

OPINION

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The Straits Times says

Military takeover a setback for Myanmar

Despite assurances by Myanmar's military that it would abide by the Constitution and act according to law, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his generals have moved. Top civilian leaders, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, have been detained, a state of emergency declared and former general Myint Swe installed as acting president. Ostensibly, the move was to preserve the "stability" of the state after the election commission failed to address "huge irregularities" in the November election, which produced yet another landslide win for Ms Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). The commission firmly rejected the military's charges of voter fraud and Parliament was to convene yesterday.

Myanmar's military-drafted Constitution reserves 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for the military as well as control of three key ministries, giving it effective veto power on a range of issues. The military has nevertheless had an uneasy co-existence with Ms Suu Kyi's government. That it now feels compelled to rule directly is disappointing, worrying and a setback not only for Myanmar but also for Asean, which repeatedly gave diplomatic cover to the junta that ruled previously, and to Ms Suu Kyi, in hopes of steering the country on a path towards becoming a successful and prosperous democracy. The democratic transition has now come to an abrupt halt, for it appears that the military's old fears and prejudices

never vanished but were held in abeyance. Ever since the NLD demonstrated its hold on Myanmarese by winning 42 of 45 seats in the 2012 by-election, the military needed to find a way to work with Ms Suu Kyi. It had, after all, nullified the 1990 election results that the NLD won handsomely, and kept her under house arrest for most of the two decades till 2010. After another NLD sweep at the 2015 national election, the military allowed her to take office as State Counsellor, given that the Constitution denied her the presidency as her late husband and two children were foreigners. It was not an ideal arrangement but it seemed to work.

But yesterday's coup is a blight on Myanmar's

image, adding to that which befell it over the handling of the issue surrounding its Rohingya ethnic Muslim minority. That was costly for Ms Suu Kyi who, out of conviction or political expediency, defended the military against genocide allegations. Those events dismayed several in Asean. The alarming and unconstitutional sacking of the government of a member must bring a collective response from the grouping, not least because its credibility will be questioned. It is also imperative that all parties in Myanmar, especially the military, act with restraint. It would be a pity if the gains of a decade are reversed and a slew of Western sanctions follow. Ms Suu Kyi had, after all, not been an unsteady hand at the wheel.

AI sans ethics can endanger everyone

Legislative framework on the use of artificial intelligence needs to balance public interest and innovation

Yaacob Ibrahim and Chong Yoke Sin

For The Straits Times

It was around this time a year ago that Singapore launched the second edition of the "Model Artificial Intelligence (AI) Governance Framework" in Davos; the first edition was launched in January 2019. The Model Framework included case studies and practical measures to guide companies in the implementation of AI.

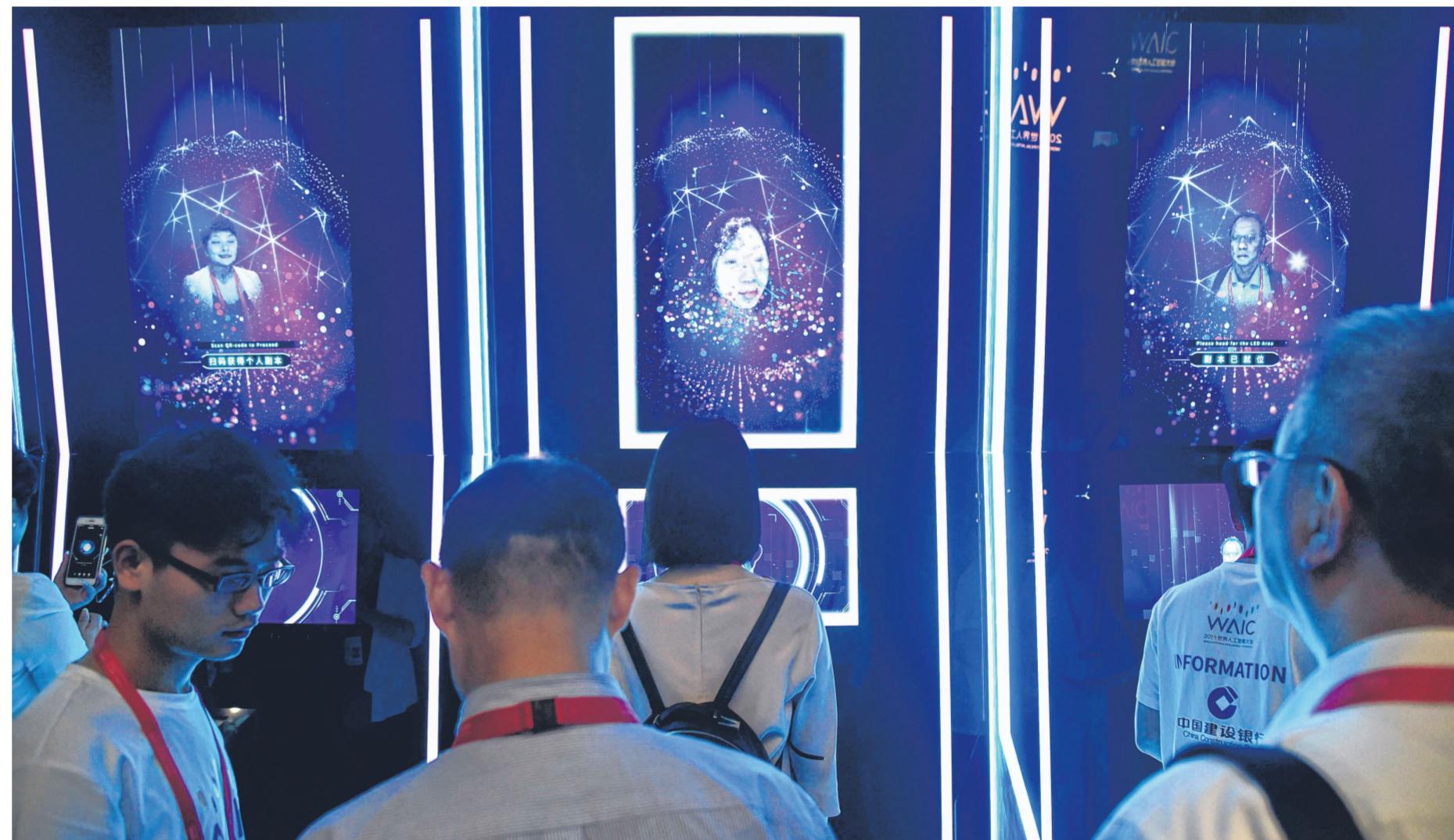
A year is a long period in high-tech. AI is becoming more ubiquitous and can be found in everyday home appliances and smart devices. AI algorithms are now being used in finance, insurance claims, credit approval processes, transportation, healthcare and human resources management.

Simply put, AI tries to inject intelligence into machines to attempt to imitate human behaviour and thinking. In the last couple of years, AI has become a transformative technology, combined with the proliferation of big data, cloud computing and pervasive social media. That is why it is essential to discuss, dissect and debate the ethical use of AI.

Here is an example of what can go wrong, thereby impacting vital sections of the population. Last year, Britain's Ofqual, the authority that administers A-level college entrance exams, was in the spotlight – for the wrong reasons. Unable to conduct live exams because of Covid-19, Ofqual designed and deployed an AI algorithm that calculated scores based partly on the schools' historical performance. Students who were already disadvantaged found themselves further penalised by artificially deflated scores and their efforts disregarded.

"This is far from an isolated incident; even the world's most sophisticated technology companies have faced similar problems," Harvard Business Review reported in October. "In 2018, Amazon's recruiting algorithm was flagged for penalising applications that contained the word 'women'."

The costs of bias can be substantial; likewise, the benefits of eliminating discrimination can be just as significant. One study at Stanford University found that at least 25 per cent of growth in US GDP between 1960 and 2010 could be attributed to greater gender and racial balance in the workplace",



and that the figure could be as high as 40 per cent.

AI BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

Fortunately, Singapore has not been hit by an unethical example of an AI algorithm – yet. It is prudent that we do not wait till some of us are impacted by an adverse AI event before we decide to act.

Even more so since Singapore considers AI an essential and fundamental technology for the digital economy. Singapore believes that its balanced approach can facilitate innovation, safeguard consumer and other societal interests, and serve as a common global reference point.

The Model Framework was the first step; the second was an initiative by the Singapore Computer Society and the Infocomm Media Development Authority to develop a comprehensive AI Ethics and Governance Body of Knowledge (BoK).

Launched in October last year, the BoK is the work of 30 authors and 25 reviewers, with 25 case studies to illustrate the ethical use of AI. At the core, AI solutions must be human-centric. As AI is used to amplify human capabilities, the protection of humans' interests, including our well-being and safety, should be primary considerations in the design, development and deployment of AI.

How does this apply in the real

world? It depends on two factors: First, whether AI technologies are applied to keep the human's interests, safety and security as the top priority. Second, in case of doubt, can those processes be explained to show that top priority was given to human safety and security?

Technology must, therefore, serve a higher purpose. While technological solutions can be disruptive, it is up to the government and industry to soften the disruption's effects as much as possible. Job displacement through automation and digitalisation has created much anxiety among workers. Technology should be deployed in a humane way that improves society's quality of life at large.

USE AI RESPONSIBLY

That is where ethics in AI comes in. There must be some way companies that deploy AI must be held responsible, just as data providers are held accountable for breaches. There is the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) and the Personal Data Protection Commission to ensure that people and companies who do not protect their data adequately are penalised. Similarly, there is a need to have some framework for people who are impacted by an unethical deployment of AI.

Hence, the "explainability" part of AI is vital. Every solution by an AI algorithm must be explainable to critical stakeholders, such as

regulators. Moreover, the "human-in-the-loop" idea is essential as it provides a safeguard to potentially biased solutions.

Explainability becomes a crucial issue in healthcare if an algorithm misdiagnoses an ailment or prescribes a wrong dose or drug. There is a need to have a framework for this, whether it is through legislation or otherwise. With PDPA, there is legislation in place for data breaches; there is a need to have something similar in AI ethics.

However, AI is a creature that is rapidly evolving in mimicking human decisions and beyond. Hence, adequate control measures must be in place to ensure the safety and well-being of people and systems AI is designed to serve.

The framework for legislation should evolve with the capabilities of AI. The PDPA took a similar path where it has now evolved to cater to new instances where a better understanding of data privacy and its impact on society has taken shape.

Other jurisdictions have also spelt out their approach in dealing with AI. For example, the United States has issued guidelines that leave it to the industry to develop AI applications in an unregulated model. The European Union is planning legislation, especially in areas it deems to be "high risk".

This effort rides on the earlier EU AI Ethics Guidelines' principles: non-discrimination, transparency, accountability, privacy,

robustness, environmental well-being and human oversight.

Which model should Singapore follow? There is some consensus among AI researchers that a balanced approach is needed where the rules protect both – the public and promote industry innovation. Smart regulation will build trust among people while also encouraging innovation.

The need for legislation is clear. The issue is how extensive the legislation should be and when exactly it should be enacted. It is not easy to anticipate all the effects of AI, and it does not make sense to have legislation covering every area where AI is deployed. The EU takes a risk-based approach where sectors deemed to be "high risk" are the first to be legislated.

Singapore has adopted an advisory approach to the deployment of AI. With the BoK, there is enough scope for AI deployment to be unhindered and mindful of possible ethical issues. The experiences gained can help the relevant government agencies decide how the legislative framework should take shape.

Clearly, the need to balance public interest and industry innovation must guide this process.

People having their faces scanned at the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai in 2019. As artificial intelligence (AI) is used to amplify human capabilities, the protection of humans' interests, including our well-being and safety, should be primary considerations in the design, development and deployment of AI, say the writers.

PHOTO: AGENCIE FRANCE-PRESSE

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