



## THE INTERNET AND BURMA: A NEW TOOL FOR NONVIOLENT CHANGE

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Perhaps the most important feature of the telecommunications revolution and the Internet is its ability to dramatically reduce the cost while simultaneously increasing the sBurma may be the first international movement for nonviolent change in which the Internet has been the movement's tool of choice for those organizing outside of the Southeast Asian nation.

The Internet has allowed them to establish a virtual community intent on engaging in cyberdiplomacy to nonviolently pressure the current military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, SLORC, to step down and allow the democratically elected officials to take office.

The Internet was originally used, and continues to be used today, like a crowbar to pry open the very closed, highly secretive and tightly controlled nation by creating an information-rich highway to the world. The road may have four lanes out of Burma and only one narrow lane in, but it has allowed the global community a glimpse into the real events and happenings inside of Burma and occasionally allowed information to leak back into the country via radio broadcasts and traditional mediums through porous borders.

The activists who are working on the pro-democracy Burma campaign can be found concentrated in the border regions of India and Thailand, in Australia, Japan and Europe and a much larger concentration of activists are working from the United States and Canada. Their vehicles are the [BurmaNet](#), which is a news and information list server and the [Free Burma Coalition](#) which is a network of activists complete with Web pages, chat rooms, news and information, e-mail lists, examples of legislation and student protest campaigns, etc.

A good example of how the Internet can be used to the advantage of a nonviolent campaign for change would be the role it played in the passing of a Massachusetts bill to impose sanctions on companies doing business inside of or with Burma. Massachusetts has no Burmese constituency to speak of, yet they are the first state in the nation to pass such a sweeping anti-SLORC message. This illustrates how the Internet can be used to create geographically dispersed networks for nonviolent action, even when there is no locally concentrated constituency, as there was during the anti-apartheid movement directed at South Africa in the 1980s.

Numerous electronic-mails, enhanced by traditional lobbying techniques, ensured passage of the legislation, which caused several large companies to pull out of Burma in order to keep their state contracts. Apple Computer cited the legislation as their sole reason for divesting. Currently, the Bay State is considering similar sanctions legislation for Indonesia and East Timor based on the success of the Burma bill. The Burma legislation has brought criticism from the European Union and Japan, who have

promised to take the case to the World Trade Organization if the Federal Government does not reign in the wayward state.

Massachusetts Representative Byron Rushing, an advocate of the Burmese sanctions as well as the state's legislation against South Africa in the 80s says Massachusetts declared independence before the rest of the nation and has a history rich with progressive measures.

This campaign more than any other in the Burma movement displays how cyberdiplomacy was used to pass legislation that in effect moves states into the arena of foreign policy. A policy that undermined that of the United States Government and contributes to the growing question of the future of the Nation-State system.

Burma can be best described as a largely closed society, since SLORC's appearance on the scene. The regime has passed a law to make it illegal to own unregistered computers, fax machines, modems and software. Cellular technology has not taken hold to date, and there is no real technological infrastructure. However, SLORC is in a precarious position as they try to modernize the country to attract foreign investment yet keep absolute control over technology and information.

SLORC's initial response to the activist's cyberattack was slow, but recently they have hired an American firm to produce a web page chock full of government censored news items and they allegedly hired a former Burmese embassy official to engage in cyberdebate on behalf of the government. But SLORC cannot stop the debate and information flows on Burma now circling the globe. All it can do is add its voice to the debate.

During this study, it has become apparent that the advantages of the Internet in nonviolent campaigning go beyond networking, cost-effective methods, lobbying and providing information to fuel the propaganda war against a dictatorship. Added advantages include the teaching of skills that are essential to building a democracy such as consensus building, assembly, safe-debate and first amendment privileges, writing resolutions and legislation and pressuring governmental bodies to pass it and all this was done in a foreign language.

In conclusion, it appears that the Internet has significantly enhanced the nonviolent movement for democracy in Burma, providing lessons that could be used in other like campaigns against hierarchical repressive regimes.