

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 27 May 2020

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Crisis Facebooking During Covid-19 in Myanmar

*Nyi Nyi Kyaw**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Myanmar's State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi started Facebooking on 1 April 2020, during the developing Covid-19 crisis, and she continued daily through to 2 May.
- She uses Facebook for two purposes: to post messages about her government's plans and activities, and thus motivate people; and to hold video conferences with people from all walks of life from across Myanmar.
- The State Counsellor's skyrocketing Facebook fanbase of 2.3 million followers has left hundreds of thousands of loves and likes on her page. Her digital footprint has grown day by day.
- Three factors may explain the virality of her Facebooking: her charisma, performance, and personality politics; perfect timing; and relatability of Covid-19 to everyone in Myanmar.
- Apparently enjoying crisis Facebooking for now, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is likely to continue at least until the general elections due in November 2020.

** Nyi Nyi Kyaw is Visiting Fellow in the Myanmar Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He is also Assistant Professor (adjunct) in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.*

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar's State Counsellor and de facto leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi started using her personal Facebook account on 1 April 2020.¹ She claimed, in spite of her initial reluctance to employ this medium, that she wanted to communicate with people in Myanmar and to disseminate information relating to Covid-19.² At the time, Myanmar had 15 diagnosed cases of people down with the disease.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Facebook account drew several hundred thousand followers within hours, and it had more than 2.3 million followers as of 2 May. She has been the undisputed national leader since 1988, and Facebook the most popular social media platform in Myanmar. Therefore, the virality of her account is not surprising. It may even be said to have not reached its potential to attract more than half of the estimated 22 million Facebook users in Myanmar.³ That said, from a quick look at the tens of thousands of comments under each post, picture, and video on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's account, it is undeniable that the Facebooking of the dear *Amay* (Mother) or *Amay Suu* (Mother Suu) has taken Myanmar by storm.

Most followers of and visitors to her account express nothing but admiration, though a few critical voices are also found there and have been allowed to remain on the account.

Why is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Facebooking viral in Myanmar? There are three reasons. The first is her personal charisma and performance, touching the hearts and minds of her supporters via text, audio, and video messages. The second is timing. She could not have chosen a better time than April 2020, when many, if not most, people were staying home. The third is relatability: Covid-19 directly and indirectly affects everyone everywhere in Myanmar.

DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI GOES FACEBOOKING LATE

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's comment, made at a dinner offered for the Myanmar Press Council on 23 November 2018, provided a window to her view of social media. She reportedly said, "Because there were no social media (before), we had to rely on news agencies. Now I see a competition between the power of the news agencies and that of social media. It's difficult to say who is winning."⁴ She seemed rather convinced of the assumed power of social media, and expressed a dilemma in choosing between the two. A year and a half later, she made her choice, and her personal Facebook account went live.⁵

There had been expectations that she would go Facebooking sooner or later, at least before the 2015 general elections, or perhaps after those elections, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) that she chairs won in a landslide and came to power from 2016. But she did not do so until April 2020. Why not earlier? And why now?

The answer to the first question probably is related to the bad press that Facebook constantly received until August 2018, when the company started removing accounts because of the spread of anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya hate speech and fake news on the platform.⁶ Because the accounts that Facebook removed included that of Senior General Min Aung

Hlaing and several others affiliated with the Myanmar military,⁷ Daw Aung San Suu Kyi might have been deterred from starting to use Facebook herself.

There are two possible answers to the second question: one immediate and one forward-looking. The immediate reason is, according to the first-ever post on her account, the need to communicate with people and to provide information about the Covid-19 crisis. There can be very little doubt about the truthfulness of this reason, given the severity of the crisis. But politicians such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in politically charged environments like Myanmar with hyper-partisan Facebookers must think carefully about the ‘impact’ of having a personal account and the resultant constant exposure to people. She must also have considered the potential use of the account for the next general elections due in November 2020. Therefore, the other possible reason, which is no less important than her immediate need for crisis Facebooking, is related to the potential use of Facebooking for political communication in the coming electoral campaign. Looking at her non-stop trips to states and regions at the beginning of 2020, which were abruptly ended by the looming Covid-19 crisis, leads to the conclusion that she must have become concerned about how she was to reach all corners of Myanmar while forced to stay at home. Here Facebook comes in useful.

WHY IS DAW AUNG SAN SUU KYI’S FANBASE GROWING?

That Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s Facebook account would go viral was a foregone conclusion. But the activity and traffic on the account have been quite remarkable. So far she has used the account in two ways. First, she posts messages about Covid-19 to inform people of her government’s (potential) decisions, encourage them not to despair, remind them not to panic or misunderstand one another, and thank frontline workers, social workers, and other people. Second, she holds video conferences that can be watched live or later. Every single day from 1 April until 2 May 2020, she did not fail to post a message or hold a video conference.

With its good mix of textual, visual, and video materials to attract readers, viewers, and commentators, her Facebooking has created an Aung Mye San Suu fanbase. When followers, commenters, and visitors like, love, share, and comment on her posts and videos, the posts and videos further spread into those followers’, commenters’ and visitors’ respective networks. The virality of her Facebooking, already considerable in the first place, then increases exponentially.

Of course, there are a few other accounts that had or have more followers than Daw Aung San Suu Kyi does now. Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s two accounts reportedly had 2.8 million and 1.3 million followers, respectively, before being removed in August 2018.⁸ Celebrity singer and actor Sai Sai Kham Leng’s fan page has about 9 million followers.⁹ Statistics on the daily or even monthly increases in the fanbases of those accounts are not available, but it is likely that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s fanbase grew much more quickly than the fanbases of those pages did. What is certain, and more important, is that the level of traffic seen on her page is unparalleled in the history of Facebooking in Myanmar. And her digital footprint keeps growing day by day.

Of course, not everyone admires Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s Facebooking. Several of those commenting on her page have red-flagged issues including the continuing civil war and

deaths of civilians in Rakhine State, the long internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin States, and the government's alleged lack of preparation and support for internally displaced peoples in those states. In this way, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's dedicated Facebooking has in its first month given both her admirers and critics something to cherish or criticize. And overall, Amay Suu's page has received more love than criticism. Three reasons may explain both that balance of reactions and its virality.

Charisma, Performance, and Personality Politics

Despite mounting international criticism, especially since 2017 and due to the Rohingya crisis, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity at home has not significantly declined. Her 'defence' of Myanmar in her appearance in front of the International Court of Justice in December 2019 only elevated her stature, at least among her supporters. Her blood relationship to the national hero Aung San (1915–47)¹⁰ still benefits her, and she has made sure to mention her father in a few of her posts.¹¹ But that father-daughter relation is not the only reason for admiration for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi among millions of Myanmar people. She has developed her own charisma over 32 years, ever since she entered Myanmar politics in 1988.

The Myanmar word *amay* literally means 'mother'. Sociolinguistically it has three meanings. First, children use it to address their own mothers. Second, people use it for women of ages similar to their own mothers' age, as a way of showing respect. Third, but most importantly, when *amay* is used to refer to popular leaders like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, it is not always about showing respect for a woman of a certain age. Rather, the motherly term evokes a combination of emotions including but not limited to respect, adoration, trust, reliance, and worship. Protesters in Burma during the 1988 Uprising¹² also invoked Aung San by calling him *apha* or 'father' in what was then the country's most popular revolutionary song *Kaba Makyaybu*.¹³

The personally touching quality of her Facebooking seems to be working wonders for Amay Suu. There is disproportionately larger interest in her posts, in messages typed by *Amay Suu* herself on her iPad, than in the videos that she puts up, and hundreds of thousands of people respond to those posts.

Her post on 5 April read, "It takes quite a bit of time to type word by word because I have just begun to use Facebook. But I am happy to communicate with people. Soon my typing will be quicker."¹⁴ That post from the 75-year-old *Amay Suu*, and the image of her slowly typing and learning to type faster on her iPad, must have been captivating. Another post on 9 April telling people to stay strong and help in her government's plan to distribute essential items for the poor was enhanced with two pictures, one showing her making a mask and the other showing her wearing that home-made mask.¹⁵ That post was her second most popular until 2 May, trailing only her very first post. It has received 650,000 Likes and Loves — the two most popular emojis¹⁶ left by visitors on her page — along with 75,000 comments and 104,000 shares;¹⁷ see Figure 1. Her comment under her post of 1 May apologized for the incorrect appearance of some Pali-derived words that she had used and noting that she just could not spell them properly on her iPad. This two-line comment alone received 46,300 Likes, Loves, and Cares; see Figure 2.

Amay Suu is noticeably sweet in her video conferences, too. For example, in her conference of 20 April she wore a big smile; see Figure 3. The conference has received 177,000 Likes and Loves, 19,800 comments, 33,100 shares, and 683,000 views. Her video conferences also receive Likes and Loves as they take place. The video conference of 17 April has not just comments but Likes and Loves mushrooming almost every second; see Figure 4.



Figure 1. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Showing her hand-made mask. (Post dated 9 April 2020, screenshot taken 2 May 2020)

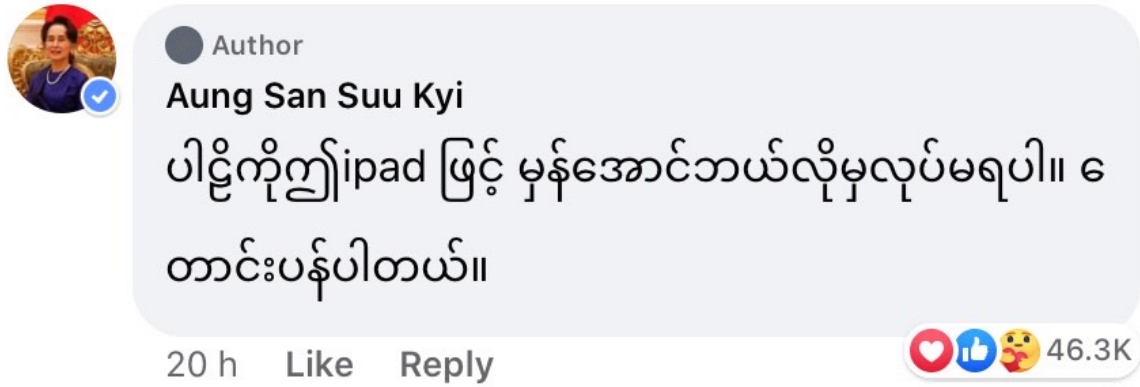


Figure 2. Apology for difficulty in spelling Pali-derived terms. (Post dated 1 May 2020, screenshot dated 2 May 2020)



Figure 3. Video conference (Post dated 20 April 2020, screenshot dated 2 May 2020)



Figure 4. Video conference (Post dated 17 April 2020, screenshot dated 2 May 2020)

Despite her charisma and personally touching performances on Facebook, there is another important reason behind the virality of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s account. The NLD party, established in September 1988, has now been in power for five years. Repressed by the military junta in the 1990s and 2000s and almost eliminated from the political arena, the party remains a personalistic party.

While there are at least three other manifestations of the NLD — as the party in office, as the party on the ground, and as its powerful central office¹⁸— it is for most if not all supporters of the NLD, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s party. To put it more directly, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi *is* the party. And she is the face of the government, too. That is why screenshots of her Facebook posts and video conferences have occupied front pages of all three government-owned newspapers every day.¹⁹ State television also re-airs her videoconferences in the evenings. This personality ‘worship’ of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on the part of supporters has contributed to the virality of her Facebook account.

Good Timing

Although Myanmar has had relatively low numbers of coronavirus infections, probably due to low testing capacity, the panic over the disease has been months in the making.²⁰ People in Myanmar expected detection of the coronavirus in the country sooner or later. When Aung Mye San Suu came live on Facebook, Myanmar had only fifteen cases of infection. But the return of hundreds of Myanmar migrant workers from Thailand, with its higher level of

infection, increased the sense of panic.²¹ People seemed convinced that the number of cases would increase to the hundreds or even thousands in a matter of days or weeks. All these concerns, evident on Facebook and in print and electronic media outlets, provided a good reason for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to start Facebooking.

Also, for two reasons, there could not have been a better time than April 2020 for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to go online. First, many if not most, people in Myanmar, and especially those in populated cities like Yangon, were staying home because of the imposition of restrictions on movement, the closure of workplaces, and fear of catching the virus.

Also, the five-day *Thingyan* water festival and the following Myanmar New Year's Day fall in April. But celebrations were banned, leaving people to stay put at home and able to spend more time on Facebook. Amay Suu's sudden appearance on Facebook, posting touching messages and pictures and holding dialogues with people from all walks of life from across Myanmar, was irresistible for her fanbase.

The Relatability of Covid-19 for Everyone

Covid-19 has affected all countries, big or small, rich or poor, and all people, male or female, old or young, working or not working. So it is the most relatable issue on Earth, at least for now.

From 1 April until 2 May 2020, almost all of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's posts, images, and video conferences on Facebook have had a single message:²² Let's tackle Covid-19 together. Daw Aung Suu Kyi works from Naypyidaw, and it is Yangon that has had the largest number of infections. As of 1 May, Yangon had 115 of the 151 diagnosed cases in the country. But she made sure to make her crisis Facebooking relatable to people from across Myanmar.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi held conferences with people from Yangon, Bago, Magway, and Ayeyarwady regions, and from Shan, Kayin, Mon, and Chin States. Her interlocutors included doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, government officials, police officers, social workers, labour unionists, factory owners, and ordinary people.

She has not, however, spoken with anyone from Kachin and Rakhine States, which host some 100,000 and more than 130,000 internally displaced persons, respectively. The tripartite relationship between the NLD, the Myanmar military, and the Arakan Army has been increasingly difficult.²³ But it has only been a month since Daw Aung San Suu Kyi came live on Facebook. She and her team have perhaps just delayed conferences with groups and peoples in contested situations. That said, a video conference between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Rakhines will not materialize soon.

CONCLUSION

Amay Suu went online late. It is still too early to give a verdict on one month of activity. Despite all the Likes, Loves, Cares, shares, and views, Myanmar has not emerged from the Covid-19 crisis yet. The need to face social, economic, and public health issues lies ahead.

How much Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's crisis Facebooking will help solve that multi-dimensional crisis and its fallout is still difficult to assess.

But on a political and personal level, Aung Suu is benefitting considerably from Facebooking. Her account offers a good mix of programmatic government information and a personal touch. Some visitors to her page have left comments critical of her own or her government's conduct. Many of those critical comments provide information on the situation on the ground. Being at the top of the ladder of power, she may not have easy access to such information. On the other hand, some of her diehard fans have shown a tendency to red-flag criticism. Such discursive contention and confrontation, with one side seeking to domineer the other side, may not be healthy for a young 'partial-democracy' like Myanmar.

Although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has claimed that she would use Facebook for crisis communication, she has not said when she would stop or if she would stop once the crisis is over. Looking at the way her Facebooking has dominated the politically hyper-partisan Myanmar Facebooksphere makes it seem likely that she will continue Facebooking indefinitely. As the November elections draw near, having access to one of the most popular Facebook pages in Myanmar, while also enjoying unbridled access to government media as the country's de facto leader, will make her all the more formidable an opponent for political competitors.

¹ The URL for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Facebook account is <https://www.facebook.com/aungsan.suuky.5661>. Normally, references to Facebook posts have dates and times. But this account has only existed for a little more than a month, and when exactly she makes posts is not relevant to the discussion here. Therefore, only dates of posts are provided in the following footnotes.

² Aung San Suu Kyi, 1 April 2020 (<https://www.facebook.com/100049181212011/posts/114861056829934/>, downloaded 3 May 2020).

³ Facebook does not reveal the number of its users in Myanmar; the number given here is an estimate by online marketing companies. See Saw Yi Nanda, "Facebook Refuses to Reveal Number of Users in Myanmar", *The Myanmar Times*, 23 January 2020 (<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/facebook-refuses-reveal-number-users-myanmar.html>, downloaded 1 May 2020). Despite the proven popularity of Facebook, a large percentage of this estimated userbase of 22 million may not be active on or use Facebook often, even though they have accounts. That may explain the significantly lower percentage of followers of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's account as a proportion of the reported userbase of Facebook. But the fact that her account has only existed for a little more than a month must also be considered in judging the popularity of the account and the significance of the number of followers that it has attracted.

⁴ Cited in Sithu Aung Myint, "ဒေသခံအဖွဲ့စုတို့ကညီ ဖွဲ့မိန့်သတင်းမီဒီယာလောကကို နားလည်ရဲ့လား?" [Does Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Understand the Myanmar Media World?], *VOA* (Burmese), 3 December 2018 (<https://burmese.voanews.com/a/sithu-aung-myint-news-analysis-aung-san-suu-kyi-and-media/4684103.html>, downloaded 2 May 2020).

⁵ There is another Facebook account using her name, and it also has more than 2.2 million followers. That account only post quotations from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and news and videos about her trips with no personal touch. Her office and deputies have never confirmed that it is her account. It is most likely that it is being used by someone else. Global communications agency Burson Cohn & Wolfe's study of the Twiplomacy of world leaders ranks that other account among those of the 50 most followed world leaders on Facebook. See Twiplomacy, "The 50 Most

Followed World Leaders” (<https://twiplomacy.com/ranking/50-followed-world-leaders-facebook/>, downloaded 2 May 2020).

⁶ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Facebooking in Myanmar: From Hate Speech to Fake News to Partisan Political Communication”, *ISEAS Perspective* 36/2019

(https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_36.pdf, downloaded 1 May 2020).

⁷ Facebook announced on 28 August 2018 that it had removed those accounts associated with the Myanmar military engaged in ‘coordinated inauthentic behaviour’, which occurs when “groups of pages or people work together to mislead others about who they are or what they are doing”, according to the definition provided by the company’s head of cybersecurity Nathaniel Gleicher. See Nathaniel Gleicher, “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained”, *Facebook*, 6 December 2018 (<https://about.fb.com/news/2018/12/inside-feed-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>, downloaded 19 May 2020).

⁸ “Myanmar Rohingya: Why Facebook Banned an Army Chief”, *BBC*, 28 August 2018 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45326928>, downloaded 2 May 2020).

⁹ Sai Sai Khem Leng, “Sai Sai Khem Leng@saisaifanpage”

(<https://www.facebook.com/saisaifanpage/>, downloaded 2 May 2020). Media outlets also maintain extremely popular pages. For example, the account of *7 Day News* has more than 24 million followers, but such accounts are of a different character and do not produce personal Facebooking. So they are not comparable to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s account.

¹⁰ Aung San, only 32 years old then, and several other colleagues were assassinated on 19 July 1947 at the dawn of Burma’s independence. 19 July is commemorated as Martyrs Day, which is a gazetted holiday in Myanmar.

¹¹ Aung San Suu Kyi, 2 April 2020

(<https://www.facebook.com/100049181212011/posts/115917216724318/>, downloaded 3 May 2020), Aung San Suu Kyi, 1 May 2020

(<https://www.facebook.com/100049181212011/posts/132905151692191/>, downloaded 3 May 2020), and Aung San Suu Kyi, 2 May 2020

(<https://www.facebook.com/100049181212011/posts/133426394973400/>, downloaded 3 May 2020).

¹² The 1988 Uprising began as student protests against police repression in March 1988 and then ballooned into a popular uprising against socio-economic hardships and political repression under the one-party Burma Socialist Programme Party regime. The military took direct power by launching a coup on 18 September, and the junta ruled Burma/Myanmar until 2011.

¹³ Or ‘We won’t forgive you until the end of the world!’ A version of that song is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_T4oZbzYZw (downloaded 2 May 2020).

¹⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi, 5 April 2020

(<https://www.facebook.com/100049181212011/posts/118196983163008/>, downloaded 3 May 2020).

¹⁵ Aung San Suu Kyi, 9 April 2020

(<https://www.facebook.com/100049181212011/posts/121152289534144/>, downloaded 3 May 2020).

¹⁶ After Facebook launched a new “Care” emoji in late April 2020, that emoji joined Likes and Loves — all showing that commentators like Aung San Suu’s messages, love her, and care about her and one another.

¹⁷ Statistics on Likes, Loves, Cares, comments, views, and shares are correct as of 2 May 2020.

¹⁸ Richard Roewer, “Three Faces of Party Organisation in the National League for Democracy”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, published online 14 February 2020

(<https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419898913>, downloaded 25 April 2020).

¹⁹ They are *Myanma Alinn*, *The Mirror*, and *The Global New Light of Myanmar* (English version).

²⁰ Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Covid-19 in Myanmar: Panic Vigilantism?”, *ISEAS Commentary*, 2 April 2020 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/covid-19-in-myanmar-panic-vigilantism/>, downloaded 3 May 2020).

²¹ Ibid.

²² The exceptions were her very few personal posts, like one a song she likes or one about her father’s Pali skills.

²³ The government declared the Arakan Army a terrorist group and an illegal organization on 23 March 2020. A statement issued by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on 21 April also called it a terrorist group.

To read earlier issues of *ISEAS Perspective* please click here:

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective>

Preceding three issues of *ISEAS Perspective*:

2020/52 “Myanmar’s Foreign Policy in an Election Year” by Moe Thuzar

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_52.pdf

2020/51 “COVID-19 in Thailand: The Securitization of a Non-traditional Threat” by Supalak Ganjanakhundee

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_51.pdf

2020/50 “Chinese Steel Investments in ASEAN” by Tham Siew Yean and Yeoh Wee Jin

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_50.pdf

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--