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Leveraging the Digital Sphere for Democracy in Southeast Asia

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Leveraging the Digital Sphere for Democracy in Southeast Asia

Yatun Sastramidjaja examines how the digital sphere has been used for both democratisation and state power consolidation.

Over the past decade, the digital sphere has been a double-edged sword for democratisation and democratic processes in Southeast Asia. The boom of social media in the region between mid-2000s and early 2010s raised hopes that it would make political participation accessible for all and provide citizens with an effective tool to hold powerholders accountable and push for democratic change. But that enthusiasm has faded as the democratic potential of social media has proven to be limited and flawed. Rather than being a great equaliser, social media is now considered a great engine of polarisation and disinformation. The Oxford Internet Institute's most recent global inventory of organised social media manipulation, titled *The Global Disinformation Order* (2019), flagged seven Southeast Asian countries as problematic for the extent to which social media is being exploited by political elites and their cyber troops to spread disinformation and undermine democracy.

On the other end of the political spectrum, recent grassroots mobilisations in Southeast Asia, mostly led by digitally-savvy youths, continue to effectively leverage the digital sphere for democratic processes. The question is therefore no longer to what extent digital technologies may impact democratic processes, whether positively or negatively, but how the digital sphere itself is being transformed in these youth movements. For them, the "digital" is more than just a tool to be used in "real-world" struggles. It is their mode of claiming and performing an emerging citizen identity that shuns and transcends existing political fault-lines which have hitherto hampered democratic efforts in their respective countries.

From Tool of Protest to Tool of Power

The corporate world conveniently views social media simply as the neutral digital space that connects its manifold users. Dodging accountability for data mining and false contents, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg repeatedly claims that his social media enterprise is merely a "tech company", implying that technology is inherently void of meaning and intent. Similar views of cyberspace as an "empty" technological space initially led Southeast Asian states to pay little attention to the Internet as a civic space. Naturally, then, the Internet became a safe haven for civic groups that quickly seized the new political opportunities it provided. In the mid-2000s, Southeast Asia underwent the transition from the Web 1.0's static websites to the Web 2.0's participatory social media platforms, accompanied by the rise of cheap smartphones that bypassed inadequate Internet cable infrastructures. This led to a vibrant online public sphere in which civic groups confidently pushed the boundaries of the permissible to air popular grievances and pressure authorities for greater transparency and good governance.

By the 2010s, following the inspiring example of the 2010–2011 Arab Spring, civil society across the region was hopeful that social media provided them with a vital tool to push for democratisation. In Malaysia, this was manifested in the "Bersih" movement of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections. Social media began to play a key role since the "Bersih 2.0" rally of 2011, leading to the electoral defeat of the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition in 2018. In Indonesia, the electoral victory of the reformist

Protesters take shelter from police water cannons in Bangkok, Thailand

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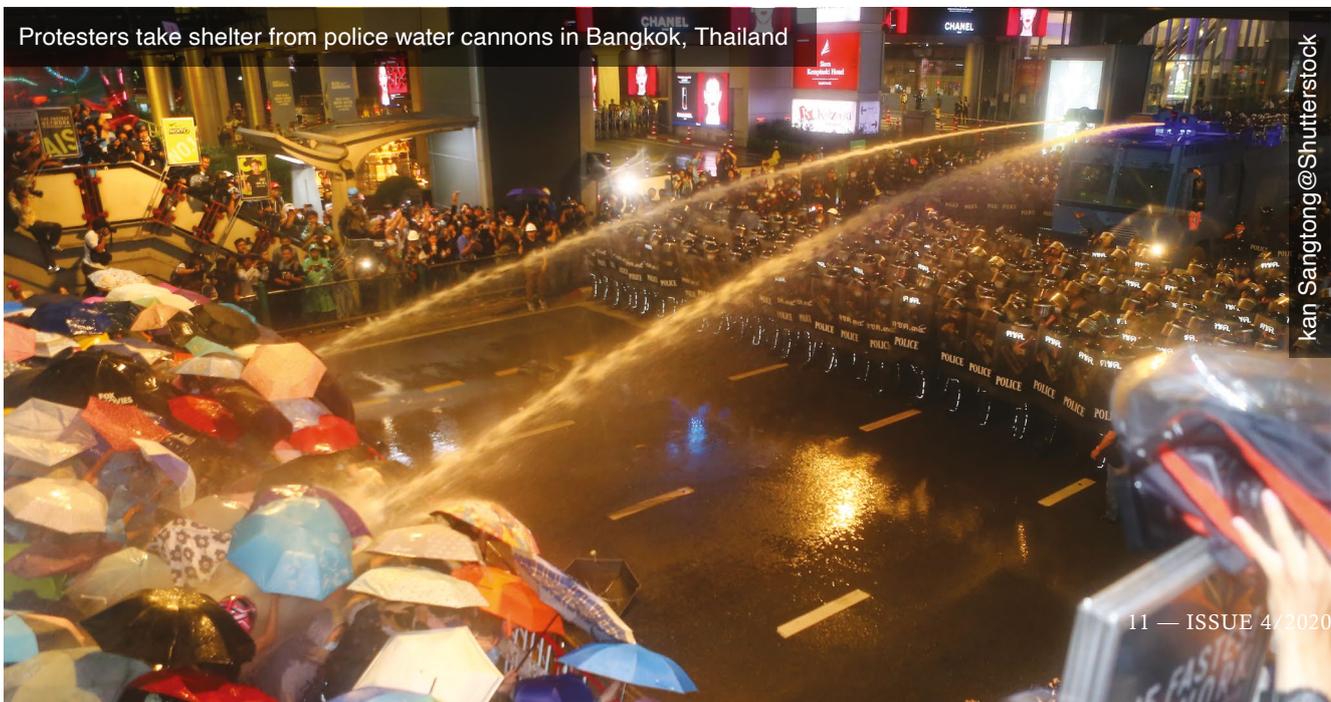
political outsider Joko Widodo in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2014 presidential election was boosted by the vigorous social media campaigns run by young volunteers. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, massive online protests and petitions succeeded in forcing concessions from the government on unpopular policies. These experiences instilled a strong sense of collective agency across Southeast Asian populations, facilitated by the new tool of social media.

Yet, hopes for democratic change proved to be premature. In Malaysia, the regime change was short-lived. In Indonesia, entrenched clientelism remained intact and corruption rampant. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it became clear that social media-driven mobilisations alone were not enough to leverage political opportunities for democratisation. At the same time, social media-driven protests awoke national authorities to the potential risks that an unfettered cyberspace might pose to national stability as well as their positions in power. Hence, finally recognising the digital sphere as a political battleground rather than an empty vessel, Southeast Asian states have responded in two ways: (i) implementing or tightening cyberlaws to regulate and restrict online political communications, typically on grounds of cybersecurity and national cohesion concerns, combined with anti-defamation and disinformation decrees; and (ii) also leveraging the digital sphere for regime consolidation and to increase popular support.

Ironically, the first type of response constructs disinformation as a threat to cybersecurity and national cohesion whereas the second type has led national authorities themselves onto a gliding scale of online propaganda. As a result, online propaganda as a political strategy, often with the use of cyber troops to spread hyper-partisan rhetoric on social media, has been on the rise in Southeast Asia especially since 2016. It is increasingly common to employ cyber troops to defend government policies and interests and discredit opponents, either through official social media teams of state public relations divisions, or through shadowy networks of operators of fake social media accounts and automated bots.

In Indonesia, both types of state online responses have become professionalised and more sophisticated especially since the 2019 elections, in which online campaign strategists for both incumbent president Joko Widodo and his contender Prabowo Subianto systematically deployed "buzzers" and bots to champion their candidate and attack the other on a massive scale. While this led to a stark polarisation of the online political landscape during the campaign period, Prabowo's inclusion into Widodo's cabinet after the elections allowed the government to develop a streamlined strategy of online propaganda to promote a single political narrative. With considerable resources being allocated to social media campaigns, the government's narrative has since increasingly come to dominate Indonesia's digital sphere.

The Transnational Power of Digital Youths

The youth-led protest movements in Indonesia and Thailand over the recent months show that the digital sphere continues to play a crucial role in the push for democratisation – especially for youths who were born into the digital era and embrace digital technologies as the organising principle of their movements. For them, there is no clear separation between online and offline action, nor between popular and political culture.

This blurring of boundaries is illustrated by recent protest scenes on the streets of Bangkok, where young demonstrators made the famous three-finger salute with one hand (adopted from the movie *The Hunger Games*), while holding a smartphone in the other to livestream the protest on social media. The physical action is thus designed to feed into the online action, and vice versa, so that the physical and digital spheres of protest mutually reinforce one another. This increases the impact of both and makes the protest less vulnerable to repression in either cyberspace or on the streets. Creative uses of digital technologies also facilitated a series of pop-up rallies by which they dodged the government's emergency ban on large gatherings. In response, the government pressured Internet providers and social media platforms to take down the protesters' pages and block access to popular messaging apps such as Telegram. But since the protesters did not depend on specific social media platforms, this did little to discourage them.

This protest strategy is clearly inspired by the "Be Water" tactics that activist youths in Hong Kong developed in response to growing repression. Indeed, activist youths in Thailand have been in close contact with peers from the Hong Kong protest movement as well as the Sunflower movement in Taiwan since 2016, when they formed the Network of Young Democratic Asians. In its current reincarnation as the Milk Tea Alliance, the network has expanded to youth movements in India, while contacts with activist youths in Indonesia are being forged. Digital technologies certainly facilitated the emergence and evolution of these transnational solidarity networks, by easing communications and idea exchanges and creating a common ground of generational experiences that have shaped a shared citizen identity as activist digital youths. While it remains to be seen if this transnational youth resistance is capable of bringing about political change, it is already giving shape to significant micro-level transformations in political culture.

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