

Comment: Is banning VOIP excessive control?

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When the announcement of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) being banned in Burma was issued on 10 March 2011 and signed by Tint Lwin, director of the Ministry of Communications, Posts and Telegraphs, ordinary citizens worried about how to make future international calls. VoIP calls were relatively cheaper compared to landlines or mobiles.

With the ministry warning that people who continue to use these services will be prosecuted, many people dare not use VoIP anymore. Generations of Burmese have suffered from this kind of authoritarian control. People are afraid of being punished for not obeying the law. In fact, in Burma the sole purpose of making laws is so that the government can punish people who do not obey their dictates. People are afraid long before they even consider doing something against the law; they are afraid of being punished unnecessarily. So the purpose of making laws is not so much to provide a law abiding citizenship, but rather to manipulate people's fear.

Since the development of technology, people have found cheaper and more effective ways of using the internet to communicate with each other. Starting from 2000, the number of people who use the internet increased in Burma in the same manner that the laws relating to control of the internet increased. People using VoIP increased as well, since government telephone lines charge around 1000 kyat (USD 1) per minute, while overseas VOIP calls at internet cafes cost around 100 kyat (USD 0.10). Nowadays, millions of Burmese people work outside of the country because of poor income, and many students study abroad because of the poor education system. The average annual salary in Burma is USD 459, which does not allow people to spend a dollar per minute on overseas calls.

If the government wanted more people to use its telephone lines, it would make more sense to make it cheaper, rather than banning the cheaper alternative.

In 2004 the Burmese government announced the Electronic Transactions Law, the aims of which are as follows:

- (a) to support with electronic transactions technology in building a modern, developed nation;
- (b) to obtain more opportunities for all-round development of sectors including human resources, economic, social and educational sector by electronic transactions technologies;
- (c) to recognize the authenticity and integrity of electronic record and electronic data message and give legal protection thereof in matters of internal and external transactions, making use of computer network;
- (d) to enable transmitting, receiving and storing local and foreign information simultaneously, making use of electronic transactions technologies;
- (e) to enable communicating and co-operating effectively and speedily with international organizations, regional organizations, foreign countries, local and foreign government

departments and organizations, private organizations and persons, making use of computer network.

The announcement of 10 March 2011 banning VoIP however, puts lie to this law issued by the States Peace and Development Council.

According to news reports, there was an enquiry by special investigation officers into internet cafés in Sule, Pansodan, Hledan and Kyaukmyaung in Yangon, the country's capital. The internet café owners were asked not to allow VOIP as otherwise action would be taken against them. The officers added that users could also be arrested. People in Yangon however, still use Skype, VZO and Pfingo.

With regard to freedom of opinion and expression, the Television and Video Law (1985), the Motion Picture Law (1996), the Computer Science Development Law (1996), Electronic Transactions Law (2004) and the Printers and Publishers Registration Act (1962) are being used to censor the media. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar states in his report of March 2010 that these laws continue to be used to restrict freedom of expression and association. It is important to note that these laws are in contravention of international law, as well as articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The people in Burma used to say that they do not know the law or are not interested in it as it is not related to their daily life. But when it affects their individual freedoms in using Skype, G-talk and other means of easy communication tools, they talk about it amongst their families and friends. Until such controls are eliminated, there will be a psychological illness in the minds of people. There cannot be genuine social and economic progress in the country if there are no communication tools, no free speech and if fear prevails. Under such conditions, Burma's future will be zero.