

# **Human Rights and Financial Freedom Bitcoin's Impact in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos**

**Win Ko Ko Aung**

# **Human Rights and Financial Freedom**

## **Bitcoin's Impact in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos**

**Win Ko Ko Aung**

**Human Rights Fellow at Bitcoin Policy Institute**

### **Abstract**

*This study examines the role of Bitcoin in enhancing human rights and financial autonomy in Burma (also known as Myanmar), Thailand, and Laos. These Southeast Asian nations confront significant challenges, including governmental oversight, economic instability, and limited banking access for large populations. Despite its strategic importance, Southeast Asia receives insufficient attention within United States foreign policy frameworks. Bitcoin's decentralized structure provides individuals with a mechanism to safeguard assets and achieve financial independence. This paper presents case studies from the aforementioned countries to elucidate Bitcoin's broader implications.*

## Introduction

Southeast Asia, a region characterized by its rich cultural heritage and dynamic economic landscape, remains underrepresented in United States foreign policy discourse. Nations such as Burma (also known as Myanmar), Thailand, and Laos grapple with substantial obstacles that impede human rights and economic development. According to the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, Laos ranks 153rd out of 180 countries, reflecting severe restrictions on freedom of expression. Similarly, the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index places Laos at 114th, indicating pervasive corruption that undermines equitable governance. Burma contends with ongoing conflict and economic decline, affecting millions, while Thailand, despite its tourism-driven prosperity, faces rural-urban disparities that restrict banking access. These challenges disproportionately impact marginalized populations, exacerbating social and economic inequalities.

Bitcoin, a decentralized digital currency, offers a novel solution by enabling direct peer-to-peer transactions independent of traditional banking systems. This feature is particularly valuable in contexts where governmental control over financial institutions limits individual autonomy or where currency devaluation erodes savings. The study explores Bitcoin's application across Burma, Thailand, and Laos, analyzing how local communities leverage this technology to resist authoritarian measures, preserve wealth, and foster resilience. Through a detailed examination of these cases, this paper highlights Bitcoin's potential to advance human rights and financial inclusion.

## **Burma: Bitcoin as a Counter to Authoritarian Control**

Since the 2021 military coup, Burma has experienced significant turmoil, resulting in over 3,500 deaths and the imprisonment of 23,000 individuals due to the military's repressive actions. The government has imposed internet shutdowns in over 100 townships, severing communication channels and restricting access to banking services. The recent earthquake, a powerful magnitude 7.7 in 2025, further exacerbated the crisis, causing thousands of deaths and widespread destruction of infrastructure, thereby deepening economic instability. The military's surveillance of bank transactions to target dissenters has eroded public trust in financial institutions, posing severe challenges for citizens seeking to purchase essentials, support families, or secure their earnings. In this context, Bitcoin emerges as a vital tool, operating beyond governmental oversight to facilitate secure financial transactions.

Utilizing Bitcoin alongside its efficient Lightning Network, individuals have channeled support for the recent earthquake, a powerful magnitude 7.7, through initiatives such as Bitcoin Aid for Myanmar (Burma). This program enables global donors to contribute funds anonymously, protecting them from military retaliation. Notably, these donations have facilitated the distribution of meals, blankets, and medical supplies to affected communities, bypassing government-controlled channels. People can send Bitcoin to the ground without requiring permission from the Burmese military, which usually weaponize aid for their political reasons. Additionally, Bitcoin serves as a hedge against the rapid devaluation of the kyat, the local currency, which has been undermined by inflation. Scholars and activists in Burma draw parallels between Bitcoin's emergence and the advent of the internet, which initially empowered free expression. By adopting Bitcoin, citizens safeguard their assets and assert their right to financial autonomy, fostering resilience against oppressive governance and contributing to a hopeful vision for future stability.

## **Thailand: Bitcoin as a Catalyst for Rural Economic Empowerment**

Thailand, renowned for its tourism industry and urban economic hubs, exhibits significant disparities, particularly in rural regions such as Nikhom Huai Phueng, located near the Laos border with a population of 9,000. This area lacks reliable banking infrastructure, yet a robust Bitcoin community has emerged, transforming local economic dynamics. A local leader, Mick, operates a coffee shop that serves as an educational hub for Bitcoin adoption. His efforts have enabled over 40 businesses, including restaurants, pharmacies, and small retail outlets, to accept Bitcoin, a figure comparable to adoption rates in Bangkok, a metropolis of 11.2 million. This development allows small enterprises to operate independently of distant and costly banking systems.

In Nikhom Huai Phueng, Bitcoin facilitates transactions for daily necessities such as food, clothing, and tuk-tuk rides, as well as services like motorbike repairs and market purchases. This capability mitigates the impact of Thai baht fluctuations, which often destabilize small businesses during economic downturns. Furthermore, Bitcoin enables cross-border trade with Laos and Burma, enhancing income opportunities. For instance, a local restaurant owner leverages Bitcoin payments from international visitors to bolster business resilience. However, challenges persist, including low digital literacy among older residents and the degradation of QR codes over time. Mick addresses these issues through regular community workshops, teaching wallet setup and basic mobile phone usage to ensure broad accessibility. This initiative demonstrates Bitcoin's role in integrating rural populations into the global economy, reinforcing their financial sovereignty and supporting economic rights in regions marginalized by Thailand's urban-centric development.

## **Laos: Bitcoin as a Strategy to Overcome Economic Constraints**

Laos, a nation with a population of 7.3 million, confronts significant economic challenges. It owes 66.2% of its GDP to China, and in 2023, its money supply reached 95% of GDP due to the persistent devaluation of the Lao kip. The government imposes strict controls on freedom of expression, as evidenced by its 153rd ranking in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, while corruption remains a critical issue, with a 114th position in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index. Access to banking services is limited, particularly for those outside the government's inner circle, leaving many citizens, especially in rural areas, without financial resources. Bitcoin presents an alternative mechanism to circumvent these constraints and secure personal savings.

In Vientiane, the capital, a modest yet growing group of individuals organizes Bitcoin meetups and disseminates knowledge in the Lao language via platforms such as Nostr. These sessions educate participants on Bitcoin's functionality despite governmental restrictions on free speech, often utilizing practical demonstrations to illustrate its utility. The country further capitalizes on its surplus hydropower to mine Bitcoin, generating \$27 million in annual tax revenue, which highlights the currency's potential to stimulate economic growth. By adopting Bitcoin, individuals can engage in trade without reliance on traditional banks and protect their assets from the depreciating Lao kip. Although adoption remains nascent, with only a few Nostr users, this development mirrors the initial expansion of social media in Laos, suggesting a gradual increase in acceptance. Moreover, Bitcoin facilitates cross-border transactions and access to global markets, empowering citizens to assert financial autonomy. This technological adoption thus serves as a critical tool for advancing economic rights and integrating into the international financial system, particularly in a context marked by governmental oversight and systemic corruption.



[www.btcpolicy.org](http://www.btcpolicy.org)

