



SCAM BALLOTS, SILENT NETWORKS

How an engineered election and controlled information space lock in military rule—and why it matters for the region



EDITOR'S NOTE:

“Ballots Under Bandwidth Control”

Myanmar’s generals are preparing an election while tightening control over the nation’s information space. These are not two parallel tracks; they are one strategy. The ballot is staged inside an environment where communication is filtered, pro-democracy parties’ voices are muted, observers are constrained, and citizens risk punishment for speaking freely. The result is an appearance of normalcy without genuine competition.

This special issue explains, in plain language, how the playing field is shaped before, during, and after polling; why the outcome cannot credibly reflect the public will; and how the same

approach is spreading across borders, complicating humanitarian response and fuelling crime–conflict economies. It offers practical guardrails for diplomatic engagement: how to judge claims of legitimacy, how to protect open communication as a condition for dialogue, and how to calibrate sanctions and assistance to avoid harm to civilians.

Elections conducted under restricted bandwidth cannot bestow democratic legitimacy. Acknowledging that fact—and responding accordingly—will help safeguard the people of Myanmar and mitigate the risk of broader instability.

THE SCRIPT: FROM BALLOTS TO BANDWIDTH

“Set the stage, then call it a vote.”

BEFORE THE VOTE. Military authorities narrow the information space by curbing tools people use to reach independent news and to organise safely. From mid-2024 onward, [reports](#) describe nationwide restrictions on virtual private networks alongside police checks and fines—measures that shrink trusted channels for coordination, whistleblowing, and real-time reporting.

When ballots are held inside a managed information space—constrained before, steered during, and punitive after—the outcome cannot credibly reflect free choice.

RULE BY REGULATION. In January 2025, [a new cybersecurity law](#) obliged service providers to keep user records for years, comply with removal orders, and penalise unlicensed circumvention tools. In effect, what citizens read, share, and say online can be mapped back to them offline—raising the personal cost of journalism, activism, and everyday commentary.

DURING THE VOTE. Rather than an obvious blanket shutdown, connectivity is kept largely “on” while the most sensitive routes—social platforms, messaging apps, livestreams—are quietly slowed or switched off where they matter most. [A major 2025 investigative leak](#) about the imported control system indicates it can single out particular services, places, and user groups, enabling discreet steering during protests and polling.

AFTER THE VOTE. Enforcement follows the trail. [Civil-society reviews and local reporting](#) describe dashboards that tie sessions to subscribers and locations, enabling targeted detentions and legal action in the days that follow. The message lands quickly: participation carries risk—discouraging protest and locking in the announced result.

DEMOCRATIC LIFE UNDER GLASS

“Participation without protection isn’t participation.”

CIVIC SHRINKAGE. When people [cannot organise safely or reach trustworthy information](#), they hesitate. Meetings get smaller, community pages go quiet, and volunteers stay home. Turnout falls not because views have changed, but because the personal cost of showing up has risen.

Elections require the freedom to speak, organise, and compete. When those freedoms are conditioned or criminalised, the ballot becomes a ceremony, not a choice.

ONE-SIDED COMPETITION. In [a healthy contest](#), every voice can reach the public. Here, some voices carry and others are muffled. The evening news looks calm, the airwaves sound balanced, but the field has been tilted in ways that are hard to see and harder to challenge. The result resembles a design more than a decision.

MEDIA ATTRITION. Independent outlets face a steady squeeze—[blocked access](#), [legal threats](#), and financial pressure. Editors spend more time managing risk than reporting news. Audiences, unsure what is safe to read or share, drift toward state-aligned sources or say nothing at all.

COLD FEAR, WARM COMPLIANCE. People learn that what they read, post, and forward [can be traced back](#) to them. The knowledge alone changes behaviour: jokes are left unsent, criticism is saved in drafts, and public life grows thinner by the week. Silence becomes a habit—and a policy outcome.

READING THE “SCAM ELECTION”

“What credible elections require—and what’s missing.”

CAN THE OPPOSITION CAMPAIGN AND ORGANISE SAFELY?

A real contest needs room to meet, speak, and travel—online and offline—without fear. When key channels for [outreach are blocked or risky to use](#), candidates and volunteers retreat to private spaces, and ordinary supporters keep their heads down. Campaigns shrink to whispers. The answer is **no**.

IS THE PRESS FREE TO REPORT? Voters deserve clear facts and many voices. If [reporters face pressure](#), [editors face legal threats](#), and platforms are muted or switched off at sensitive moments, the public record narrows. Rumour fills the gaps; scrutiny fades. The answer is **no**.

ARE RULES NEUTRAL AND KNOWABLE? [Trust depends on rules](#) that are the same for everyone—and applied the same way. When new regulations tilt the field, when registration and speech are policed

unevenly, and when penalties land on some and not others, the rulebook becomes an instrument, not a safeguard. The answer is **no**.

CAN OBSERVERS SEE THE SAME COUNTRY CITIZENS LIVE IN?

[Independent eyes](#) help separate claim from fact. If communications slow or change during polling, if access is constrained, and if the view offered to observers differs from what voters experience, confidence collapses. The answer is **no**.

IS MYANMAR SECURE ENOUGH FOR A NATIONWIDE VOTE?

No. Fighting persists across multiple regions, with roughly [3.6 million people displaced](#) into late 2025; authorities impose movement restrictions, access is frequently denied, and new displacement is reported each month. In these conditions, citizens, parties, and observers cannot move or communicate safely—making a credible nationwide election implausible.

Where these answers lean “no,” the ballot is ceremony, not choice. Post-poll claims of legitimacy cannot carry weight when the contest was staged on a managed field, with the voices of opponents softened, the press supervised, the rules bent, and independent witnesses kept at arm’s length.

WHY THE REGION SHOULD CARE

“When borders harden for information, people pay the price.”

HARDER HUMANITARIAN WORK. In emergencies, minutes matter. When calls don’t go through and messages slow, responders lose the picture they need to act, families wait longer for help, and small delays become dangerous. After Myanmar’s March 28, 2025 earthquake, communications restrictions hampered relief and clouded situational awareness; [UN updates](#) through May–June flagged ongoing access challenges as needs rose.

FRICTION WITH NEIGHBOURS. Governments under pressure reach for blunt tools: cutting power to border towns, restricting cross-border telecom links, or tightening checkpoints. [These steps](#) strain relations, complicate trade and aid, and too often fall hardest on civilians who had no say.

CRIME–CONFLICT LOOPS. Scam compounds, forced labour, and trafficking prosper where scrutiny is weakest. [UN analysis](#) describes these centres as a growing regional threat, while US actions in September 2025 sanctioned operators tied to hubs such as Shwe Kokko—evidence that organised crime is exploiting controlled information spaces to target victims across borders.

COPY-AND-PASTE CONTROL. The model travels. [Recent reporting on leaked materials shows](#) Myanmar is part of a wider export of control systems to multiple countries, hardening “information borders” and making regional crisis management slower and less transparent.

A country that controls its networks too tightly exports instability: slower aid, stronger criminal enterprises, and sharper diplomatic tensions. Keeping channels open is not only a domestic obligation—it is a regional safeguard.

SIGNALS FOR EMBASSIES AND MISSIONS

“What to watch before, during, and after polling.”

BEFORE. Look for bursts of street checks, fines, or arrests linked to VPN use; abrupt rule changes for platforms; and sudden loss of access to independent outlets. In mid-2024, Myanmar’s coup leaders intensified [VPN blocks with on-the-spot inspections and penalties](#), while major platforms faced restrictions—early warning signs that the information space is being managed ahead of a vote.

DURING. Watch for unexplained slowdowns or glitches on social and messaging apps near polling places; selective access for domestic and international media; and complaints from observers about connectivity. [Recent leak-based reporting](#) indicates the capability to target specific services and user groups—precisely the kind of selective steering that can mask interference while keeping the network “on”.

AFTER. Track targeted detentions and investigations tied to online activity; legal orders compelling companies to hand over user records; and intimidation of journalists and activists. Myanmar’s [2025 cybersecurity law](#) formalised multi-year data retention and penalties for unlicensed circumvention, enabling post-poll reprisals built on digital traces.

ACROSS BORDERS. Flag unusual routing or blocking that disrupts [humanitarian agencies’ communications](#) and any signs that neighbouring governments are adopting similar playbooks. [UN updates](#) around the March 2025 earthquake noted continuing access constraints for relief operations, while investigations show the same control model being exported across the region.

A tight grip on networks before, during, and after polling is a strong indicator that the ballot is being staged, not contested—and that the risks extend beyond one country’s borders.

CONCLUSION

lections held inside a managed information space cannot speak for the people. A principled diplomatic stance—grounded in open communication, verifiable facts, and shared standards—offers the best protection for Myanmar’s citizens and the surest path to lowering regional risks. Consistency on these basics is not only a matter of values; it is a practical safeguard for peace and stability.