a narrow stairway and one among other rooms lining the corridor.

Like its political influence, the office of one of Singapore's oldest political parties is in stark contrast to that of its rival, Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) which works out of a large, corporate-style building set in its own grounds in an upscale area near Singapore's Changi international airport.

Freedom of online dissent?

Yet, sitting in his office, Mr. Giam does not share the general pessimistic view of the state of the political opposition in Singapore. Pointing to the WP's impressive showing in the 2011 national election after going unrepresented in parliament between 1968 and 1981 and having only five lawmakers in the legislature between 1981 and 2006, he says Singapore citizens have become more politically aware since 2006, with the Internet playing a big role in this.

"I see that there is an increasing political awareness in Singapore, particularly among young people, even among many older people," he says.

The first-time lawmaker who joined politics in 2009 after a career in the civil service also does not think that online freedom of expression is under threat in Singapore. A keen political blogger himself, he says he was inspired by the emer-

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gence of bloggers commenting on social and political issues starting with the 2006 election.

Mr. Giam, however, does not think bloggers will replace mainstream media for a number of reasons, including their inability to match the news gathering resources of traditional media. "They will definitely complement the mainstream media. They add different opinions and perspectives. In a way many of them are freer to speak their mind than mainstream media journalists."

He is optimistic about the future for freedom of expression in his country. He doubts Singapore's rulers will be able to control online media which is playing an important role in political development in Singapore.

Social media had a significant influence on the outcome of the 2011 elections to parliament, providing information to let people make the right choice. In particular, it helped

Gerald Giam

opposition candidates in reaching out to and connect directly with voters.

The opposition lawmaker is critical of the May 2013 online licensing

regulation issued by the state media regulator, the Media Development Authority (MDA), which requires online sites reporting at least one Singapore news story a week over a period of two months and visited by at least 50,000 unique IP address from within Singapore, to pay a licensing fee of S$50,000.

But he hastens to add that it should not be interpreted as an attempt at stifling online freedom of expression. "In general, I don't agree with the MDA regulation. But it doesn't mean the government does not allow online media," he says, adding that it cannot be compared to the much harsher restriction on online political activities in Vietnam which has banned sharing of anything other than personal information on popular social media like Facebook . "There's been no such regulation in Singapore."

He tries to explain the reason behind the MDA regulation. "I think

Does freedom of expression matter?

In his National Day Rally speech on August 18 this year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spelt out major plans to make Singaporeans contented and happy. During his two-hour speech at the Ang Mo Kio campus of ITE College Central, the prime minister announced major reforms in housing, education and healthcare and more state support for the poorest citizens.

Healthcare was a focus of his speech. The head of government announced an increase in state contribution to health insurance which, moreover, will now be extended beyond 90 years of age to life. Healthcare costs have become a major concern for Singaporeans with the working age population having to bear the double burden of healthcare for children and elderly parents. This is one of the reasons why a growing number of elder citizens, neglected by their offspring who are finding it hard to bring up their own children, can be seen working at the service counters of fast food outlets like McDonalds or as waiters at shopping mall food courts in Singapore.

The prime minister also promised that every

Singaporean would now be able to afford a home. Households with a monthly income of S$1,000 would be able to buy a two-room Housing and Development Board (HDB) flat, while those with total monthly earnings of S$2,000 and S$4,000 would find it easy to own a three-room and four-room HDB flat, respectively. The government would also provide additional subsidies, including a housing grant of up to S$20,000. The grant was till now only given to low-income households, but would now also be extended to middle-income families.

Unlike other Asian countries, Singapore is very generous when it comes to taking care of its people. An Indonesian citizen needs a US$1,300-monthly income to qualify for a bank loan in order to buy a US$40,000 house, while a Singapore citizen with same monthly income is eligible to buy a US$80,000 HDB flat. In Malaysia or the Philippines, citizens have to pay themselves for their health insurance, while the Singapore government's Medishield covers a citizen for life with the government subsidizing up to 80% of the costs for the lowest income groups.

that from the government perspective, the regulation's purpose is to ensure that any news, whether online or not, which has a significant following, comes under a certain type of regulation."

He is, nonetheless, concerned that the regulation was issued even though Singapore has the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) and Broadcasting (Class License) Notification of 2001, which, he says also, covers news websites.

Yet, he expresses optimism that the MDA regulation will not be a major obstacle to independent online bloggers. "I don't see that the MDA licensing framework for online media is a big impediment to political development in Singapore." As of now, the new rule does not affect any individual blogger in Singapore, he says. "I don't see it as a restriction on the freedom of expression," he adds.

"Although we still have the PAP, the ability to restrict the flow of information has been severely curtailed by the emergence of the Internet and online media," he points out.

"Unless they are prepared to shut down the Internet like in North Korea, put opposition politicians in jail or restrict the (flow of) online information. I think those days are hopefully over." Mr. Giam thinks the government will not be able to secure popular backing for "such tactics", adding, "I think Singaporeans will not stand for that."

But Mrs. Lina Chiam, Non-Constituency Member of Parliament and Chairwoman of the opposition Singapore People's Party believes the MDA regulation is detrimental to media freedom because of its ambiguous wording. "The definition of news sites under the regulations, as they stand, are so arbitrary, and can encompass any website posting at least one news-related article in a week," she says.

Mrs. Chiam thinks one does not even need to believe in the constitutional right to free speech to realize how worrying the new MDA rules are, from the point of view of

Free speech space: Singapore's Speaker's Corner at Hong Lim Park. [Photo: Wikimedia Commons, by Gabriel Ehrnst Grundin]

Such comprehensive state support is hardly surprising in one of the world's richest nations. The former British colonial outpost and now a hi-tech city of glittering skyscrapers with 5.3 million people and a GDP of over US$270 billion in 2012, is often referred to as one of Asia's economic 'tigers'.

The country is also known for the conservatism of its leaders and its strict social controls with a system of punishments for acts considered anti-social. The government controls almost every aspect of the people's life, including even daily conversation, hosting an online dialogue with the people through *www.oursgconversation.sg*.

Critics say government support in helping meet

people's basic needs has been an effective tool in winning acceptance for the state's control of the citizen's life. "Singapore is a very materialistic nation. If you listen to PM Lee's speech at the National Day Rally, all that he said is about material things, like healthcare and housing, he didn't mention anything about the freedom of expression," says Choo Zheng Xi, Co-founder of *The Online Citizen*, prominent socio-political blog in Singapore.

"Singaporeans don't think about politics. They are more interested in material belongings… they are just too greedy. The only time they talk about politics is only when it concerns their bottom line," he adds.

Mr. Xi may be right. During her stay in the country and spending time in public places – food courts, coffee shops and restaurants – the writer rarely hear anyone talking of politics or government policies, unlike in her home city of Jakarta.

Unlike in most other countries, the majority of Singaporeans are not interested in freedom of expression for themselves, says well-known media freedom advocate, Professor Cherian George. "Most material

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legal order, transparency in governance, and good business sense. "With the freedom of expression suppressed, Singapore is not living up to its potential as a First World country," she adds.

The Singapore People's Party has called on the government to withdraw the MDA regulation.

A long history of media regulation

The Singapore government's relationship with traditional news media organizations is hardly encouraging for those trying to use the online space to criticize the ruling party's philosophy that has guided the city state's development over the past six decades.

Speaking at the National Day Rally last year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took a dig at online media, accusing it of unreliability and lack of balanced reporting. "It (online media) lends itself to many negative views and ridiculous untruths," Singapore's leader said on the occasion.

Over the past four decades, government control of mainstream media has been aided by legislation such as the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) and the Broadcasting Act. All print and broadcast media in Singapore are also owned by the government-linked-company, Singapore Press Holding and Mediacorp.

Kumeran Pillai, Managing Editor of the online alternative newspaper *Independent Singapore* says government ownership is a "fear factor" for the journalist. The feeling is that "if I write something bad, I am going to lose my job."

"In Singapore you don't have private ownership. All (media outlets are) owned by the government. So if a journalist wants to write from a different view (to that held by the government), the government is in a position to hit them very hard," says Leon Perera, advisor of *Independent Singapore*.

Singapore's first political website *Sintercom* (Singapore Internet Community), launched in 1994 by Tan Chong Kee as a public platform for free discussion on a variety of national issues, had to license itself in 2001 with the national internet policy maker and regulator – the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA). (The SBA's role was taken over by the MDA in 2003.) Mr. Kee said he decided to shut down the website after realizing that it was impossible for him to run it with integrity.

Last year, the popular socio-political blog *The Online Citizen* (*TOC*) was registered as a political organization under the Broadcasting Act. The government said this was necessary as *TOC* was in a position to influence public opinion and shape political outcomes in Singapore. Registration has barred *TOC* from receiving foreign funds or allowing foreign citizens to take part in its events. Moreover, the Political Donations Act requires a registered website to list domestic sources of funding – a potentially crippling blow in a country where dissent results in political and economic marginalization.

Cautious optimism against online control

Prominent blogger Ravi Philemon whose investigative online reports have embarrassed the government and triggered debates in Parliament, thinks it is not easy for the government to control expression of opinion online.

"I think the internet is a different animal altogether. Because how do you control the internet unless you are a country like China, which is so big and where citizens are inclined to speak in one language," he says. Even though the government is trying to regulate Internet content, it is not easy to control. Singaporeans are turning to online media to get a perspective on news other than that offered by mainstream media, he says. "There is always another side of a story. I am sure, that what mainstream media tells is not the whole story," says Philemon.

Technology has also made it easier to evade state control, he points out. "There are so many tools for you to bypass censorship. So how do you control something like that,

needs of the people are taken care of by the government. We almost don't have (a) corrupt government, (the) jobless level is very low. So what is the need of freedom of expression?"

Champions of free speech in Singapore feel encouraged by gradually changing public attitudes on the issue. In February 2013, after many years, Singaporeans staged a public protest demanding a tightening of the immigration policy. Some 3,000 people gathered at Singapore's Hong Lim Park to join the protest triggered by growing public perception that middle-aged Singaporeans were losing out to foreigners in the jobs market. "Now it is slowly changing. More and more Singaporean who are not so happy because they feel housing is become unaffordable, the transportation system which is not going to be better, and the living cost that is getting too high recently," says Prof. George.

"It is easier to persuade Singaporeans now that they need this freedom. Because they realize there is a direct relation between freedom of expression and social-economic welfare, which they didn't see 10-20 years back," he says.

However, it will be a struggle to spread awareness among people in Singapore that freedom of expression is a human right, he says. *[by Ulisari Eslita]*

especially in a country like Singapore which is so connected? So how do you restrict peoples' reading? It is a very big challenge."

Moreover, information is now "just one Google search away". So the government can now no longer "control the political discourse, and for any government, it will be very troubling if you can't lead the social-political discourse".

"If you can't lead it (political discourse), it means you (go) down (in) your power. In my opinion, it is understandable why the government wants to control the Internet, but it's impossible," he says.

By making it possible to reach out to a much wider audience, online communication can be a powerful tool to challenge authority, he says, citing his own example. During the severe haze crisis in Singapore in June this year, Mr. Philemon highlighted on his blog the public frustration that was expressed on social media over the government's failure to keep its promise to make air filter masks available in all pharmacies. The government accused him of lying but could do nothing more, he points out.

Mr. Philemon says that after ignoring online media for a long time, the government has become aware of the importance of Internet-based communication after the 2011 election.

Well-known Singaporean media freedom advocate and Professor of Journalism from Nanyang Technological University, Cherian George also thinks it is not easy to control online expression of opinion. "Criticizing the government through online media with your own name is more common now, because you are not alone. The Internet has given confidence to the Singaporean, that if you have critical views about the government, you are not alone," he says.

The government will have to arrest thousands of people if it starts

Cherian George. (Photo SMU Apolitical)

cracking down on those expressing critical views online, he explains. He cited the large number of online comments criticizing the Prime Minister's statement at the August 18 National Day rally.

The Singapore government is getting "very annoyed" with online criticism but it has to realize that there are limits to regulating online expression of opinion, Prof. George says. While "realists" in the government "realize" that it will have to learn to live with online criticism, the danger is that "hardliners" may have the urge to act, he says. This is evident in the new MDA licensing regulation for news bloggers. "There is nobody outside government who can understand why it is necessary or what problem it is supposed to solve. I can only conclude that it is more a symptom of frustration."

"I am not afraid about the regulation (in itself), but what this regulation signals about government thinking. It shows that the government still doesn't understand the need to reform the media. It is the clearest sign for many years that the government doesn't want to recognize the reality," he adds.

"It seems that the government is trying to make online media more

like mainstream media. (The cases of) China, Iran, North Korea show it is possible to restrict (online media freedom). But, is that the direction you want to go?" he asks rhetorically. "Nobody imagines Singapore will go that way."

Choo Zheng Xi, Co-founder of *The Online Citizen* thinks likewise. "They can't control the Internet," he says, adding: "They have imposed a lot of regulation that makes them very stupid. If they ask online media to pay $50,000 and they don't want to pay, what would they do?"

Mr. Xi thinks the government is "afraid" and scared that independent bloggers can now affect the outcome of elections. He thinks the Internet provides a useful outlet for people to express their feelings on social and political issues.

Prof. George thinks the government needs to realize that loosening its grip on mainstream media will actually lead to an improvement in public and political life in Singapore. Instead of trying to suppress the online expression of political opinion, the aim of Internet regulation should be to protect citizens from unethical online behavior such as intrusion of privacy and cyber bullying, he says. "The govern-

Singapore

ment is more concerned about themselves instead of the ordinary people. Internet regulation should be about making the Internet safe for ordinary citizen."

Challenges for independent online media

Even as they try to evade government control, bloggers and independent online news websites have to prepare themselves to become credible alternative media voices.

While bloggers and social media cannot replace mainstream media, they can play a valuable supplementary role, says Prof. George. Surveys he has conducted show that while people consider mainstream media to be biased in its coverage of the government, they have to depend on mainstream media for information because there is no choice available.

He sees the establishment of the online news blog *Independent Singapore* as a positive development but adds that it will not be easy for it to sustain itself as it lacks adequate resources in terms of funding and staff. After the National Day Rally, which was the biggest political event of the year, the website could publish only two commentaries, one of them authored by Prof. George.

Singapore still does not have independent online news sites that can guarantee comprehensive and reliable coverage of current issue. Even *TOC*, the best so far, can barely manage to pay its editors and interns.

Mr. Xi of *TOC* says the website was started to make up for the "very unbalanced" coverage of mainstream news media and its "lack of objectivity". In the past two to three years since its establishment, the website readership has grown from "a few hundred" to "thousands". During the 2011 election, *TOC*

organized a political forum to which all political parties were invited though only the main opposition party took part.

Initially the government was not affected by TOC's reporting "because we are very small" but *TOC* news stories are now forcing the government to act. "Many times, the government is responding to our articles," says Mr. Xi.

The *TOC* story on homelessness in Singapore led to a debate in parliament. Although the government claimed the report was exaggerated, it launched an investigation into the issue. Mr. Xi says that mainstream media coverage tends to ignore issues like poverty, homelessness and foreign workers in Singapore. Unlike most other blogs which only carry opinion, *TOC* also provides reliable news to the public. "We are considered pioneers. We do reporting, cover news events and (carry) opinion (articles)." Its readers include retirees, professionals and students.

However, he does not think bloggers and alternative online news groups can lead in shaping public opinion. "Only the mainstream media can do that. He is, nonetheless, optimistic about the future and expects *TOC* to become stronger over the next five to ten years. "Recently we've seen, former journalists, who have retired or were kicked out by their media organization, feeling frustrated and joining online media."

The website has a core team of five staff and also between 10 to 15 volunteers, many of them students. "'We have to nurture them, lead them, make them feel their work is worth something."

TOC is not finding it easy it obtain financial support as potential business backers are nervous about supporting a political news and opinion website that they see as being critical of the government, says

Mr. Xi. The website runs on reader donations which add up to about S$1,000 per month. "It is enough."

A significant addition to Singapore's alternative media landscape was the launch of the *Independent Singapore* on 15 June this year. Its Managing Editor, Mr. Pillai, a former *TOC* editor, thinks alternative online media organizations have to professionalize themselves, moving beyond reliance on volunteers to paid staff.

Independent Singapore Director and Legal Advisor, Alfred Dodwell says the website aims to be independent of any political party. "I suppose the mainstream media is a PAP mouthpiece (and) *TOC* and *TRE* (*Temasek Review Emeritus*) are more like the opposition."

The website writes about issues not covered by mainstream media and tries to be professional unlike a blog, he says. "We have an editorial team. Like a real newspaper."

Hopes for the future

Prof. George thinks more and more of his fellow citizens are now beginning to realize that they need the freedom to criticize the government. Till recently, the number of "Singaporeans that want to fight for freedom of expression for its own sake was very small". Yet, in recent years, "more and more Singaporeans" are feeling "the government isn't noticing our problems seriously enough (and that) they need freedom of expression to voice their unhappiness".

Mr. Dodwell hopes *Independent Singapore* will give rise to a better informed younger generation. "The reason why we started *Independent Singapore* was because we are all parents, we have children. We want to do this for the future of Singapore (so that) children do not grow up with the *Strait Times* as the only one newspaper."