



Mandatory IMEI registration in Myanmar: Risks, challenges, and mitigation measures

// Frequently asked questions //

Q: What is IMEI?

A: The IMEI (International Mobile Equipment Identity) is a number consisting of 15 decimal digits that allows the identification of the brand and model of a mobile device, as well as its serial number. Through the IMEI code, a mobile operator can track the use of a specific devices very quickly, when the devices are used in the same mobile network — *Derechos Digitales citing Aririquzo and Aqbaraji, 2016*

Q: In countries where IMEI registrations were/are implemented, what challenges did people face?

A: In **Indonesia**, people who did not register IMEIs were **blocked** from linking up with any telco networks. They could access the internet through WiFi but could not use services requiring telco/mobile services. The government agencies tasked with registering IMEIs could not keep up with the demand for registration and Indonesia's Central Equipment Identity Register (CEIR) also encountered many technical problems, further delaying the process. People were disconnected longer than they expected.

In 2012 in **Kenya**, the authorities disconnected the telephone lines of around 1.5 million citizens, since the IMEI codes of their devices were not in the international database. Not only were people unable to communicate freely, economic activities were also severely impacted due to the lack of access to mobile payment systems.

In **Turkey**, citizens have to pay 2732.4 Turkish Lira (TRY) or USD\$156.63 to register their phones in 2022. It is 3000 Turkish Lira (TRY) for Iphones— an exorbitant amount that made internet access unaffordable for the average person.

In **Lebanon**, analysis by SMEX highlighted concerns that individuals that register IMEI numbers can be tracked with more accuracy, and that registration would make it difficult for individuals like journalists and activists to change phone numbers. The IMEI number also reveals the device's technical features, which could allow for targeted surveillance designed according to the device's specifications. Finally, the site for IMEI registration can expose people's information to third parties and increase the potential for privacy violations.

In **Nigeria**, people opposed similar requirements due to fear of mass surveillance and violations of the rights to privacy and freedom of expression. In addition to IMEI registration, the government proposed linking people's phone numbers/IMEI to their National Identity Numbers.

Q: With the IMEI number, can the government or telco operator track the device's location?

A: Yes, it seems possible. In **Saudi Arabia**, it has been reported that the government used the IMEI numbers of mobile phones, along with military-grade technology, to track down the phones of women who flee the patriarchal system.

Q: What security measures can the people of Myanmar take should these measures come into force?

A:

- Do not disclose your IMEI number to other people, to avoid risk of cloning and tampering.
- Be careful when buying aftermarket mobile phones. Stolen, broken, or counterfeit devices can have its IMEI blacklisted, rendering it useless when connected to a mobile carrier.
- Remember that when you reactivate an old mobile phone, its IMEI will again be transmitted to the carrier you are connecting to. If you are at risk of targeting, surveillance, or blocking, and this old device has already been associated with you, it may jeopardize the privacy measures you are about to implement or already implementing.
- You can eliminate activation of cellular service and exclusively connect to wireless internet. The obvious problem with this measure is that you will not be able to use the voice and data services for your device unless you are connected again to a WiFi network.