

CHIANG MAI — on October 18, Thein Soe, the chief of Burma's Union Election Commission (UEC), announced that the international media would not be allowed to report on the country's upcoming elections.

The reason, local media quoted him as saying, was that foreign media agencies already had correspondents in-country to cover the polls. Even then, no photography or filming would be allowed inside the polling stations, on the pretext that this might prevent voters from "casting their votes freely."

The announcement, made less than a month ahead of the country's November 7 election, came as little surprise. In its 2010 Press Freedom Ranking, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) ranked Burma 174th out of 178 countries – above only Iran, Turkmenistan, North Korea and Eritrea. Domestic media have long been cowed by an efficient mechanism of censorship and few observers were expecting much change ahead of the country's first election in two decades.

In fact, as the election draws closer, media insiders say foreign reporters are likely to face a tightened range of restrictions on their access to the country and their ability to get their stories out. An early sign of the crackdown came in March, when CNN's Southeast Asia correspondent Dan Rivers was deported from the country 24 hours after arriving on a press visa to cover the annual Armed Forces Day military parade in Naypyidaw.

One Rangoon-based journalist said that unlike recent events – such as the 2007 monks' protests and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis the following year – the run-up to the election was a "carefully managed process," featuring a range of visa and information controls. In addition to the suspension of the visa-on-arrival service on September 1, the source said, the government has begun refusing new work visas for some foreigners—particularly NGO workers and teachers—cracked down on visa overstays and started ensuring foreign workers are correctly registered at addresses.

"Special Branch staff are filming almost every political event so it makes it very difficult for foreign correspondents and freelance journalists to work here, even if they can get a visa," the source said. (This correspondent was refused a tourist visa from the Burmese embassy in one Southeast Asian country, which delayed the processing of the visa application indefinitely due

to “some things happening in Myanmar.”)

Toe Zaw Latt, Thailand Bureau Chief for the *Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)*, a Norway-based exile media group, said Burmese internet access slowed to a crawl in Rangoon last week and predicted it would do so until after election day. “[The government’s] already started preparing,” he said. “The closer to the election, the more restrictions you have to expect—not only internet, but the reach of telephone signals. Of course, in some critical areas there might not be any internet access at all.”

Information controls have shown signs of increasing sophistication since the mass protests that brought Rangoon and other Burmese cities to a standstill in September 2007. Though the government attempted to impose internet restrictions about one week after the protests broke out, the now-iconic images—of streets thronged with maroon-clad monks holding their alms bowls aloft—had already reached the outside world.

“The government didn’t realise the power of the image. Burma was all over the world in the international news,” Toe Zaw Latt said. “Everybody knew about Burma’s human rights violations, but no one had ever seen it.”

Andrew Marshall, the author of *The Trouser People*, a political travelogue about Burma, said relatively few restrictions were in place during the protests. “It was easier to get a visa before the monks’ protests in 2007, partly, I think, because the regime was at pains to downplay the unrest and possibly felt that granting tourist visas sent the right business-as-usual message,” he told *The Irrawaddy*.

The protests, a landmark demonstration of mass opposition, also marked a watershed in the lengths to which the government would go to prevent future media leaks. Directly following the protests, Toe Zaw Latt said, the government established the Cyber Crimes Unit, staffed with officials trained in Russia to monitor internet and telephone use and launch cyber attacks on dissident websites.

In December 2007, three months after the protests, Yadanabon Cyber City, a 4,050-hectare information technology center near Pyin U Lwin, came online. According to RSF, the establishment of Yadanabon, which has resulted in a centralization of Burma’s network management, has increased the efficacy of cyber controls, which include “massive filtering of websites and extensive slowdowns during times of unrest.”

The government's new technological capabilities were illustrated in September, when the websites of several dissident media organizations, including *DVB* and *The Irrawaddy*, were temporarily shut down by cyber attacks.

By the time Cyclone Nargis made landfall in the Irrawaddy Delta in May 2008, the government was able to impose significant restrictions on foreign reporters and aid workers. Marshall, who was deported for trying to report on the situation in the delta, wrote in *TIME* magazine that foreign aid workers, diplomats and undercover journalists were "expelled from the disaster area or barred entry at police or military checkpoints." The junta's restrictions made it "almost impossible" for outsiders to witness the aftermath of the disaster.

Compared to the time of the monks' protests, he wrote, the generals were "far more worried by the political implications of the cyclone," due to the "combination of popular anger and the junta's reluctant but necessary acceptance of foreign assistance."

They were also more prepared. A long-planned constitutional referendum fell one week after Nargis hit the Burmese coast, and Toe Zaw Latt said the media restrictions already in place made it easy for the junta to erect an information firewall around stricken areas of the Irrawaddy Delta.

It's unclear, however, whether tighter controls will actually lead to the information blackout the government hopes to achieve. The Rangoon-based source said many foreign correspondents, rising to the challenge, had evaded tighter visa controls and gained entry to the country; foreign reports, fueled by widespread international interest in the elections, have already started appearing in international publications. Toe Zaw Latt said *DVB*, which maintains a network of undercover reporters throughout the country, was "working overtime" to find ways of circumventing the restrictions.

A longer-term hope is that the government's façade may also start to weaken due to forces inside the regime. One veteran correspondent who has been granted official press access to the country said there were officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who wanted to see more "balanced" coverage of the events in the country—"to get their message across to international viewers" — and were willing to grant increased media access on that basis.

The correspondent said that while working on journalist visas, they were able to push the limits of what the government was willing to permit and that “many people in Myanmar, officials and ordinary people, had appreciated the effort” at bridging the gap between the junta and its critics. The fear, the journalist said, is that “[the junta’s] definition of ‘balanced’ may not be the same as ours.”

The hope, after the election, is that these two poles may start to converge.