

Myanmar Military's Digital Tactics After 2011 Political Transition

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Abstract

This paper examines how Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw) have used digital platforms as instruments of political influence and control since the country's political transition in 2011. Drawing on securitization theory, social conflict theory, and digital repression literature, the study investigates how the military used online networks to strengthen its legitimacy during the post-transition period and suppress anti-coup resistance after February 2021. Using qualitative content analysis of official statements, state media, social media content, and reports from international organizations, the study finds that digital platforms played a central role in military propaganda, disinformation campaigns, hate speech dissemination, and political surveillance. The findings further demonstrate that online technologies were used to influence public opinion during the Rohingya crisis, the 2015 and 2020 elections, and the post-coup period. At the same time, digital technologies enabled anti-coup activists and civil society groups to organize resistance, document human rights violations, and mobilize international support. The Myanmar case highlights the growing importance of digital spaces in contemporary authoritarian governance and democratic resistance.

Keywords: Myanmar military, digital repression, social media, digital resistance, political transition

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Introduction

Myanmar's post-independence history has been characterized by recurring military intervention in politics and constitutional engineering. Following the military coup in 1962, the Tatmadaw established a one-party socialist system and embedded military influence throughout state institutions (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009). Although political and economic reforms introduced in 2011 created opportunities for greater openness and international engagement, they did not significantly reduce the military's influence over the political system. Instead, the expansion of digital communication technologies provided the Tatmadaw with new mechanisms to shape public narratives, monitor opposition activities, and maintain political legitimacy.

The rapid growth of internet access and social media transformed Myanmar's information environment. Facebook became the dominant digital platform and an important source of news and political discussion for millions of citizens (Smith & Smith, 2022). While digital technologies enabled greater civic participation and public debate, they also created opportunities for misinformation, hate speech, and state-sponsored propaganda (Palatino, 2014). Prior to the February 2021 military coup, the Tatmadaw and its allies increasingly used online platforms to influence public opinion, promote nationalist narratives, and delegitimize ethnic and political opponents (Brenner, 2014).

Following the military takeover on 1 February 2021, digital repression became a central component of the junta's governance strategy. The military-imposed internet shutdowns, restricted access to social media platforms, increased surveillance activities, and arrested individuals for online political expression (Access Now, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021a). At the same time, pro-democracy activists and civil society organizations used digital platforms to coordinate resistance, document human rights abuses, and mobilize both domestic and international support. Against this backdrop, this study examines how the Tatmadaw's digital tactics evolved between 2011 and 2025 and how pro-democracy actors responded to these forms of digital repression.

Literature Review

Scholars have long examined how the Tatmadaw has maintained political dominance through coercion, legal control, and divide-and-rule strategies. Brenner (2014) explains that the military has often used ethnic and religious divisions to weaken collective opposition and maintain its authority. This is important in the Myanmar context because political conflict has frequently been shaped through narratives of national security, race, and religion. Studies of Myanmar's information environment after 2011 also show that the expansion of digital media created both opportunities and risks. On one hand, social media allowed citizens, activists, and civil society groups to criticize authority, share political information, and organize collective action (Tønnesson et al., 2021). On the other hand, the same platforms also became tools for surveillance, disinformation, and online harassment (Smith & Smith, 2022).

The role of Facebook in Myanmar's political and social conflict has received particular attention. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (2021) shows that, during the Rohingya crisis, military-linked actors and ultranationalist groups used Facebook to spread dehumanizing narratives, false information, and hate speech against Rohingya and Muslim communities (Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 2021). These online narratives contributed to the framing of the Rohingya as a security threat and helped justify

military action in Rakhine State (Selth, 2018). Similar concerns were raised by international human rights organizations, which documented the use of coordinated accounts and pages to promote anti-Rohingya hostility and nationalist propaganda (Mozur, 2018). Therefore, the Myanmar case demonstrates how social media can become a powerful tool for both political communication and social division.

Research on elections further highlights the role of digital platforms in political polarization. Myanmar's 2015 general election took place in a context where religious nationalism and anti-Muslim narratives influenced public debate (Mann, 2014). Nationalist organizations such as Ma Ba Tha used religious identity to shape political attitudes, while pro-military networks used online platforms to question the credibility of the National League for Democracy (NLD) (Lowy Institute, 2016). During the 2020 election period, similar online narratives reappeared, including claims that the NLD was linked to Muslim interests or foreign influence (The Irrawaddy, 2013). These patterns suggest that digital platforms were not only used for communication but also for strategic political framing and electoral influence.

Beyond Myanmar, comparative scholarship on digital repression identifies two mechanisms that are especially relevant to authoritarian settings. The first is coercive digital repression, which includes internet shutdowns, platform blocking, surveillance, and arrests for online expression. The second is channeling repression, which involves manipulating the information environment through propaganda, disinformation, troll networks, and coordinated online harassment. Topal (2022) argues that digital repression has reshaped modern authoritarian power by allowing regimes to combine traditional coercion with new forms of online control (Topal, 2022). These ideas are useful for understanding Myanmar because the Tatmadaw has used both direct control and information manipulation to suppress dissent, weaken resistance, and maintain political legitimacy.

Conceptual Framework

Three theoretical lenses guide this paper. First, securitization theory explains how political elites construct existential threats to justify exceptional measures. The Tatmadaw has repeatedly framed the Rohingya, the NLD and anti-coup protesters as dangers to national survival, thereby legitimising repression. Second, social-conflict theory emphasises competition among social groups and institutions. Myanmar's political arena is characterised by antagonism between the military, ethnic minorities and pro-democracy movements; shifts in digital policy reflect evolving power struggles. Third, digital repression theory (Topal, 2022) distinguishes between coercive and channeling tactics. This framework allows us to map the Tatmadaw's evolving repertoire from shutdowns and surveillance to astroturfing, troll armies and the weaponization of platforms for maintaining authority.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach combined with digital ethnography. Primary data were collected through archival analysis of public statements, speeches and media releases issued by the Tatmadaw, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and affiliated nationalist organisations between 2011 and 2025. Secondary sources include reports from human-rights organizations investigative journalism, and academic studies. Social-media posts were sampled from Facebook, YouTube and Telegram channels identified by watchdogs such as the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar and Access Now as either

pro-military or pro-democracy (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). Accounts were monitored over time to detect patterns in narrative framing, hate speech and calls to action.

Data were coded thematically using NVivo software. Categories included: framing of threats, appeals to religion or race, references to elections, portrayal of international actors, and calls for violence or participation. To triangulate online discourses with offline developments, timelines of major political events (e.g., the 2015 election, Rohingya clearance operations, the 2021 coup) were cross-referenced with spikes in online activity (Than, 2016). Interviews with six activists and three digital-rights researchers provided further insights into how anti-coup movements adapted to censorship and surveillance.

Results and Discussion

The Rohingya Crisis: Weaponization of Digital Media

During the 2010s, the Tatmadaw and its ultranationalist allies increasingly used social media platforms to portray the Rohingya Muslim minority as foreign intruders and security threats (Rahman, 2019). Although Rohingya communities have lived in Rakhine State for generations, official narratives and nationalist groups frequently referred to them as “Bengali” migrants and denied their ethnic identity and citizenship rights (Lynn, 2016). These narratives became more prominent during the lead-up to the 2017 military operations in Rakhine State, which resulted in the displacement of more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees to neighboring Bangladesh (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017).

Digital platforms played a significant role in spreading anti-Rohingya narratives during this period. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (2021) found evidence of coordinated online campaigns involving military-linked accounts, ultranationalist networks, and influential Buddhist monks (Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 2021). These campaigns disseminated misinformation, hate speech, and fabricated stories portraying Rohingya communities as terrorists, criminals, and threats to national security. Such content reached millions of users and contributed to the normalization of anti-Rohingya sentiment within the broader public sphere (BBC, 2018).

Several studies and investigative reports have highlighted Facebook’s role in amplifying these narratives. Mozur (2018) reported that military-affiliated actors systematically used Facebook to spread inflammatory content and mobilize public hostility against Rohingya communities (Mozur, 2018). Similarly, BBC (2018) reported that Facebook acknowledged its platform had been used to incite offline violence in Myanmar. International human rights organizations also documented how coordinated networks promoted hate speech and disinformation aimed at justifying military actions and marginalizing minority communities (Amnesty International, 2017).

Although Meta removed numerous military-linked accounts, pages, and coordinated networks beginning in 2018 and expanded these actions following the 2021 coup (Meta, 2021a, 2021b), the long-term effects of these online campaigns continue to influence public perceptions. The Rohingya crisis therefore illustrates how digital platforms can be weaponized by state and non-state actors to construct threat narratives, legitimize exclusionary policies, and facilitate large-scale human rights violations (Romero Garrido, 2022).

Social Media and Myanmar's 2015 and 2020 Elections

Facebook and other platforms became battlegrounds during the 2015 and 2020 general elections. The Carter Center (2016) notes that during the 2015 campaign nationalist monks and USDP activists used social media to urge Buddhist voters to oppose the NLD, warning that a victory would endanger Buddhism and elevate Muslims (Carter Center, 2016). Many posts accused NLD leaders of planning to create a “Muslim Affairs Ministry” or of being foreign agents. These narratives were amplified by pages and groups linked to the Tatmadaw, often employing hate speech and inflammatory images. Vrieze (2015) observes that despite these efforts the NLD won decisively, but the online polarisation laid the groundwork for later crises (Vrieze, 2015). In 2020 pro-military networks recycled similar themes, questioning the legitimacy of the electoral register and alleging that Muslim communities intended to dominate politics (Kamruzzaman, 2020). The recurrence of these themes illustrates how digital strategies were entrenched long before the 2021 coup.

Digital Repression After the 2021 Coup

On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw seized power by arresting elected government leaders and declaring a state of emergency, citing allegations of electoral fraud that were widely disputed by domestic and international observers. Immediately after the coup, the military imposed extensive restrictions on digital communication by ordering internet shutdowns, blocking access to major social media platforms, and restricting the flow of information. These measures were intended to limit public mobilization, suppress political opposition, and control narratives surrounding the military takeover (Access Now, 2021).

The junta also intensified its crackdown on independent media and online expression. Human Rights Watch (2021a) reported that journalists, activists, and civil society members were arrested for publishing or sharing information critical of the military government. News organizations faced raids, license suspensions, and increasing restrictions on their reporting activities (Amnesty International, 2017). At the same time, the military expanded its surveillance capabilities to monitor online discussions and identify individuals involved in anti-coup activities.

Social media became a central arena for both repression and resistance during this period. Mozur et al. (2021) reported that military authorities monitored social media posts, comments, and online networks to identify protest leaders and members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (Mozur et al., 2021). In response to concerns about human rights violations and coordinated disinformation campaigns, Meta removed military-controlled accounts and pages and banned the Tatmadaw and associated state-controlled media organizations from Facebook and Instagram (Meta, 2021b). The company also dismantled networks engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior linked to military interests (Meta, 2021a).

Despite these actions, pro-military narratives continued to circulate through alternative accounts, unofficial pages, and encrypted messaging applications (Paddock, 2018). Supporters of the junta increasingly migrated to platforms with weaker content moderation mechanisms, allowing disinformation and propaganda campaigns to continue operating. As a result, the post-coup period illustrates how digital repression in Myanmar evolved beyond internet shutdowns and censorship to include surveillance, online intimidation, information manipulation, and platform migration strategies.

The Strategic Shift to Telegram

After Meta's bans, many pro-military actors migrated to encrypted messaging platforms. Telegram channels run by figures such as Han Nyein Oo and Kyaw Swar broadcast propaganda, doxed activists and encouraged violence. Because Telegram offers one-to-many broadcasting and limited content moderation, these channels quickly accrued tens of thousands of followers. Meta's February 2021 ban of military personnel exacerbated the shift (Meta, 2021b). BBC (2021) reported that the junta imposed temporary Facebook blocks to accelerate the migration (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2018). The lack of oversight on Telegram underscores the challenges of platform governance: while some companies adopted human-rights policies, others became havens for state propaganda.

Anti-Coup Groups: Digital Resistance and Mobilisation

Despite repression, pro-democracy activists turned the digital sphere into a space of resilience. Civil servants, students and ethnic organisations embraced social media to coordinate strikes and protests. Hashtags such as #SaveMyanmar and #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar reached global audiences and drew diaspora communities into the struggle. Mozur et al. (2021) note that the Civil Disobedience Movement relied on Facebook and Telegram to mobilise tens of thousands of participants. Human-rights abuses were livestreamed and archived, generating international pressure. To evade surveillance, activists increasingly used encrypted apps and pseudonymous accounts. This digital solidarity reveals the double-edged nature of platform technologies: they can empower both authoritarian repression and democratic resistance.

Trends in Digital Resistance (2021–2025)

Between 2021 and 2025, Myanmar's digital conflict developed into an ongoing struggle between the Tatmadaw's surveillance apparatus and the adaptive strategies of civil society. Following the military coup, authorities introduced restrictive digital policies and proposed cybersecurity measures that expanded state surveillance powers and increased penalties for online dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). Digital rights organizations argued that these measures threatened freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information, while also creating significant risks for journalists, activists, and ordinary internet users (Access Now, 2021).

In response to these restrictions, pro-democracy activists adopted a range of digital security practices to maintain communication and avoid surveillance. Encrypted messaging applications, virtual private networks (VPNs), and mirrored websites became important tools for bypassing censorship and preserving access to information. As military control over online spaces intensified, activist groups also shared digital safety guides and cybersecurity training materials through online networks (Human Rights Watch, 2021b). In some cases, cyber-activist groups targeted military-linked websites and digital infrastructure to challenge the regime's information control mechanisms (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The post-coup digital struggle also attracted growing international attention. Governments and international organizations imposed sanctions on military-owned enterprises and called for greater accountability regarding human rights violations. At the same time, civil society groups urged technology companies to strengthen content moderation policies and restrict military-linked disinformation campaigns. According to Topal (2022), Myanmar represents a significant example of contemporary digital authoritarianism, where governments combine

internet restrictions, surveillance technologies, and information manipulation to suppress opposition and maintain political control.

Despite these challenges, digital resistance remained active throughout the period. Myanmar diaspora communities played an important role in fundraising, advocacy, information dissemination, and support for activists both inside and outside the country. Social media platforms and encrypted communication channels were also used to document human rights violations and maintain international awareness of the crisis. These developments demonstrate that although digital repression can restrict civic space, citizens and civil society organizations continue to develop innovative strategies to resist authoritarian control and sustain political activism in the digital era.

Conclusion

Myanmar's journey since 2011 demonstrates how digital technologies are woven into contemporary struggles over power and legitimacy. The Tatmadaw exploited the liberalisation of the telecoms sector to extend its narrative control, portraying itself as the defender of race and religion while demonising minorities and opponents. During elections it harnessed social media to polarise voters; during the Rohingya crisis it weaponised hate speech to justify atrocities; and after the 2021 coup it combined shutdowns, surveillance and propaganda to suppress dissent. Yet digital platforms also empowered citizens to organise mass protests, document abuses and build global solidarity. The contest between repression and resistance has intensified since the coup, with both sides migrating across platforms and adopting new tactics. International technology companies and governments play a crucial role: Meta's bans curbed some pro-military networks, but the persistence of propaganda on less-regulated apps reveals a governance gap. As Myanmar's conflict continues, scholars and policymakers must attend to the evolving relationship between authoritarianism, technology and civil society, recognising that digital resilience remains a vital tool in the pursuit of democracy.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that generative AI technologies were used in revising and formatting this manuscript. The author also used QuillBot for grammar checking, spelling correction, punctuation review, and proofreading purposes. These tool was used solely to improve the clarity, readability, and presentation of the manuscript. The author carefully reviewed and edited all generated suggestions and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and final content of the work. No AI tools were used to generate research findings or conceptual arguments. All substantive analyses and interpretations are the author's own work.

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