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By Global Digital Cultures 09/03/2021

This post was written by Julienne Weegels, Yatun Sastramidjaja and Luisa Gonzalez Valencia as part of the GDC-funded project [“P\(R\)OTESTAS: The politics and aesthetics of digital authoritarianism and protest in the Global South”](#)

Although there are significant parallels to be found in digitally-mediated protests and digital authoritarianism across different regions in the Global South, very little cross-regional research is being done on these issues, much less interdisciplinarily. Hence, over the next nine months we will conduct P(R)OTESTAS, an innovative trans-Pacific research on protest, power, and digital authoritarianism. Focusing on Southeast Asia and Latin America, we would first of all like to present the tension that can be discerned between digital democratization and securitization in two mutually entangled processes. These are, first, the consolidation of the *new authoritarian turn*, and second, the emergence and subsequent repression of protest movements that have begun to question these regimes in the wake of the high-speed digitization of civil society.

Over the past two decades, in Southeast Asia and Latin America, multiple governments headed by democratically elected presidents have begun shrinking the civic space for dissent, implementing constitutional changes or laws that allow for their (indefinite) reelection or the consolidation of their political dynasties, while criminalizing protesters and amassing power in the executive branch or with the governing elite. Contrary to their ‘old authoritarian’ predecessors – the military or revolutionary juntas of the sixties and seventies in Latin America, or the despotic regimes preceding Southeast Asia’s hybrid democracies – they came to power through the popular vote, granting them a level of international legitimacy that makes the contestation of their established hegemony controversial. Yet, the authoritarian legacy of these regimes is evident in their use of state security forces to control political adversaries, and occasional deployment of para-state forces for their ‘dirty work’. Finally, as these authoritarian leaders come to dominate the state’s law-making capacities, the implementation of freedom-restricting legislation becomes a matter of pre-decided majority vote. This development from democratically elected to authoritarian administrations is currently theorized as the new authoritarian turn and, in this project, we submit that *digital authoritarianism* – the desire to thoroughly control, surveil and police citizens’ digital spaces and activities – is intimately related to the consolidation of such new authoritarian administrations.

While this new authoritarian turn unfolded, societies rapidly digitized and a substantial generation of digitally-connected youth has emerged. Perceived as apathetic and relatively unorganized at first, such youth came to spearhead massive anti-government protests across the world in recent years. Alluding to the Arab spring, observers spoke of a “Latin American autumn” by the end of 2019, and ongoing protests in Southeast Asia have spotlighted “a new youth culture of protest” in which social media play an intrinsic part. However, while emerging in response to their governments’ increasing authoritarianism, these protest movements are also hampered in their capacity by the government’s legal and other instruments for cyber-control. With this project, our key objective is to identify recurring patterns and unique configurations in the *politics* and *aesthetics* of emerging global digital cultures of protest and repression. We thereby approach the digital holistically, as embedded in people’s daily lives and environments, their moral worlds, cultural preferences and modes of cultural production, attentive to the slippages that occur between the digital and non-digital, and to the political economy of digital infrastructures as an instrument of power. P(R)OTESTAS’ research will be published in both academic and non-academic venues, in English and the languages of our research. This way, we hope to foster and speak to public debates around digital authoritarianism and protest. Over the next months, we will also be setting up a series of decentered inter-regional exchanges of tools and knowledge around these topics, through workshops, blogs, and (online) events. We will keep you posted!

Julienne Weegels is an Assistant Professor of Latin American Studies. Her research focuses on the politics and aesthetics of (dis)order, incarceration, and hybrid forms of repression.

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