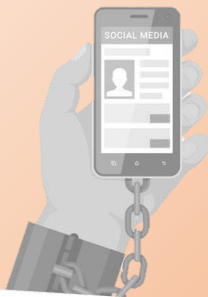
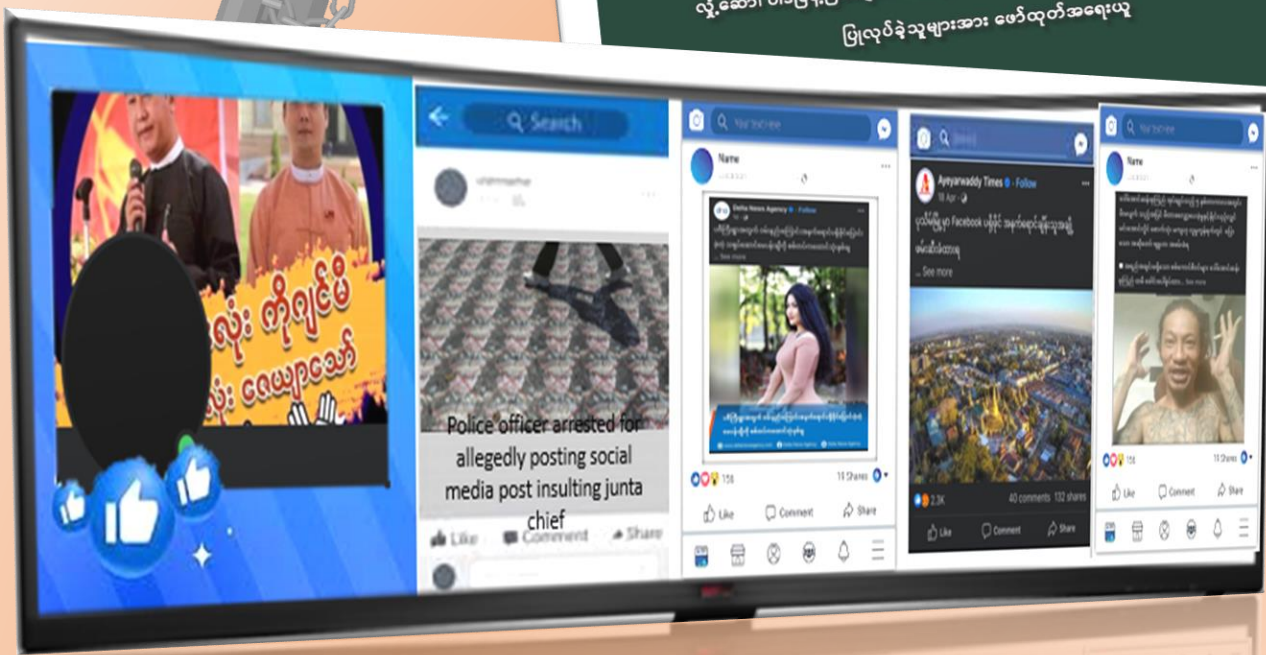


Analyzing freedom of expression online (Facebook social media) in Myanmar post-coup



အကြမ်းဖက်အုပ်စုအဖြစ်ကြေညာထားသော CRPH၊ NUG နှင့် ၎င်းတို့၏ လက်ဝေခံများ၏ လှုံ့ဆော်၊ ဝါဒဖြန့်ဖြူးခြင်းများအား လိုက်ပါလုပ်ဆောင်ခြင်း၊ အားပေးကူညီခြင်းများ ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့သူများအား ဖော်ထုတ်အရေးယူ



June 2023



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Background of Athan

Athan, established by Myanmar's young activists on 15th January 2018, aims to promote freedom of expression on a societal level. Mainly performing research activities, the organization regularly engages in advocacy and capacity building. The organization's broad scope of works includes exploring and recording the laws, customs, traditions, and events that hinder freedom of expression; supporting legislative reforms in line with democratic standards and grounded by conducted research and advocating in different stages and sectors for the full enjoyment of freedom of expression. Athan envisions a society that fully enjoys the freedom of expression as part of the democratic value.

Research Methodology and Challenges

This research report is aimed to study social media users being restricted and fearful from practicing the full right to freedom of expression, and the brutal army's illegal arrests, seizures, and executions as a consequence of political expressions on online platforms that are happening every day throughout the nation. quantitative and qualitative methodologies are merged to acquire data.

This research report is conducted using "Google Survey Form" and interview sessions are held continuously. 28 females, 27 males, and 3 gender-neutral participated in Google Survey form surveying. Among the 58 people who participated, 42 live in urban areas, 12 live in rural areas and 4 live in the countryside. For the interview session, 6 female and 3 male participants were interviewed via online platforms.

The biggest challenge we encountered in compiling this research report was that some divisions in Myanmar were faced with the Mocha cyclone while surveys and interviews were conducted. Telecommunications and internet were cut off in the meantime due to tower damages, and the brutal army is also restricting internet and telecommunication access intentionally in certain areas. Thus, there have been a lot of challenges in contacting participants.



Brief background of freedom of expression on social media (Facebook)

Since the 1962 military coup, freedom of expression has been restricted by laws and full practice has been erased. As Myanmar's social norms derived from the ruling class of strict Eastern feudalism, freedom of expression has been regarded as a rude, suppressive form of communication or reckless behavior and the military restricting it with laws has made people distant from the concept of freedom of expression.

About 40 years later, around the 2010s, there has been widespread use of Facebook within Myanmar youth society. And the exercise of freedom of expression through digital social media (Facebook) among Myanmar people has started.

Losing online freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is stated as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and other declarations. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. United Nations special envoy Frank La Rue said the right to freedom of expression can be practiced online as well¹.

However, there are violations of freedom of expression and oppression towards online freedom of expression on the ground of Myanmar. There have been digital suppressions such as internet blackouts, social media and website bans, application bans, and online surveillance along with the military coup.²

On February 3, three days after the coup, the Ministry of Transport and Communications instructed to ban Facebook momentarily. They also shut down other social media websites as well.³ People

¹ Abraham, S. (2018). First Among Equals? The Role of the State in Facilitating Internet: Access and Protecting the Freedom of Expression Online in the Global South. *Just Security in the Under Governed World*, 352-388.

² OCHR. (2022). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/myanmar-un-experts-condemn-militarys-digital-dictatorship>

³ Voice of America – Burmese. (2021, February 04).



who wrote about opposing military coup on social media, supporting NUG/CRPH, advocating to participate in protests, and funding revolution forces were mainly targeted to arrest and imprison as well as detaining people flagged as personally attacking someone from the army body on social media via Facebook posts. Also, well-known celebrities who stood up to the army and people who commented and supported their posts were targeted and arrested.

In the meantime, news media outlets were revoked, and the army arrested and imprisoned reporters, shut down press offices, and raided publishing houses. On 1st November 2021, the army rectified the “second amendment of Television Law” and added sections that include fines and long-term imprisonment that targeted large media to smaller online news media outlets.⁴

Findings

Facebook is the most-used social media platform in Myanmar. According to a 2022 survey, 98% of social media users in Myanmar are Facebook users. And 33.35% of the total population are social media users and 35% are Facebook users.⁵ However, since February 2021, violations of freedom of expression and oppression worsened as the military started restricting sharing news among users and their freedom of speech in using Facebook to the point where Facebook itself had to encourage users to use the profile lock feature that is only available in some countries.

Therefore, Athan conducted a research survey based on Facebook users to understand how far people can practice freedom of expression online post-military coup. According to survey findings, 60.3% of Facebook users are using the Facebook profile lock feature, and the rest 39.7% are not using that feature at all.

(1) Analyzing restriction of freedom of expression

It can be clearly seen that people from all over the country started expressing their opinions on the military coup in many ways. In effectively expressing these opinions, posting and sharing political opinions, and ideologies on social media platforms such as Facebook become intense. There have

<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/facebook-communication-telecommunication-sociamedia-coup/5764803.html>

⁴ Development Media Group. (2021, November 15)

<https://www.facebook.com/dmgnewsagency/photos/a.466679383484478/2157365711082495/?type=3>

⁵ Digital Portal. (2022). <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-myanmar>



also been online conversations and discussions held to educate people about the current political landscape and revolution ideologies.

First of all, we analyze the civilian ability to discuss political opinions and ideologies post-coup. According to findings, after the military's coup, there have only been 8.7% of people involved in political conversations and discussions, and 35.1% not involved at all.

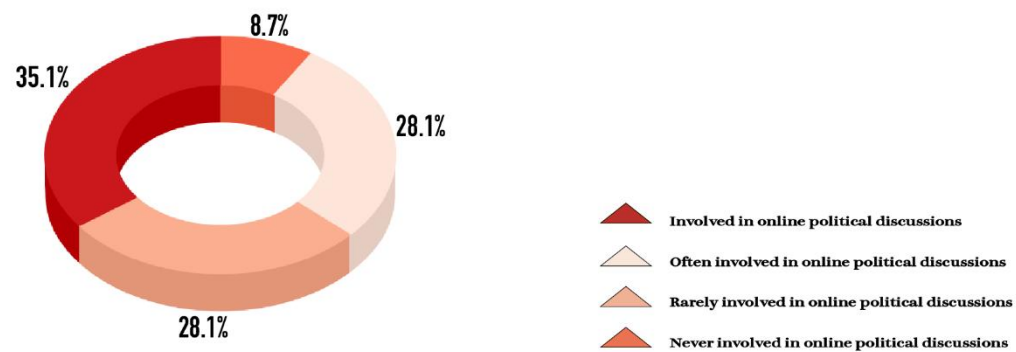


Figure - (1.1) Indicating involvement in online political discussions

As social media platforms become well known along with technology trends and political discussions are popular among internet users in Myanmar, the brutal army started restricting freedom of expression online and continuously oppressing the other hand.

From then, people involved in social media conversations and discussions are measured on the scale of how much they can freely express their political opinions, and the results can be seen as follows.

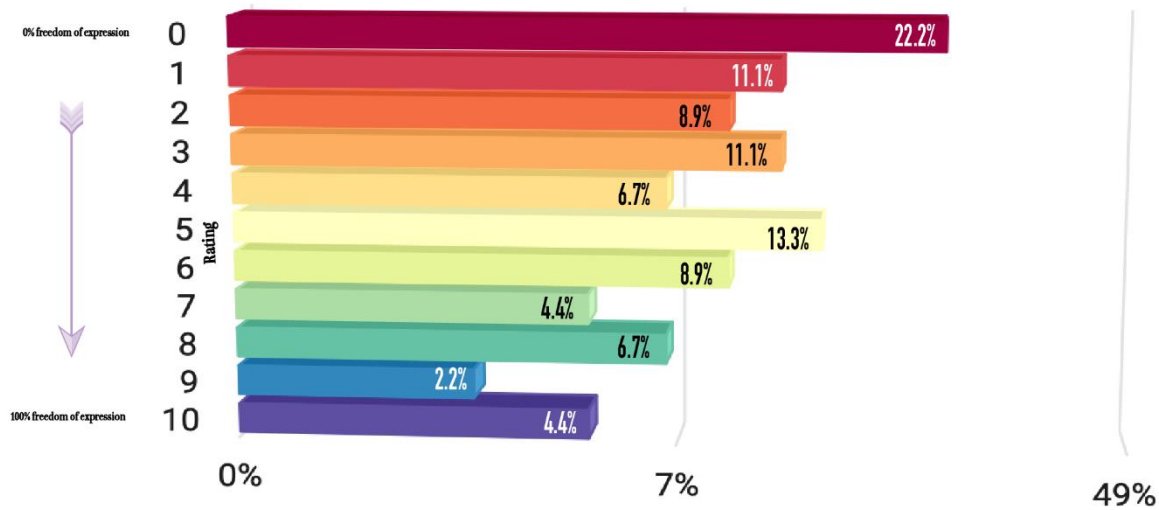


Figure (1.2) Status chart Indicating the ability to freely express political opinions on social media (Facebook) conversations, and discussions.

When analyzing the ability to freely participate and discuss political opinions and ideologies in online conversations or discussions via interviews, a young woman activist from Yangon said ***“I can express a bit but not fully. I am fearful as well. As it is online, you cannot know exactly how safe the platform is. I am fearful that someone might be eavesdropping on what I talk and do”.***

Moreover, people are facing the military and its members surveillance them full-time and committing arrests, imprisonments, and death threats when expressing their opinions on social media (Facebook). Survey results on the fearful state as the consequences of being monitored said 94.6% of respondents are fearful about the military in respect of freedom of expression online. (Figure - 1.3)

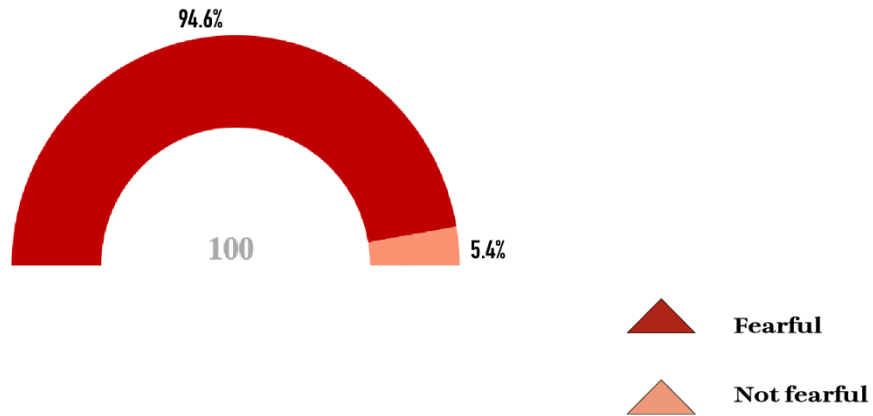


Figure - (1.3) Indicating the fearful state of the military in respect of freedom of expression

We found that Myanmar people omit and limit their expression of political opinions on social media post-military coup. As per the figure, the survey states that 58.9% of respondents always have to omit and limit their expressions. (Figure - 1.4)

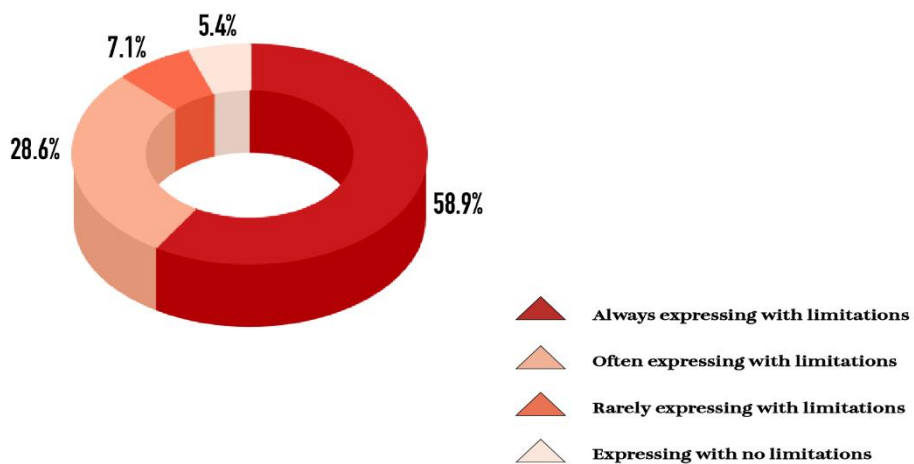


Figure - (1.4) Indicating the state of limitations when expressing about politics



Analysis from interviews shows that most of the respondents are fearful of the military surveillance them. A resident in the Ann region said ***“Some of them have limitations. I do not feel completely free at all. So, I stopped writing since March 2023. Because I do not feel freedom. It is too risky to write about what I want to express. I stopped talking to the media this May. I had to stop because the security threat is on the rise.”*** Survey findings state 82.4% of the respondents answered that freedom of expression in Myanmar is deteriorating in this period and 12.3% answered that there are no changes. (Figure - 1.5)

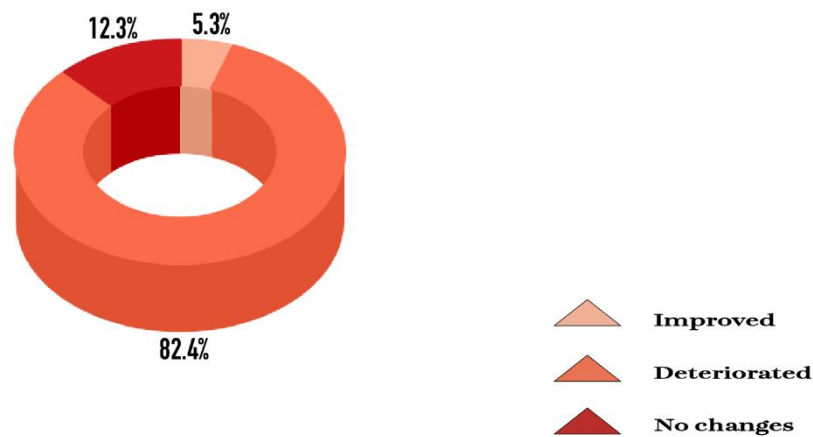


Figure - (1.5) Indicating the state of freedom of speech in Myanmar

The brutal army has restricted freedom of expression in various methods and people lost the right to freely express their beliefs and concepts entirely. A resident woman in Rakhine said as below in the interview about how fearful she is of the consequences of publishing political posts online.

“We completely lost the right to freedom of expression. Even if I damned the effects and expressed my will, there could be a lot of consequences. There could also be problems with the family members. If I consider the safety of my family, I lose the right to freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is not possible in this period. Once I express something, I would be in fear of being arrested.”



Moreover, a young interviewee from Yangon talked about how the military systematically arrested and imprison army-opposing political activists, well-known celebrities, writers, poets, and influencers as an example to control freedom of expression strategically.

54.4% of the respondents have confronted online harassment, threats, and attacks for expressing opinions related to the current political landscape and 45.6% have not confronted those cyber threats. From our analysis, it is obvious that more than half of the survey respondents have confronted online harassment, threats, and attacks for expressing opinions related to politics. Likewise, according to survey data, almost half of the respondents have confronted in-person harassment, threats, and attacks for expressing political opinions online. 58 respondents of the social media freedom survey have rated the freedom of expression on social media platforms in Myanmar as per the following chart. (Figure - 1.7)

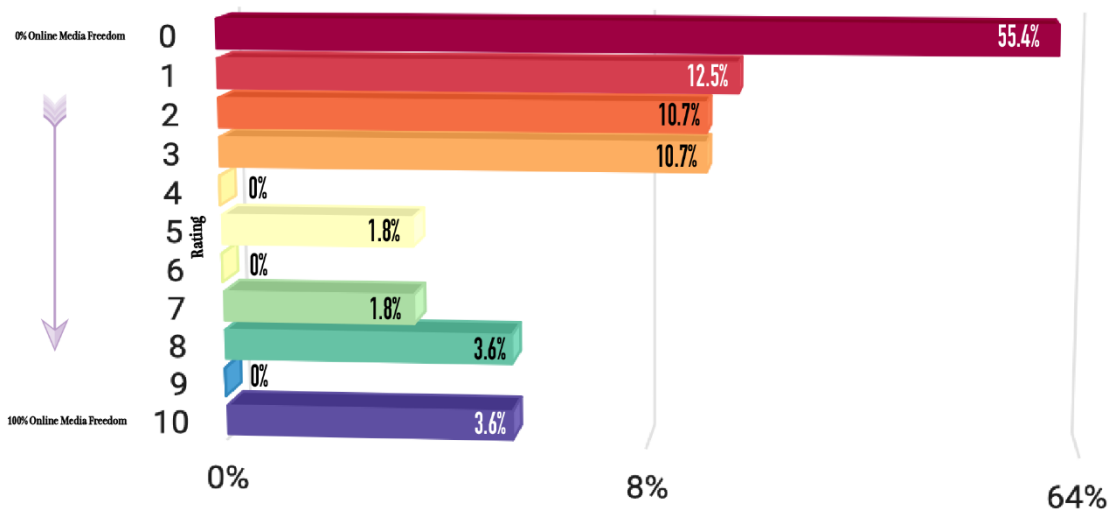


Figure - (1.6) Rating chart indicating freedom of expression level on social media platforms in Myanmar.



(2) Analyzing restriction of Freedom of Expression by laws

The brutal army even restricted changing army-opposing Facebook profiles and frames and with the help of their informants, the brutal army is arresting civilians right inside their own residences and unfairly imprisoning them. Therefore, we studied unjust oppressions by law and follow-up actions in regard to freedom of expression online. An urban citizen commented on this matter.

“I have seen them come and arrest someone at their house. Army lost a chunk of a unit in a battlefield and he posted that news on Facebook in a rejoicing manner. And someone took a screenshot of it and informed the military. Then the police came to the house and arrested him.”

A resident from Myitkyina said about what he experienced in his surroundings.

Survey findings suggest that 82.5% of the respondents have experienced someone from their surroundings being censored (restricted) and even jailed as legal consequences of freedom of expression about their political beliefs and opinion on Facebook. (Figure - 2.1)

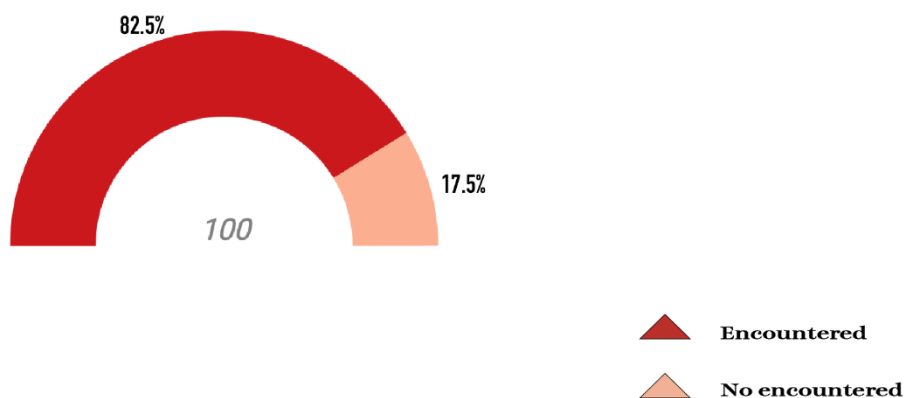


Figure - (2.1) Indicating the state of people who encountered legal consequences of freedom of expression

As the brutal army can search and harm not only themselves but also familiar faces due to freedom of expression on social media platforms, we found that people avoid presenting honest opinions



on social media. 85.9% of the respondents are forced to restrict their freedom of restriction due to the fear of military arrests as stated above. (Figure – 2.2)

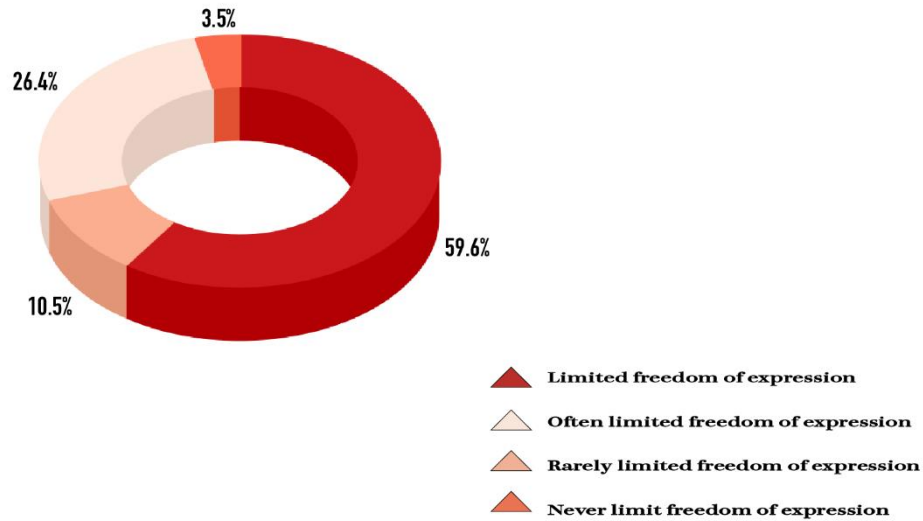


Figure (2.2) Indicating the state of limiting freedom of expression of oneself in fear of military arrest

We studied this situation by conducting interviews and found that most of the respondents are feared. A woman resident in the Rakhine region said as follows in the interview. *“When we talk about politics, we cannot talk about everything. We have to omit certain things based on the situation. It is due to some of the people in the village as well. Sometimes when you are mixed up with someone who has connections to the army-opposite, you might be worried about being searched as technology is getting pretty advanced. That is why we have to control what we express online a bit.”*

(3) Analyzing technological restriction of Freedom of Expression

We continue our study on technological interference and challenges in civilians practicing their rights to freedom of expression. It is significant that the military cut off internet access throughout the nation post-coup.



According to the survey, we found 56.1% of respondents state that they encounter difficulties accessing the internet every time due to internet shutdown (or) interference, and 31.6% state that they often encounter difficulties. (Figure - 3.1)

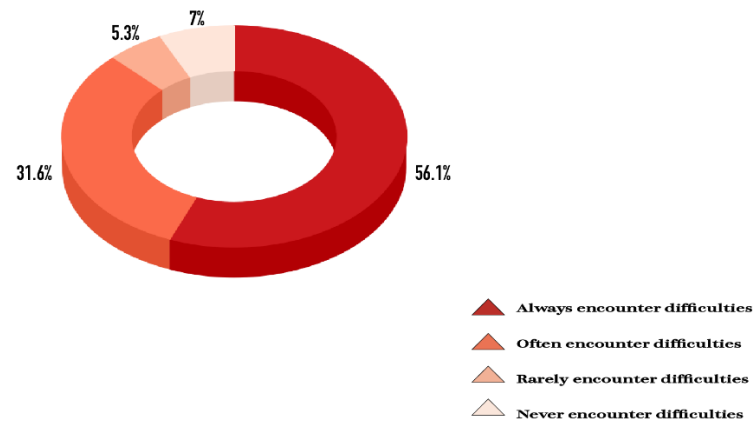


Figure - (3.1) Indicating difficulties in accessing the internet due to internet shutdown (or) interference

Moreover, 31.6% of the respondent state that they encounter difficulties every time they try to access websites due to technological restrictions, and 57.8% state that they often encounter difficulties. (Figure - 3.2)

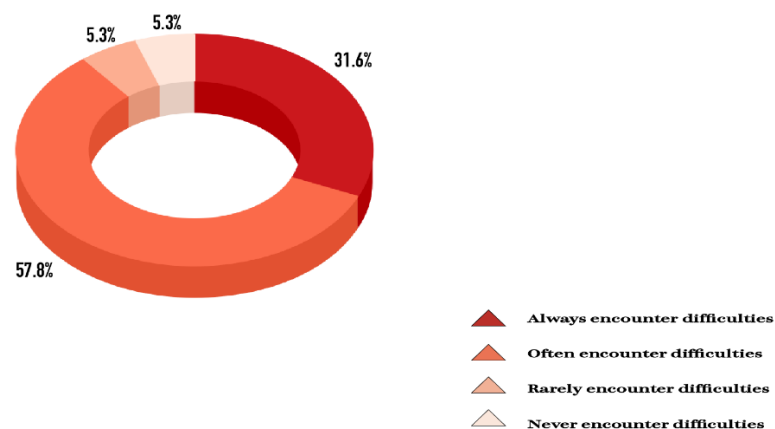


Figure - (3.2) Indicating the state of encountering difficulties accessing websites due to technological restrictions



Conclusion

Freedom of Expression on social media (Facebook) has been completely eradicated with the military coup. Ground information and findings state that information on social media platforms (Facebook) can affect security in real life thus people are reluctant to speak out their opinion on online platforms and every expression someone makes is a threat to his/her safety. There have been house arrests for just a post or a photo on social media (Facebook) and freedom of expression is terribly violated. People avoid posting, sharing about certain matters, and even giving reactions, and comments on politics-related posts as they are worried not only themselves but also family members would suffer the consequences of expressing their opinions online (Facebook).

Freedom of expression is a basic human right worldwide and those rights are protected by laws but in Myanmar, people have to risk their lives, safety and that of family members to practice freedom of expression online. Therefore, various international organizations and activist organizations must approach practical solutions for the people of Myanmar who are resisting fearlessly to behold freedom of expression.



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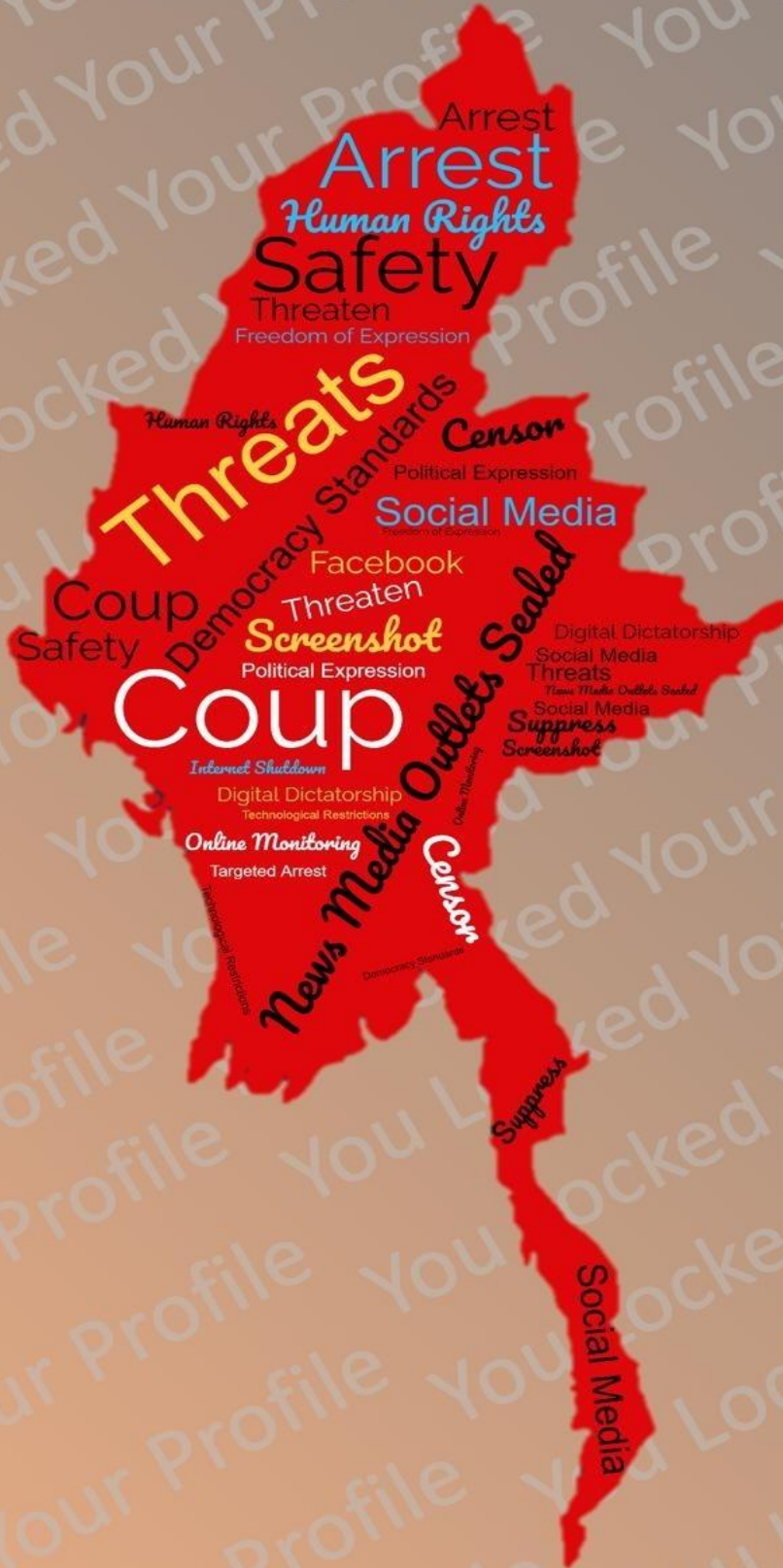
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