



Myanmar protests prove VPNs can offer more than entertainment

12 March 2021

In its most recent Human Freedom Index report, the Cato Institute ranked Malta 13 of 18 Western European Countries

In its most recent Human Freedom Index report, the Cato Institute ranked Malta 13 of 18 Western European Countries. That might not seem great at first glance. But when you look at the detail, Malta's placing beside its continental neighbours doesn't really matter. Or at least, it doesn't to the average person: If you are in Western Europe, you enjoy almost all the social, economic and political freedoms you could want. The difference between the teams at the top isn't like a football league table. France, for example, is bottom of the Western European grouping, and it's hardly what you would call an authoritarian regime.

Of course, the differences become stark as we move further down the Human Freedom Index. If you are to travel 350km or so south from Valetta, you'll hit Tripoli, with Libya 156th on the list. A few places above Libya comes Myanmar, a country that will likely plummet down towards the very bottom (Cato ranks 162 nations) once the next report comes out. Freedom, by various measurements, has fluctuated in Myanmar in the 21st century. But the recent power grab by the military, and the subsequent jailing of Aung San Suu Kyi, has put the country back towards its lowest ebb.

Demand for VPNs soared after crackdown

As you might expect, technology plays a role in all this. Banning social media is one tool at the military's disposal to stop protestors from organising and communicating. Facebook, for example, went down on the 4th of February, and other social media sites were also soon restricted. After the Facebook ban demand for VPNs soared by 7200%, according to a report by Sky News. The software enables users to hide, or spoof, their locations, thereby bypassing website restrictions.

Back in Western Europe, VPNs are also popular. Many of the most popular options in Malta are covered in this list, and those are the very same companies that provide the services to protestors and the oppressed elsewhere. The difference, of course, is why they are used. Here, we might use a VPN to get better versions of Netflix, avail of cheaper products through geo-pricing or as an extra layer of security against cyber-attacks. In Myanmar, however, it's about connecting to each other, and to the outside world.

VPNs popular in Middle East and South Asia

It's no surprise, then, that some of the countries whose citizens have the worst-level of social freedoms are those with the highest VPN usage. Indonesia, where the government regularly

restricts websites and where internet freedoms continue to fall, is the world's highest percentage of VPN penetration (61%). Other South Asian and Middle Eastern countries aren't far behind. As you might expect, countries with strict controls over their populations, like China and Belarus, have banned VPNs.

Because so many Myanmarers were able to use VPNs to circumvent website blackouts, the military was left with no option but to limit the connectivity of the whole country, effectively shutting down the internet. These shutdowns usually come at night to coincide with the current curfews, but it's also the time when the military conducts raids against protestors. But when the internet is 'switched on', the VPN can be a lifeline for the protestors.

VPNs are just one tool in pro-democracy protests, and it shouldn't be forgotten that they are simply a key to getting to what's really important, social media. Just as a nascent Twitter platform helped protestors communicate, internally and with the outside world, during the Arab Spring, the same thing is happening here. But authoritarian regimes are wiser now to the power of social media, and they have tried to shut them down before and during periods of unrest. We may see VPNs as handy tools for spoofing our location, but elsewhere they might just be the key to true freedom.