

Cyberocracy as a Social Movement in The New Burma

Amorisa Wiratri

Abstrak

Cyberocracy adalah istilah untuk menunjukkan gerakan demokrasi yang menggunakan fasilitas internet. Sepanjang sejarah Burma, *Saffron Revolution* adalah salah satu peristiwa demonstrasi yang fenomenal. Demonstrasi tersebut dimotori oleh para biarawan yang selama ini tidak pernah menunjukkan pertentangan dengan pemerintah ataupun pihak militer. Demonstrasi ini juga menunjukkan bagaimana interaksi antara aktivitas politik melalui internet dan gerakan nyata di masyarakat berhasil membuahkan sebuah revolusi.

Kata kunci: *Cyberocracy*, internet, Revolusi Saffron, gerakan sosial

Background

Burma gained its independence from the British on January 4, 1948, (Than, 2005: 3). **The military formally started a coup** in 1962, headed by General Ne Win. In the early 1970s, Ne Win introduced the “*Four Cuts*” policy, which aimed to cut all food, supplies, recruits and intelligence to insurgent groups. This was effectively a scorched-earth policy against villagers in conflict zones (Than, 2005: 3). In 1988, a national pro-democracy uprising forced Ne Win to step down. In response, the military cracked down on the demonstrators, killing an estimated 3000 people throughout the country. Many Burmese student activists fled to ethnic insurgent-held areas in the jungle, where they formed their own pro-democracy organisations, allied with ethnic armies. This event is known as the biggest protest ever in Burma and the protest members are called 88’s generation students.

In the 1990 elections, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won with a landslide victory. The military panicked, not expecting such an embarrassing result, and refused to hand over power. They instead announced that they would form a national convention to draft a new Constitution, using elected representatives, mixed with military appointees.

The military controlled not only the socio-political aspects in Burma, but lack of democracy also affected freedom of expression in the media. The military controlled media and telecommunications, including the Internet. The Internet was introduced to Myanmar in 2000 under strict government restrictions. Thiha (2010: 2) shows that in 2006, there were only 0.12 Internet

users per 100 people, the lowest of the region. Although the number of the Internet users is low, it has had significant impacts, especially in informal political movements since 2006.

Lordet (2011:13) states that now, Burmese Internet users are allocated to three Internet service providers, instead of the two they had. One is reserved for the Burmese Defence ministry, one for the government and one for the public. Under this system, the government will be able to totally or partially block the population's access without affecting government or military connections. This service also will allow the Defence ministry to directly control the Internet traffic at the point of entry into Burma.

However, Saffron Revolution has shown the world about the role of Internet to support and mobilize political movement. The Internet has indeed proven help to mobilize mass. It was not only supported traditional offline social movement actions, such as the classical street demonstrations and made them more transnational, but is also used to set up new forms of online protest activities and to create online modes of existing offline protest actions. By doing so, the Internet has expanded and complemented today's social movement 'repertoire of collective action' (Laer and Aelst, 2009: 231). In addition, they argue (2009: 231) that social movements can be defined as "networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity".

Saffron Revolution

The Saffron Revolution was triggered by the lifting of fuel subsidies on 15 August, leading to a doubling of transportation fees on the same day. Protests began on 19 August 2007, led by prominent activists, member of 88's generation students. Government arrested leaders of protest on 21 August. The footage from NLD network (Astegaad, 2010) also shows how mobile phones, Yahoo Messenger and G-talk had a significant role to spread the information not only within Burma, but also with other Burmese nationals living outside the country. NLD activists used the Internet to mobilise mass support and the monks to conduct further protests against the government's economic handling of the fuel crisis.

The government tried to stop the monks' protest in Pakoku using military power, injured three young monks. This news was spread rapidly through the Internet and mobile phone as NLD activists informed their networks and monk leaders in the regional *sangha*, the Buddhist community (Hlaing 2008: 134). NLD activists and the monks held talks, resulting in the monks demanding an apology by the deadline of September 17. They threatened to hold *patam nikkujjana kamma* (a boycott to receive alms from family members of the armed forces) if government did not issue the formal (Hlaing 2008: 130).

However, the government refused to apologize and protests began again on the 17 September. At first, only a small number of monks took part in the rally, **but it grew bigger and bigger after news spread, and the monks and democratic activists came together.** Hlaing (2008: 136) argues that it was easier for monks to mobilize their fellow-monks, because they start with friends within their own monasteries and reach to the broader networks that they have. **In addition, many people in Rangoon joined the march with monks as a silent protest against the government.**

One of the surprising moves occurred on September 22, 2007, when a group of monks along with the crowds gathered in front of the house of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League of Democracy (NLD) and the winner of 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. A few minutes later, she appeared behind the line of anti-riot police and paid respect to the monks. It was her first appearance in public within 4 years (Astegaad, 2010). **A few hours later, the pictures of her appearance went viral on the Internet through blogs and later were picked up by news agencies.** It marked the beginning of the Saffron Revolution and the beginning of the changing role of monks in Burma. This was the first time monks had taken a political role.

The monks traditionally never had any involvement in all political matters. Furthermore, they always supported government and the ruling military regime. However, the Saffron Revolution has shown the world the changing position among monks in Burma. It has also shown that there are divisions between monks. Hlaing (2008: 134) states that there are groups of monks who are pro government and refused to join the protest, while other groups of monks oppose the military regime and mobilized the protests by collaborating with pro-democratic activists.

The demonstrations escalated and peaked on 24 September, by which time, more than 100,000 protesters were involved. Women human rights defenders of Burma (2007: 2) contend that the international media has shown the shocking images of the regime's brutal crackdown on the peaceful demonstrations on 26 and 27 September. The toll of killed protesters, including monks, reached hundreds. At least 3,000 monks and civilians were detained and tortured. It was reported that the regime ordered doctors at hospitals not to give any treatment to those wounded during the crackdown. Women human rights defenders of Burma (2007: 2) added that there were secret reports sealed off by heavily armed guards about an undetermined number of burning bodies at a crematorium situated at northeast of Rangoon. According to the report, the burning started on the night of Friday, September 28, a few days after the regime began cracking down on the Buddhist monks and civilians demonstrating peacefully. There have been reports that some of the bodies were still alive, including a pregnant woman. Women human rights defenders of Burma (2007: 3) added that according to AAPP (Association

for Assistance of Political Prisoners), on the Saffron Revolution, at least 19 women have disappeared, and 131 women protestors, including 6 nuns have been arrested by the regime.

The government imposed a dusk till-dawn curfew on the 25th and prepared for a crackdown. The government took a strong action following further protests on 26 September and the Internet was made incapacitated on 28 September. Throughout the revolution, up to date news was provided by international news agencies through blogs and footages that were presented in many television news programs around the world, including the BBC news (Thiha 2010: 2; Astegaad, 2010).

One of the footages is Burma video journalist (vj) with title, "Reporting from Closed Country", made by Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a multimedia organization that provides independent news coverage to citizens of Burma living under military rule and to the international community. In the Saffron Revolution, as the demonstrations escalated, the Burmese military prohibited coverage by foreign journalists. Without any coverage by foreign media, and silence and misinformation from state run media, DVB publicized the Saffron revolution to broad segments of the population of Burma and to the world at large. In that time, DVB reporters shot footage on hidden digital cameras and sent it on foot over the border to the DVB office in Thailand or over the Internet to DVB Head-quarters in Oslo. DVB's Oslo studio, in turn, edited the coverage into radio and television reports to be broadcast back into Burma. At the end of September 2007, audiences in Burma and elsewhere watched in horror as the army clubbed and used tear gas on protestors; in images very shocking for the country's majority Buddhist population, this same treatment was used on monks, who were beaten, defrocked, and even killed. During this period, there were also mass arrests of 3,000 to 4,000 protestors, and forced detention of thousands of monks during raids on monasteries (Pidduck 2010: 476).

Furthermore, Preetam Rai, a Southeast Asia editor of Global Voices Online in (Chowdhury 2008: 9) noted that it was surprising to see new blogs sprouting up [in Burma] in the initial stages of the protests and posting images, etc. For example, kids were smart enough to post anonymously and tech savvy enough to use alternative posting methods when the blogger.com domain was blocked. Bloggers from across the world flooded the global blogosphere with images, audio, and video from Burma. Besides, online news sites such as Irrawaddy.com quickly started compiling these images to form coherent visual supplements to their news and opinion sections about the events in Burma. During the Saffron Revolution, the major source of information was amateur video, taken by ordinary citizens, instead of that created by professional journalists. Most traditional news outlets, including the Associated Press, Reuters, CNN, and BBC regularly ran grainy video and

images from citizen journalists and even tourists who were eyewitnesses on the ground (Chowdhury 2008: 9).

Andrew Chadwick in Chowdhury (2008: 9) argues that the Internet has allowed for easier organization of international campaigns. He points out that in Burma case, due to severely limited Internet access inside Burma, much of the cyber activism surrounding democracy in Burma has originated outside the country with links to locally based activists. Moreover, Preetam Rai in Chowdhury (2008: 9) who has been closely following the Burmese blogosphere for the last two years, commented:

The online population in Burma comes mostly from the bigger cities and mostly students and young professionals. Their blogs are generally about popular culture, technology and life in general and one would not expect political content. Once in a while some of these bloggers would touch on politics but they would always use vague terms and quickly change topics if the discussion becomes heated. Most people involved in anti-government postings were Burmese exiles.

Ethan Zuckerman in Chowdhury (2008: 9) supports “Cyber activism inside a country can work if there is not a high degree of fear. In Burma, people are generally terrified about writing against the government due to the numerous cases of arrest and torture”. This included the more than three hundred thousand members of the Facebook group ‘Support the Monks’ Protest.’ To drum up support and awareness among bloggers before the event, an International Bloggers’ Day for Burma, a ‘blog blackout’ day, was organized on October 4. Bloggers that took part did not write posts that day and displayed banners on their blogs with only the words ‘Free Burma’ (Chowdhury 2008: 11).

Chouliaraki (2008: 329-330) states that transnational media play the role of agents of symbolic power. Symbolic power refers to the capacity of the media to selectively combine resources of language and image in order to present distant suffering as a cause of emotion, reflection and action for Western media audiences. In the global media age, the symbolic power of the media to represent suffering reformulates these issues into a crucial ethical and political challenge: the extent to which satellite media enable the expansion of moral imagination beyond existing communities of belonging, national or regional.

The use of symbolic power throughout the global media could be clearly seen in the Saffron Revolution, where the media spread footage about the brutality of military against the monks. Chouliaraki (2008: 341) adds that in Saffron Revolution,

“There were two symbolic elements contributed to the construction of this story as an emergency: (i) the citizen-generated imagery of the peaceful demonstrators *vis-à-vis* the brutal violence of the state army, which invoked both empathy for the suffering yet defiant monks and denunciation against the perpetrators of their suffering; and (ii) the intertextual chains of this imagery across types of media, from mobile phones to broadcasting and to internet blogs and websites, which not only expanded the public visibility of the events but further contextualized them in powerful discourses of resistance against the military junta”.

Moreover, Chowdury (2008: 15) argues that the Saffron Revolution shows that transnational networks successfully mobilized to pressure foreign governments to pass sanctions and to publicly condemn the Burmese government. In 2007, looser coalitions such as the Facebook group in support of monks were also organized online but they were not able to prevent the forceful shutdown of either the protests or the Internet. However, a unique aspect of Burmese transnational mobilization is that individual bloggers and digital activists worked together (Chowdury, 2008: 15). This combination of online and offline groups acting together is likely to have a more significant and sustained impact than purely online movements, which may have a more limited attention span.

Scholars around the world have noted on this situation as a new era in the Burmese political movement, a new media and the beginning of a new revolution through the Internet. Until the government **shut down the Internet** on 28 September, Burmese blogosphere played a crucial role in providing news, photos, and delivering campaign messages from different organizations. In addition, Youtube also helped spreading the footage of the monks’ protest, by using new media **bypasses traditional gate-keeping mechanisms and enables** the world to watch spectacles of violence otherwise inaccessible to the media (Chouliaraki 2008: 331). However, Katz and Lai argue that the role of new media is:

Not big enough to really influence the economy or politics, but big enough to let people care about what is happening... I believe, for young people, blogs and social bookmarks and You-Tube start to replace traditional media (personal communication) (2009: 105)

Chowdury (2008: 7) argues that this new kind of media has offered more possibilities for resistance rather than traditional media that fully controlled by the state through military regime. Thiha (2010: 4) contends that the spread of information through blogs during the Saffron Revolution shows distinction in the aim of bloggers in the Saffron Revolution, the bloggers’s aim was to promote, support and initiate revolutions under pro-democratic groups. The

cyber media has functioned not only as an agent to spread news, but also an agitator of revolutionary social movements. Fuchs adds that “cyberprotest as an emerging field of social movement research that reflects the role of alternative online media, online protests, and online protest communication in society” (2006: 275).

Analysis

The Saffron Revolution proved to the world that “theoretical concepts of characteristics of information and communication technologies in general and cyberprotest in particular” provide a foundation for “community building, the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, digital divide and social inequalities and the influence of globalisation on local communities and their contribution to the global public sphere” (Neumayer and Raffl 2008: 1).

In reality, global activism through digital social networks is mostly initiated by elite class society, which is able to organize activism, discussions and participation using Internet. Chowdury (2008: 9) states that the online population in Burma comes mostly from the bigger cities and mostly are students and young professionals. It is true that the Internet users in Burma are dominated by middle class society that could buy personal computer and pay Internet services, which is accounted in very small numbers. Neumayer and Raffl (2008: 9) argue that people all across the globe are excluded from possibilities offered by the Internet and related technologies because of imbalanced power relations, lack of purchasing power and hence exclusion from the process of shaping technologies or commodities, lack of relevance for the market, access, skill or capabilities.

Furthermore, I agree with Chowdury (2008: 11) statement that it is still debatable whether an international protest of this scale would have been possible without the Internet. While there is no strong evidence that these protests have actually led to any major policy changes, it is possible that they have created global awareness about Burma and may have prompted certain political leaders to take a more proactive and explicit stance against the Burmese regime. In support, Danitz and Strobel (2000: 131) contend that although the role of the Internet is important, it is not a replacement for other forms of interaction and communication, but it is a powerful supplement. Traditional face-to-face lobbying is still more effective than computers. In addition, using the Internet has inherent limitations for grassroots activists. Its use is limited to those who are accessible to the technology, and its openness allows information to be manipulated by those holding opposing points of view.

Benedict Anderson’s theory in *Imagined Communities* (1983) shows of common ground through shared ideologies or interests can be applied to cyberspace-communities as well (Neumayer and Raffl 2008: 5). In Anderson’s

terms we can talk about an *Imagined Community* that shares a common ideology or idea, although the members do not know each other personally. "Sharing common values and symbols make actors cooperate and act together in virtual space as well as in real life" (Neumayer and Raffl 2008: 5). It is clearly seen in the Saffron Revolution that the combination between the virtual sphere of Facebook, Youtube, blogs and other electronic media, and the use of traditional media, politicians and activists in real life really works out for the successful social movement.

In addition, Faris and Etling (2008: 83) argue that the Internet is most effective in supporting political processes that draw upon widespread participation of citizens, such as elections, grassroots movements, and participatory media. This naturally follows from the sharp drop in the costs of disseminating information and online organizing. However, consolidated democracies are composed of much more than effective involvement of citizens. The Internet does not have an obvious or significant impact on critical attributes such as civilian control of the military, a supreme constitution, protection of minorities, and freedom of religion. These intra-governmental processes exactly what is most needed in many countries around the world and appear to be immuned to the transformative power of digital tools.

According to Appadurai (1990), we can assume that mass media and the Internet create a new kind of nationalism that is no more confined to national boundaries (Neumayer and Raffl 2008: 10). In addition, political actions or decision-making processes on a local scale, or in particular parts of the world, can trespass national boundaries and rapidly acquire worldwide recognition or foster activism. In general, in Saffron Revolution, the role of Internet strengthens the global networking within pro-democratic activism and builds the new kind of nationalism, which includes not only Burmese but people around the world as well, to support the global activism movement.

Conclusion

All in all, Burma, which is under the dictatorship of the military for years, has entered a new phase of globalization since the use of Internet in 2006. Saffron revolution is one of the concrete examples in Burma of how Internet has significant role in the social movement and in showing the world the condition of the contemporary Burma. It also showed the monks' role and position within Burma's political situation. Saffron Revolution has put on view that current social movement in Burma is not only mobilized by activists in the real world but is also mobilized through the cyber world. Both of them are proven to make a successful protest against the military regime. It is still unclear whether this kind of movement will give greater impact to the political situation in Burma, but it is no doubt that the Revolution strengthens the global networking in pro-democratic movement. ●

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