

Offline and Online, Protests Are Sweeping Across Asia

Friday 26 March 2021, by [ABRUZZINI Bibbi](#), [SINGH Jyotsna M.](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2021).

From Nepal to India, Thailand to Myanmar, people are taking to the streets - or social media - to demand change.

Once again, hundreds of thousands are taking to the streets and to digital highways. From Kathmandu to Delhi, moving east to [Bangkok](#) and Yangon, a wave of discontent is demanding that human rights be upheld. In Kathmandu, [women march](#) to demand an end to violence and the “deep-rooted patriarchal mindset.” Car horns blare and cooking pots bang in the streets of Yangon, a cacophony calling for the release of [Aung San Suu Kyi](#). In India, demonstrations of unprecedented scope are raging across the country - “[farmer protests](#),” cutting across religion, gender, caste, and income divides for the rights of the most vulnerable and precious, those who provide us with food. In Indonesia, [activists](#) fight against cyber surveillance and stigmatization.

From Nepal to Myanmar, what seem to be movements motivated by separate interests, have one thing in common: They are driven by citizens calling for justice and recognition. They are bottom-up, rising from the roots of society, its foundations, with students, mothers, and farmers, who look into each other’s eyes and remember that despite their differences, they are all equals in their right to protest.

But are they?

Every person has the inalienable right - [a right that cannot be taken away](#) - to take part in a peaceful protest. But we are witnessing a curtailing of this fundamental collective right, with governments instead adopting resistance and violence in the face of activism.

[A recent report by Forus](#), with data from 27 countries, shows that civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and environmentalists are subject to numerous forms of harassment.

“People Will Not Be Silenced”: Protests With a Digital Twist

In recent weeks we have witnessed with our own eyes and ears a climate of growing intimidation, with legal and regulatory restrictions, stigmatization, and personal attacks blossoming in the face of fierce protest - both online and offline.

“Even though the military is trying to arrest people, the number of protesters in Myanmar is multiplying,” the [Asia Development Alliance](#) (ADA) reports. “Let’s gather in millions to take down the dictators,” activist [Khin Sandar](#) writes on Facebook, hugely popular in the country, and which has been used as a channel to [share “counter-propaganda,”](#) tactics and slogans.

Civil disobedience and campaigns against the [military coup](#) of February 1 have been the biggest in decades. Health professionals, students, and workers are demanding the end of the military dictatorship once and for all, with thousands calling for civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi to be

released from detention and the present and future of Myanmar be handed back to civilians.

Concerns are growing, however, over the potential for violence and digital attacks as [anti-coup protesters](#) urge supporters to take to the streets en masse, while military generals deploy troops in major cities. February 28 was the deadliest day yet, with [at least 18 people killed](#) when security forces opened fire on protesters.

“Civil society organizations have had a long experience living and working under military rule and the challenges that it brings,” says Daniel Santos do Carmo of [FONGTIL](#), the Timor Leste NGO Forum. However, “the longer the military dictatorship lasts, the more human rights will be lost in Myanmar,” ADA warns.

Together with the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation, ADA has recently produced a [toolkit on online privacy](#) to protect activists and civil society in the region concerned about internet safety. As social media has emerged as another battleground, going hand-in-hand with recent demonstrations, activists are not only targeted offline, [but also online](#).

A new cybersecurity law proposed by Myanmar’s military, mandates that internet service providers remove online content “causing hate, disrupting the unity, stabilization and peace” of Myanmar. Some proposed offenses carry up to three years in prison and heavy fines. [In a collective letter](#) with more than 160 signatories, civil society across Myanmar decried the bill as a violation of human rights, including “the rights to freedom of expression, data protection and privacy, and other democratic principles and human rights in the online space.”

“The military is trying to stifle the people’s voices by shutting down the internet – a clear violation of the right to freedom of expression. But Myanmar people will not be silenced,” reports the collective Support Myanmar.

The group has developed a [live map](#) for protestors to be aware of police movements, medical coverage. and road blocks. They have also created protest guides on personal and digital safety.

Several governments are justifying internet censorship and [digital state surveillance](#) under the guise of “cyber sovereignty.” The potential for an expansion of the “big brother syndrome” especially in the context of the COVID-19 is raising concerns about civic oppression – with a new digital twist.

In Indonesia, “there have been cyberattacks against activists criticizing government policies in handling COVID-19. The WhatsApp account of a friend and activist was hacked and he was then accused of inciting riots and hate speech. Cyberattacks and hacking attempts have also targeted journalists and their social media accounts,” says Tatat Sukarsa, from the International [NGO Forum on Indonesian Development](#) (INFID).

Based on monitoring by the [Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Networ](#) (SAFEnet), several cases of digital attacks targeting activists, workers, and students have occurred since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Indonesia. These have been in the form of hacked Instagram accounts, takeovers of WhatsApp numbers, attempts to log in to Twitter accounts, and other online threats. According to a recent survey, nearly 70 percent of Indonesians are now afraid to express their opinions online.

Nepal: Women’s Marches and Digital Rights

Alongside the growth of restrictive measures, [civil society has been campaigning](#) to defend its legitimate space in various ways. In Nepal, despite [a tense political climate](#) and civic space further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, women collectives are amplifying peoples’ voices and directly engaging with local communities and constituencies in seeking transformative change.

“How do we make sure that there is no gap between laws and social progress? The policy angle needs to run parallel to the social one, to ensure that boys and girls at a young age are part of the discussion to end the toxic cycle of gender discrimination,” says Jesselina Rana, a 25-year-old activist based in Kathmandu. She is the founder of the social enterprise [Pad2Go](#) that promotes menstrual health in Nepal, and of the digital platform [Nepali Feminist](#), which she founded in 2017, in response to “a lack of safe spaces for young feminists in Nepal to talk about the issues affecting them.”

“The digital space has really giving people the ability to be part of the conversation. Most people put importance on taking the streets and marching, but we often don’t realize that protesting is a privilege. People with disabilities for instance may not always have that privilege,” Rana explains. “The ability of being anonymous on digital platforms is also something really important. I read a tweet recently which said ‘no voices are unheard, they are just not giving the space to be heard’ - and I think social media has given us the ability to take that space rather than waiting for someone to give it to us.”

Today, women’s marches are being organized across Nepal to protest against various incidences of rape and sexual violence cases where no arrests have been made. Protesters are also demonstrating against [a recent government proposal](#) that requires women to seek permission from local government and male members of their families to travel abroad. From Facebook to TikTok, activists are bringing their fight online as well, to voice opposition and propose solutions.

“Digital activism in Nepal is still ‘niche’ for the most part as a result of lack of connectivity and access to the internet in most areas,” Rana says. “Most digital activism still happens in English and a lot of people are now trying to get out information in Nepali and many of our country’s indigenous languages. There is still a lot of work to be done and indeed sometimes digital space can perpetuate the pattern of inequalities that it’s trying to break.”

Digital rights organizations such as [Body & Data](#) are working to increase women and LGBTQ persons’ engagement in digital spaces as a way to promote autonomy and agency. According to Shubha Kayastha, co-founder and executive director of Body & Data, feminist and LGBTQ activists not only bear the brunt of targeted digital threats and harassment, but they are also the ones leading the struggle against the [online violence](#) against them and their communities.

“In a study conducted in Nepal among sexual and gender rights advocates, 88 percent of respondents reported having witnessed someone being subjected to violence on the internet and 52 percent of respondents have experienced such violence themselves. There are also bots and paid accounts that exist online to attack and troll activists, feminists, and progressive thinkers. Such attacks are personalized and their sexuality and bodies are used as battle grounds,” says Kayastha.

The movements popping up in the Asia-Pacific region are both the results of the past and the present movements and geopolitical currents. Citizens want to - move away from oppression and violence to build a “new normal” - one where rights are not something to beg for, but precious elements promoted and protected by everyone. As more generalized, creative, and radical forms of protests arise, what is the way forward?

Bibbi Abruzzini is part of Forus International, an innovative global network of civil society organizations, promoting transformative political, economic and social change.

Jyotsna M. Singh is Regional Coordinator at the Asia Development Alliance (ADA) a groundbreaking regional network, bringing together 30 national civil society organizations representing over 10,000 organizations from South, South East, North East and Central Asia.

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