

# Democratization in the Digital Era: Experience from Southeast Asia

Athiqah Nur Alami<sup>1</sup>, Dien Nguyen An Luong<sup>2</sup>, Ella Prihatini<sup>3</sup>,  
Eryan Ramadhani<sup>4</sup>, Jan Robert R. Go<sup>5</sup>, Noorul Hafidzah<sup>6</sup>,  
and Ummu Atiyah<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Center for Politics, National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>The ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore)

<sup>3,4</sup>International Relations Department, Faculty of Humanities,  
Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia 11480

<sup>5</sup>Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines

<sup>6</sup>School of Business & Social Sciences, Albukhary International University, Malaysia

<sup>7</sup>International Studies Department, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

athi001@brin.go.id<sup>1</sup>; dien\_nguyen\_an\_luong@iseas.edu.sg<sup>2</sup>; ella.prihatini@binus.edu<sup>3\*</sup>;  
eryan.tri@binus.ac.id<sup>4</sup>; jrgo1@up.edu.ph<sup>5</sup>; hafidzah.zawawi@aiu.edu.my<sup>6</sup>; atiyah@uum.edu.my<sup>7</sup>

\*Corresponding author

**How to Cite:** Alami, A. N., Luong, D. N. A., Prihatini, E., Ramadhani, E., Go, J. R. R., Hafidzah, N., & Atiyah, U. (2022). Democratization in the digital era: Experience from Southeast Asia. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 10(2), 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v10i2.9361>

## Abstract

Southeast Asia is home to about 8.5% of the world's total population and 10% of its internet users, yet it is also home to 12.7% of the world's social media users. The exponential growth in internet and social media utilization poses both opportunities and challenges towards democratization. The research aims to examine how the digital sphere may or may not support inclusive and deliberative democracy in the region. Using elaboration on case studies from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, the current study is reflecting on shared challenges and opportunities in preserving democracy amidst the rapid development of cyberspace as a mode of political communication. The findings suggest that digital space has been instrumental in harassing dissent or jailing opposition members in countries like the Philippines and Vietnam. On the other hand, the use of technology provides an opportunity to foster a more deliberative and inclusive democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia. The article contributes to the wider conversation on democracy and the digital sphere in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries.

**Keywords:** democratization, digital era, cyberspace, Southeast Asia

## Introduction

In the last ten years, internet penetration has increased at an unprecedented rate. At the end of 2011, over 2 billion people worldwide were using the internet, accounting for roughly 30% of the global population (Kemp, 2021). After ten years, the global user figure has risen to nearly 4 billion, with more than 6 in 10 people worldwide using the internet by the end of 2021. Similarly, the Southeast Asia region has seen exponential internet penetration growth and massive social media usage. Southeast Asia has about 8.5% of the world's total population and 10% of its internet users, but it also has 12.7% of the world's social media users (Kemp, 2021).

The scale of social media use in Southeast Asia is impressive, both in terms of the number of users and the average amount of time spent. Filipinos, for example, spend more time online than people in any other country on the planet (Kemp, 2021). Indonesia, the region's largest country, saw a fivefold increase in internet users in 2021 when compared to 2011. Indonesians now use the internet for an average of 9 hours per day, which is significantly more than the global average of just under 7 hours per day.

With such widespread participation in social media platforms, political communication on the internet has emerged as a burgeoning field, receiving significant attention from academics. Prihatini's (2020) observations on the utilization of social media by female lawmakers conclude that cyberspace is not always a safe option for their campaign strategy since opponents may apply money politics and snatch constituents' support. Hence, social media plays an insignificant role in their vote-consolidating processes. Talamayan (2020) suggests that the internet has been instrumental in silencing dissent or harassing or jailing opposition members in countries like Thailand and the Philippines. The practice of censorship and control in contemporary cyberspace has been widely used in Southeast Asia (Sinpeng, 2021), resulting in a significant threat to the quality of democracy (Sinpeng, 2020; Sinpeng & Koh, 2022).

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between democratization and the digital sphere. It aims to unpack both traditional and contemporary challenges faced by democracies in the region, particularly during the digital era, by drawing on the experience of Southeast Asian countries. It also seeks to identify cross-national opportunities and how the digital sphere can support inclusive and deliberative democracy. The article focuses on the shared challenges and opportunities for preserving democracy amid the rapid development of cyberspace as a mode of political communication.

### Democratization and the Digital Sphere

Rapid advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) have aided states in acquiring digital capacity. It does not spare democracies the desire to use digital surveillance under the guise of maintaining security and social order, even though it is frequently perceived as a tool used by authoritarian regimes to maintain their reign of power

and quell nuisances. The threat of terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks has prompted the passage of new legislation ensuring democratic state surveillance of its citizens (Bigo, 2017). States must therefore protect their citizens from threats, such as tracking the movement and funding of terrorists. Surveillance, on the other hand, can be indiscriminate in targeting groups and individuals who are critical of states, such as the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) monitoring of Amnesty International and Médecins du Monde (Dencik, Hintz, & Carey, 2018). Similarly, Poland's new Surveillance Law gives security forces the authority to spy on people who aren't even suspects (Rojszczak, 2021).

Furthermore, states can collaborate with private actors in this surveillance enterprise. It should be noted that technology companies collect and own a massive amount of user data (Zuboff, 2015). For example, the United States' PRISM Program grants the government access to the databases of technology companies such as Apple, Facebook, and Google (Berghel, 2013). In comparison, Indonesia's contentious Ministerial Regulation 5 (MR5) requires all technology companies, both domestic and multinational, "to register with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology and agree to provide access to their systems and data as specified in the regulation" (Lakhdhir, 2021). States can also ask Google to remove objectionable content from its platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram. Excessive use of digital surveillance does not bode well for democracy.

Constant monitoring can prevent the public from voicing their opinions and criticisms for fear of reprimanding (Penney, 2016; Stoycheff et al., 2019). Not only is online behavior affected by surveillance, but it also extends to the offline domain too, where individuals choose to play safe by being compliant, conformist, and submissive (Marder et al., 2016). This 'chilling effect' suppressed freedom of expression as one of the fundamental human rights protected by international law (Bernal, 2016). The International Covenant on the Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) rules in Article 19(2) that:

"Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice," (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1966).

Furthermore, Article 21 and Article 22 ensure the right of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association. Yet, these are equally undermined by state surveillance by intimidating opportunities for collective action (Stoycheff, Burgess, & Martucci, 2020). As activists utilize digital platforms to organize events and distribute messages, they have become easily targeted by states (Owen, 2017). The systematic repression of the Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies what Canella (2018) designates as "racialized surveillance" in the United States.

Goold (2010) once asked in his article, "How much surveillance is too much?" to which he answered, "We know that there is too much surveillance when citizens begin to fear the surveillance activities of the state, and no longer feel free to exercise their lawful rights for fear of unwanted scrutiny and possible censure," (Goold, 2010). Here, the key is citizens' experience, not merely state justification. The ICCPR underlines special circumstances where

such a right can be suspended – when it is misused for war propaganda and hate speech (national, racial, or religious) among others. Consequently, this rule implies that states can act on those issues, say, through censorship and content moderation. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) provides three indicators to determine justifiable surveillance: (1) it is conducted in accordance with the law, (2) it has legitimate aim, and (3) it is executed with necessity and proportionality (Watt, 2017).

Concerns remain, nevertheless, regarding the implementation of such criteria. The Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet) reported that in Indonesia digital attacks, such as hacking and doxing, have become increasingly political targeting government critics, including journalists and scholars (SAFEnet, 2022). The following section elaborates the regional experience in preserving democracy in the digital era. In some instances, the patterns in Southeast Asia resonate the global trends (Freedom House, 2021).

### **The Countries' Perspectives**

The following section offers a regional perspective on how democracy is surviving during the digital era. Using unique experience from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam, the country's case studies provide challenges and opportunities ranging from election transparency to state censorship.

#### *Indonesia*

This section aims to examine under what conditions the use of technology affected democratization in Indonesia. It argues that despite digitalization might destabilize democracy it facilitates Indonesia's democratic consolidation. The use of information technology such as social media provides more spaces for citizen's political participation. However, it poses risks in proliferating disinformation and hate speech that heighten social polarization among society. For example, President Joko Widodo referred to social media's paradoxical tendency toward destructive innovation, where the ease of access to information contrasts with Indonesian users' tendency to eschew facts and broadcast their biased views without proper evidence or academic research (Tyson & Apresian, 2021). President Widodo further argues that people use social media to attack, reproach, accuse, and vilify one another, which is not a true reflection of Indonesian culture or tradition.

Internet connectivity and technology have grown dramatically in Southeast Asia. Since then, technology has had an impact on its social, political, and cultural circumstances. As a result, the Internet has become ingrained in the political culture of the region. Furthermore, Southeast Asia is a notable region where individuals use online social networking sites at a significantly higher rate than the global average (Abbott, 2015). With more than 80% of Internet users in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines having an active Facebook profile, Facebook maintains its global dominance in cyberspace (Masna, 2011).

Social media networking and technological advancement are also visible in political life. Digitalization has influenced Indonesia's political activities in some ways. Power has shifted away from states because of digital technologies and the pervasiveness of corporate algorithms. Massive technological corporations are amassing enormous market and political power, as well as transforming into powerful information conduits. Several news outlets, for example, are run by Indonesian politicians. As a result of the combination of corporate media ownership and politics, Indonesia's digital democracy has faced challenges.

The term "digital literacy" refers to a community's ability to generate and critically evaluate knowledge as well as their ability to use digital information and technology in a variety of formats. In addition, digitalization has revealed a high level of digital illiteracy in Indonesian societies. Risks associated with technological advancement must be acknowledged in previous general and regional elections, such as the Jakarta governor race. Disinformation, hate discourse, and hate speech are examples of things that could destabilize our democracies.

As a result, the use of technology has increased social and political polarization, as well as identity politics among societies. Primordialism and identity politics were also visible during general elections, particularly the 2019 election of the President and Vice President. According to a Puskapol poll conducted at the University of Indonesia, the use of political buzzers in society has become one of the catalysts for increasing social polarization and identity politics (Puskapol, 2019). Other polls predict that ethnic, religious, racial, and intergroup (SARA) themes will be used more frequently in Indonesia's general elections in 2024, including regional and parliamentary elections as well as presidential elections.

A comparative study on regulating fake news in Southeast Asian region (Smith et al., 2021) finds that Indonesia has enacted the Law on Electronic Information and Transactions as amended in 2016 and Government Regulation on Trading Through Electronic Systems. In summary, the relevant offences under article 27 of the Act are to knowingly and without authority distribute and/or transmit and/or cause to be accessible electronic content which offends against propriety (article 27(1)), and/or affronts [sic] or defames (art. 27(3)), and/or extorts and/or threatens' (art. 27(4)). However, since there is no clarification as to what constitutes an offence against propriety or what constitutes the offence of affronting, it is left open to the courts to decide.

Despite its various implications on Indonesian political practices, the article argues that digitalization should be seen as an opportunity that has prospects for democratization in Indonesia. The rapid advancement of information and technologies, and the proliferation of online channels of social interaction could facilitate democratic consolidation. The consolidation of democracy is a discernible stage in the shift from authoritarian authority to civil government. Thus, to a democratic system, it is essential to the construction and enthronement of a stable, institutional, and long-lasting democracy (Oni, 2014). Moreover, a democratic regime should be consolidated when it is "likely to endure" (O'Donnell, 1996) and when we may expect it "to last well into the future" (Valenzuela, 1992).

These definitions highlight that democratic consolidation occurs when democratic standards are so ingrained in society and supported by political elites that there is no threat

of the regime reverting to illiberalism or autocracy. Digitalization and democratic consolidation have close links in several conditions. First, technology promotes equality and public inclusion, which is required for democratic consolidation. Digital activism will facilitate the formulation and implementation of public policies that reflect interests and development priorities by creating more venues for political participation that put citizens at the center. While fostering an open sphere, online activism provides numerous chances to aid democratization and cultivate an informed and engaged pro-democratic populace.

Secondly, digital democracy could improve accountability and transparency in democratic governance. Both transparency and accountability are the principles of good governance that indicate democratic consolidation. Therefore, the use of technology can promote government transparency, decentralization, public service delivery, and contact with citizens. They boost citizens' ability to monitor government behavior and voice their requirements to their legislators.

Finally, the utilization of technology in political activities will enhance effectiveness by providing effective services of democracy. Digital technology improves productivity in many areas, including elections. For instance, online databases greatly simplify developing and maintaining accurate and up-to-date electoral rolls. Therefore, it is critical to consider how the government might make it easier for citizens to exercise their political rights through digitalization in the digital age.

To sum up, the broader use of technology among societies to express their political rights may contribute to avoiding the breakdown of democracy and helping the completion and deepening of democracy in Indonesia.

### *Malaysia*

This section aims to analyze how digitalization accelerates the process of democratization of new and young people into Malaysian politics. It argues that digitalization emerges as an accelerator of democratic inclusion of these young people who previously were not in the circle. Digitalization has opened more expansive access to political participation and leadership among the youth and emerged as the catalyst for democratization. A youth NGO, Undi18, and the only youth-centric political party in the country—the Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA), are the reflective case studies.

Persatuan Pengundi Muda, known as Undi18, has made history in Malaysia when they successfully pushed for a constitutional amendment on the voting age in the country from 21 to 18 years old and automatic voter registration. The group was led by two young Malaysians, Qyira Yusri and Tharma Pillai. They were student leaders and members of the Malaysian Students Global Alliance (MSGA), established in 2016. The young MP Syed Saddiq from MUDA embraced this call and extended it to be tabled in the parliament. This amendment brings an addition of 6,23 million new voters, of which 1,4 million are aged between 18 to 20 years old. This group is known as the Undi18 voters (Azhar, 2022). This group will vote for the first time in Malaysia's upcoming 15th General Election (GE15) on the 19th of November 2022 (Election Commission of Malaysia, 2022).

The world's first Digital Parliament was another initiative organized by Undi18 with other youth organizations which intensified the democratization effort in the country, held in July 2020, powered by the Microsoft Team. This group convened a two-day session via live stream emulating the real parliament discussing and passing 'laws' and 'policies' related to the economy and education affecting youth. A diverse background, including women, minorities, disabled youth, and localities, makes up the 222 youth representatives who voluntarily represent their constituencies. An overwhelming 6.300 applications were received from the youth nationwide to be representatives in the digital parliament. The selected representatives have brought up various issues relating to the economy, specifically about the digital economy and the need to raise digital literacy. Strategies to enhance accessibility to Malaysians from the low-income group, young people living with disabilities, young migrants, stateless children, and other vulnerable communities were also deliberated. The session was viewed by more than 200,000 viewers (Gnaneswaran, 2020). This initiative provides a space and opportunity for the youth to be part of active nation-building and produce substantive democratization.

Democracy literacy is another effort by Undi18. They are active in preparing the youth, particularly the first-time voters, to experience and be exposed to democracy as well as making them politically informed citizens. They have produced many open access online media to educate voters on democracy, elections, voter registration, casting postal votes, and discourses on issues and policies in the country as well as capacity building (Undi18, 2022).

The Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) is the one and only political party for youth, found by the former Youth and Sports Minister Syed Saddiq in September 2020, who fought for Undi18's bill in the parliament. Through its Black Paper (Kertas Hitam), its philosophy should be "the True North" for MUDA members which carries six core values related to Physical, Human, Added, Financial, Social, and Institutional. They reminded the members that their participation, no matter through what means, can be a catalyst towards implementing organic change beyond the construction of race, religion, and demographics (Biro Dasar Muda, 2022).

MUDA is active in engaging with the youth. In its effort to engage the youth in politics, they have launched "literasiswa" (abbreviation for literasi politik mahasiswa or student political literacy). The initiative literalizes the young voters especially the first-time ones. The project educates the youth with political education concerning topics such as methods to check polling places, choose a candidate, vote, and register the postal vote. Nearing the 15th General Election, they promptly replaced the political education segment in the website with GE15 related pages where people can join or support the political force with just a click away to [www.muda.my](http://www.muda.my).

Undi18 and MUDA show how digital has significantly contributed to the democratization process by mainstreaming youth into the political process and system. Digitalization has accelerated youth political participation and leadership in politics. Data by Merdeka Center revealed that the internet is the primary source of information regarding the country's political and current affairs, sampled among 1.216 youth aged between 15 to 25 years old (Merdeka Center, 2022). It indicates that in the case of Malaysia, digitalization plays

an important role in expanding the parameter of democracy and enriching its democratization process. With the digital sphere filled with accessible information, polls, news, and interactive platforms maneuvered by the youth, democratization has taken to the next new level. Digitalization has made democracy substantive to young voters and enabled them to participate in and experience democratization. However, there is a concern for youth not within the accessibility of this digitalization sphere - because of the low internet quality and the high internet connection cost (Curtis et al., 2022). A holistic, inclusive, and sustainable action should be put in place to ensure no one is left behind in this digital democratization.

### *Philippines*

In the Philippines, the challenges it faces during the digital era are a function of its brand of democracy. Philippine-style democracy features some of the expected components of a democratic state, namely, the regular conduct of elections<sup>1</sup>. Beyond that, there are cracks in this iteration of democracy. Political dynasties dominate from the national down to the lowest levels of governance (Tadem & Tadem, 2016). Further, there is a tendency to “give up” the supposed democratic nature of government in favor of autocratic leaders after elections. The popularity of presidents after their election to office became a license for their administration to impose centralizing policies which concentrated power to the center. Thus, while politicians tend to appear consultative, democratic, and open, their policies and positions on issues are not necessarily so. Such tendencies reached their peak under the administration of Rodrigo Duterte, who was clearly populist in every aspect of his governance.

What exacerbated this style of democracy is the Filipinos’ high consumption of social media content. With the closure of the country’s largest television network ABS-CBN under Duterte, many Filipinos turned to social media to source their news. This is complemented by the proliferation of bloggers and vloggers, who presented themselves as alternatives to traditional media. Furthermore, telecommunication companies came up with promotions giving their subscribers free or “unlimited” Facebook and TikTok access. This made social media a new battleground for politicians, electoral campaigns, and strategists.

The digital era created the blurring of lines between facts and fiction. While this phenomenon is not exclusive to the Philippines, one can argue that the results of the last two elections in the country are a product of widespread misinformation and the proliferation of fabricated stories. On many occasions, rabid supporters of candidates discard historical facts in favor of “opinions” based on what they read on Facebook or watched on TikTok and YouTube. At a certain point, an anti-intellectualist discourse has risen in the Philippine social media sphere. Since one of the 2022 presidential candidates was Ferdinand Marcos Jr, whose father Marcos Sr served as president and used Martial Law to extend his power, many of his supporters attempted to revise history to favor the Marcoses and antagonize democracy fighters, including the late president Corazon Aquino, and his husband assassinated senator

<sup>1</sup>There could be additional provisos on what counts as democratic elections, such as free, fair, open, and honest. In appreciating Philippine electoral democracy, a minimalist definition was adopted which is the mere presence of periodic elections.

Benigno Aquino Jr. Without exaggeration, historians were called liars while bloggers and vloggers were hailed as exposers of alternative truth. The discourse turned questions of facts into matters of “opinions.”

A critical component of the phenomenon is understanding social media literacy. In the Philippines, while social media is widely used, there exists a problem of appreciating social media content, taking whatever is posted or seen as truth or facts. The issue of discernment cannot be more emphasized: Which is true? Which is not? Partly to blame is the substandard public education system. History classes at the basic education level barely cover the period of dictatorship. If at all, what is highlighted in the history textbooks is the construction projects under Marcos Sr’s rule for almost two decades. These books barely mention the atrocities of the dictatorship, including human rights violations and corruption of the Marcos family and his cronies. It makes the consuming public vulnerable to lies, deception and whitewashing in social media.

Unfortunately, the discussion on social media literacy also took a classist turn. As some started labeling opposing camps with names, it also heightened the class distinctions between supporters of one candidate against the other. For example, labels such as “bobotante” (stupid voter) were used to derogate Duterte and Marcos Jr supporters. On the other hand, the supporters of Leni Robredo claimed to be moralists, creating a sense of distance between the middle class and the masses. Such is indicative of the political polarization that brewed during the early years of the Duterte presidency and spilled over the Marcos Jr administration.

Since 2016, Philippine politics, arguably, has been widely polarized, with the help of troll armies, and supporters living within their respective echo chambers and filter bubbles. On the one hand, supporters of Duterte were named “DDS” or Duterte Die-hard Supporters. This is a play on the supposed meaning of DDS which is “Duterte Death Squad,” which Duterte was rumored to tap to eliminate lawbreakers and political enemies when he was still mayor of Davao City. On the other hand, the political opposition was labeled “Dilawan” (yellowish) in reference to supporters of former president Benigno Aquino III’s Liberal Party. These labels with derogatory intents were widely used in the social media as hashtags in Facebook and Twitter. In the 2022 presidential elections, new names were used to identify competing camps. Robredo’s supporters who wore pink during the campaign were called Pinklawan (a combination of pink and dilawan), while Marcos Jr supporters were labeled “pula”, the color of his campaign<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, if this is politics and democracy in the digital era, then it leaves behind an even larger community out of the picture. The reality is that the Philippines, despite the advancement in information and communication technology infrastructure, is not fully digital. The periphery remains disconnected to the online world where the debates and arguments occur. Indeed, the political discourse is not simply shaped in the social media or digital realm. Aside from social media literacy, this is perhaps one of the greatest challenges the country must face in the digital era – that there remains a segment of the population who

<sup>2</sup>As maybe noticed, political campaigns in the Philippines center on the individual candidates and not necessarily on their political parties. Thus, there is reference to their colors and personality.

are still not included in the digital world. Perhaps another question would be, at least in the case of the Philippines, should political discourse now be done in online mode?

### *Vietnam*

Vietnamese authorities have never ceased to fret over “toxic content” (nội dung xấu độc) on the internet; and indeed, the definition of “toxic content” has shifted over the years (Luong, 2017b). In the 1990s, “toxic content” was associated with pornography – so much so that in December 1996, to vouch for the arrival of the internet in Vietnam a year later, its advocates reportedly had to prove to Vietnam’s top leaders that pornographic websites could be blocked effectively (Duc, 2012). They succeeded, and the internet was officially launched in Vietnam a year later (Hoang An, & Nam, 2017), but on the condition that the World Wide Web was placed under state scrutiny and censorship. The stated need to censor pornographic content, however, masked a more significant concern of the powers that be: that the internet would unleash the floodgates of anti-government propaganda and facilitate a freer flow of information, which would end up posing major threats to the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party (Hiep, 2019).

A fixation on anti-state content has shaped how Vietnamese authorities have deployed various censorship strategies to achieve the dual goal of creating a superficial openness while maintaining their grip on online discourse.

The crackdown on what was perceived as anti-state content started all the way back in the early 2000s when the authorities started formulating several broadly worded and vague regulations on internet controls. During the 2001-2007 period, Vietnamese authorities publicly pointed their fingers at pornography and other sexually explicit content as a legitimate rationale for reining on the internet.

However, according to an in-depth report (<https://opennet.net/studies/vietnam>) by the OpenNet Initiative (2021), despite their public platitudes about curbing it, Vietnamese authorities virtually did not block any pornographic content between 2005 to 2006. The censors focused instead on what they perceived to be politically and religiously sensitive sites hosting anti-state content: corruption, ethnic unrest, and political opposition.

In fact, an analysis of all of Vietnam’s laws and regulations on internet controls during the 2001-2005 period shows that legal terms that fell under the category of “fine tradition and custom”, including pornography-related ones, were eclipsed by those under the “national security” category (Figure 1).



Perhaps the most prominent exhibit of the Vietnamese control model with Chinese characteristics is the 2018 Cybersecurity Law. This law appears to be dominantly dictated by the “Seven Bottom Lines”; a list of online behavior guidelines Beijing coined in 2013 to govern internet usage. The Vietnamese state’s formulation spells out seven barriers that social media posts must not transgress: 1) the rules and laws of the country, 2) the socialist system, 3) the country’s national interests, 4) the legitimate interests of the citizens, 5) public order, 6) morality, and 7) authentic information.

Those broad and vague dictums serve a dual purpose: 1) to enable the authorities to bend the implementation of the law to their will, and 2) to perpetuate self-censorship among internet users. However, it would be overly simplistic to frame the crackdown on high-profile and influential bloggers and activists as a sign of Vietnam tolerating little public criticism even in the online sphere. Vietnamese authorities have handled public political criticism, both online and in real life, with a calibrated mixture of toleration, responsiveness, and repression. In fact, responsiveness and legitimacy are even more crucial to the resilience of an authoritarian regime like Vietnam.

Responsiveness means the authorities have also looked to social media as a valuable yardstick to gauge public grievances and, wherever appropriate, take remedial actions to mollify the masses. Such public grievances have centered on environmental concerns and the government’s mishandling of bread-and-butter issues. They could be vented against a local move to build a cable car into what is billed as Vietnam’s cave kingdom (Luong, 2017a), a plan to fell nearly 7,000 trees in the capital of Hanoi (Peel, 2015), or a calamitous fish kill along the country’s central coastline (Pham & Nguyen, 2016).

The authorities have tried to appear as responsive to public sentiment online as they could, but not without some caveats: Collective action or social unrest, their *bête noire*, could arise from the fact that criticism of the government’s policies in a particular area quickly spreads to another, perpetuating a spiraling cycle of public disenchantment. Vietnam’s online movements – most of them initiated, coalesced, and sustained by youths during the 2014-2016 period – have revolved around that dynamic, which remains relevant today.

More than two decades since the internet’s arrival in Vietnam, anti-state content has been exhausted as a pretext for the authorities to rationalize reining in the online sphere (Figure 2). At the same time, Vietnam’s lack of political and technological wherewithal and limited home-grown social media platforms have throttled its efforts to match China in creating a “national internet” meant for the enforced blocking of Western social media platforms. Having tried for nearly a decade to exert greater control over information online, the Vietnamese authorities now recognize that they cannot act like China and ban foreign tech giants altogether. But on the other hand, the Vietnamese government has co-opted and utilized Big Tech on various fronts to the point that it would be all but possible to shut down the major social platform – chiefly Meta’s Facebook and Google’s YouTube – as they have threatened (Pearson, 2020).

Ironically, Facebook and YouTube have also become increasingly enmeshed in Vietnam’s online censorship mechanism (Cloud & Bengali, 2020). Case in point: From Facebook’s very top level – Mark Zuckerberg – the social media giant has also been upfront



On one hand, the internet creates a deepening polarization, strengthening the state's domination over individuals' political aspirations, and multiplying vile harassment. The government in Vietnam, for example, has been applying ultimate control over circulated messages on social media platforms by pushing the big-tech companies to subscribe to the government's desire. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, cyber trolls have been effectively exaggerating polarization among citizens as the digital era created the blurring of lines between facts and fiction. While this phenomenon is not exclusive to the Philippines, one can argue that the results of the last two elections in the country are a product of widespread misinformation and the proliferation of fabricated stories.

On the other hand, Malaysia has witnessed how young people could maximize their digital activism and create a wave of substantial political changes. Youngsters in Malaysia demanded for a lower minimum age (from 21 to 18 years old) to vote which will result in additional 6 million young voters participating in the upcoming elections. The case of Malaysia indicates that digitalization plays an important role in expanding the parameter of democracy and enriching its democratization process. From Indonesia, we learnt that digitalization has exposed digital illiteracy among its societies. Fueled with narratives produced by buzzers and cyber armies, identity politics and socio-political polarization have been unavoidable.

Further research is needed to unpack strategies to overcome state cyber censorship and to preserve freedom of speech amidst democratic stagnation in the Southeast Asian region. A likely research avenue from here is to investigate whether digital activism needs to investigate the success of other causes in other countries. Future research may look deeper into how states are copying each other in terms of suppressing dissent opinions and the critical junctures, and actors, involved during the process.

## **Acknowledgement**

This article is derived from a virtual Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on "Democratization in the Digital Era" held by the Department of International Relations, BINUS University, on October 14th, 2022. The FGD was part of the Journal of ASEAN Studies (JAS) Symposium organized in conjunction with a series of activities to commemorate the department's 10th anniversary. The authors would like to thank the editors of JAS and all committees. All authors contribute to the writing of the article and expressing no conflict of interest in any form.

## **About The Authors**

Athiqah Nur Alami is the Head of Research Center for Politics, the National Research and Innovation Agency (Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional-BRIN), Indonesia. She recently completed her Ph.D. from the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. Her main interests are Indonesia's foreign policy and migration governance

through the lens of gender perspective. Athiqah has been consistently working on Indonesia's foreign policy in the last ten years.

Dien Nguyen An Luong is currently a visiting fellow at the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore) and a fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (Harvard Kennedy School). His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and other publications. Dien has authored book chapters and monographs on the intersection of geopolitics and social media, online censorship, and journalism. He holds a master's degree from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism as a Fulbright scholar.

Ella Prihatini's research interests focus on women's political participation, gender studies of Asia, young voters, and social media usage in politics. Her works have been published in *Politics & Gender*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, *Contemporary Politics*, and *Women's Studies International Forum*. In 2019, Ella was listed by The Australian newspaper as Australia's top 40 researchers who are less than 10 years into their careers. Her book chapter published by Routledge (2022) examines the progress of women's substantive representation following the fall of Soeharto's authoritarianism regime.

Eryan Ramadhani is a lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Bina Nusantara University. Her current research focuses on the role of rhetoric in crisis decision-making. She holds a doctoral degree in international politics from the School of International Relations and Public Affairs (SIRPA), Fudan University, in Shanghai.

Jan Robert R Go is an assistant professor of political theory at the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman and currently Associate Dean for Research, Extension, and Publications of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (CSSP). He has been the managing editor of the *Philippine Political Science Journal (PPSJ)*. He received his doctoral degree in political theory from the Central China Normal University in Wuhan, China, in 2022.

Noorul Hafidzah is a lecturer in Albukhary International University. Her research interests are democratization, international political economy, and poverty. She received her doctoral degree in political science from Universiti Sains Malaysia. Currently, she is active in zero-poverty engagements as well as research.

Ummu Atiyah is an associate professor at the International Studies Department, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her research interest is relating to women in politics and leadership. Her book, *Women in the House Leadership in the Malaysian Parliament*, has won a national book award in 2020/2021 for the best political science book category. She also co-authored a book on Mahathir's leadership, co-edited a book on democracy, authored several book-chapters on women in election, leadership and empowerment, civil society, and terrorism. She is also actively engaging as a public intellectual and advocate, speaking on women's empowerment and leadership, and national politics on television, radio, and newspapers.

## References

- Abbott, J. (2015). Hype or hubris? The political impact of the Internet and social networking in Southeast Asia. In W. Case (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization* (1st Ed., pp. 213–234). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315674735-20>
- Azhar, K. (2022, October 25). *Special Report - GE15: Automatic registration of voters – not the youth – is the wild card*. The Edge Markets. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/special-report-ge15-automatic-registration-voters-%E2%80%94-youth-%E2%80%94-wild-card>
- Berghel, H. (2013). Through the PRISM Darkly. *Computer*, 46(7), 86–90. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MC.2013.253>
- Bernal, P. (2016). Data gathering, surveillance and human rights: recasting the debate. *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 1(2), 243–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2016.1228990>
- Bigo, D. (2017). Digital Surveillance and Everyday Democracy. In L. Weber, E. Fishwick, & M. Marmo (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Criminology and Human Rights* (pp. 125–135). Routledge.
- Biro Dasar Muda. (2022, October 22). *Kertas Hitam MUDA. Parti MUDA*. <https://muda.my/pru15/kertashitam/>
- Blanchard, B. (2009, July 6). China tightens Web screws after Xinjiang riot. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-internet-idUSTRE5651K420090706>
- Canella, G. (2018). Racialized surveillance: Activist media and the policing of Black bodies. *Communication Culture & Critique*, 11(3), 378–398. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcy013>
- Clark, H. (2013, August 21). Vietnam's dysfunctional relationship with the web. *Index on Censorship*. <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/08/vietnams-dysfunctional-relationship-with-the-web/>
- Cloud, D. S., & Bengali, S. (2020, October 22). How Facebook censorship helps suppress dissent in Vietnam. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-10-22/facebook-censorship-suppress-dissent-vietnam>
- Cong an Nhan dan. (2020, October 8). *Facebook sẽ chặn quảng cáo chính trị từ các tài khoản phản động* [Facebook will block political ads from subversive accounts]. Cong an Nhan dan. [https://congan.com.vn/tin-chinh/facebook-se-chan-quang-cao-chinh-tritu-cac-tai-khoan-phan-dong\\_100905.html](https://congan.com.vn/tin-chinh/facebook-se-chan-quang-cao-chinh-tritu-cac-tai-khoan-phan-dong_100905.html)
- Curtis, H., Hogeveen, B., Kang, J., Le Thu, H., Rajagopalan, R. P., & T., R. (2022). *Digital Southeast Asia. Opportunities for Australia-India cooperation to support the region in the post Covid-19 context* (No. 57). Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

<https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Digital-Southeast-Asia.pdf>

Deans, J. (2005, June 7). China cracks down on bloggers. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/jun/07/chinathemedia.digitalmedia1>

Dencik, L., Hintz, A., & Carey, Z. (2018). Prediction, pre-emption and limits to dissent: Social media and big data uses for policing protests in the United Kingdom. *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1433–1450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817697722>

Duc, H. (2012). *Ben Thang Cuoc (II Quyen Binh)*. OsinBook.

Dwoskin, E., Newmyer, T., & Mahtani, S. (2021, October 25). The Case Against Mark Zuckerberg: Insiders Say Facebook’s CEO Chose Growth over Safety. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-whistleblower/>

Election Commission of Malaysia. (2022). *Portal Rasmi Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya Malaysia (SPR)*. Election Commission of Malaysia. <https://www.spr.gov.my/>

Freedom House. (2021). *Freedom on The Net 2021: The Global Drive to Control Big Tech*. [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN\\_2021\\_Complete\\_Booklet\\_09162021\\_FINAL\\_UPDATED.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN_2021_Complete_Booklet_09162021_FINAL_UPDATED.pdf)

Gnanaswaran, D. (2020, July 17). *The world’s first-ever youth-led digital “parliament” goes live with Microsoft Teams*. Microsoft Malaysia News Center. <https://news.microsoft.com/en-my/2020/07/17/worlds-first-ever-youth-led-digital-parliament-goes-remote-with-microsoft-teams/>

Goold, B. J. (2010). How much surveillance is too much? Some thoughts on surveillance, democracy, and the political value of privacy. In D. W. Scharf (Ed.), *Overvåkning i en rettsstat – Surveillance in a Constitutional Government* (pp. 38–48). Fagbokforlaget.

Hiep, L. H. (2019). The political economy of social media in Vietnam. *ISEAS Perspective*, 2019(77), 1–7. [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_77.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_77.pdf)

Hoang, D., An, C., & Nam, D. (2017, November 22). Connected for 20 years: How the internet has changed life in Vietnam. *VnExpress International*. <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel-life/connected-for-20-years-how-the-internet-has-changed-life-in-vietnam-3674013.html>

Kemp, S. (2021, November 29). *A Decade in Digital*. DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. [https://datareportal.com/reports/a-decade-in-digital?utm\\_source=Global\\_Digital\\_Reports&utm\\_medium=Partner\\_Article&utm\\_campaign=Digital\\_2022](https://datareportal.com/reports/a-decade-in-digital?utm_source=Global_Digital_Reports&utm_medium=Partner_Article&utm_campaign=Digital_2022)

- Lakhdhir, L. (2021, May 21). Indonesia: Suspend, Revise New Internet Regulation. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/21/indonesia-suspend-revise-new-internet-regulation>
- Luong, D. (2017a, February 2). In Facebook, young Vietnamese see an ally. *VnExpress*. <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/in-facebook-young-vietnamese-see-an-ally-3535044.html>
- Luong, D. (2017b, November 30). Vietnam Wants to Control Social Media? Too Late. *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/opinion/vietnam-social-media-china.html>
- Marder, B., Joinson, A., Shankar, A., & Houghton, D. (2016). The extended “chilling” effect of Facebook: The cold reality of ubiquitous social networking. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 60, 582–592. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.097>
- Masna, A. (2011). *Indonesia is Just Getting Started on the Internet*. DailySocial. <https://dailysocial.id/post/indonesia-is-just-getting-started-on-the-internet>
- Merdeka Center. (2022, September 20). Highlights of Muslim Youth Survey. Merdeka Center. <https://merdeka.org/v2/download/highlights-of-muslim-youth-survey/>
- NBC. (2006, June 30). China cracks down on blogs, search engines. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna13628295>
- O’Donnell, G. A. (1996). Illusions about consolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(2), 34–51. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1996.0034>
- Oni, E. O. (2014). The challenges of democratic consolidation in Nigeria 1999-2007. *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance in Nigeria*, 5(5), 1–29. <http://www.onlineresearchjournals.com/ijopagg/art/145.pdf>
- OpenNet Initiative. (2012). *Information Controls in Vietnam*. <https://opennet.net/blog/2012/09/update-threats-freedom-expression-online-vietnam>
- Owen, S. (2017). Monitoring social media and protest movements: ensuring political order through surveillance and surveillance discourse. *Social Identities*, 23(6), 688–700. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1291092>
- Pearson, J. (2020, November 20). Exclusive: Vietnam threatens to shut down Facebook over censorship requests - source. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/vietnam-facebook-shutdown-idUSKBN28007K>
- Peel, M. (2015, March 27). Hanoi residents mobilise to save city’s cherished trees. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/54d07f2a-d462-11e4-8be8-00144feab7de>
- Penney, J. W. (2016). Chilling effects: Online surveillance and Wikipedia use. *Berkeley Technology Law Journal*, 31(1), 117–182. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38SS1>

- Pham, M. & Nguyen, M. (2016, December 24). Vietnam says recovery from Formosa industrial disaster could take a decade. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-environment-formosa-plastics-idUSKBN14C1F5>
- Prihatini, E. (2020). Women and social media during legislative elections in Indonesia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 83, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102417>
- Puskapol UI. (2019). *Politik Identitas Dalam Kampanye Pemilu 2019 [Identity Politics in the 2019 Election Campaign]*. Puskapol UI. <https://www.puskapol.ui.ac.id/publikasi-puskapol/politik-identitas-dalam-kampanye-pemilu-2019-2.html>
- Rojszczak, M. (2021). Surveillance, legal restraints and dismantling democracy: Lessons from Poland. *Democracy and Security*, 17(1), 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2020.1841367>
- SAFEnet. (2022, March 5). Digital Rights Situation Report Indonesia 2021: In Indonesia, Digital Repression Keep Continues. SAFEnet. <https://safenet.or.id/2022/03/in-indonesia-digital-repression-is-keep-continues/>
- Sinpeng, A. (2020). Digital media, political authoritarianism, and Internet controls in Southeast Asia. *Media Culture & Society*, 42(1), 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719884052>
- Sinpeng, A. (2021). *Opposing Democracy in the Digital Age*. University of Michigan Press. [https://www.press.umich.edu/11666233/opposing\\_democracy\\_in\\_the\\_digital\\_age](https://www.press.umich.edu/11666233/opposing_democracy_in_the_digital_age)
- Sinpeng, A., & Koh, Y. (2022). Journalism in the Age of Digital Autocracy: A Comparative ASEAN Perspective. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 10(2). (in press) <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v10i2.9162>
- Smith, R. B., Perry, M., & Smith, N. N. (2021). Fake News in ASEAN: Legislative Responses. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 9(2), 117-137. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v9i2.7506>
- Stocking, B. (2009, November 17). Vietnam Internet users fear Facebook blackout. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/vietnam-internet-users-fear-facebook-blackout-20091117-iki0.html>
- Stoycheff, E., Burgess, G. S., & Martucci, M. C. (2020). Online censorship and digital surveillance: the relationship between suppression technologies and democratization across countries. *Information, Communication and Society*, 23(4), 474-490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1518472>
- Stoycheff, E., Liu, J., Xu, K., & Wibowo, K. (2019). Privacy and the Panopticon: Online mass surveillance's deterrence and chilling effects. *New Media & Society*, 21(3), 602-619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144481880131>

- Tadem, T. S. E. & Tadem, E. C. (2016). Political dynasties in the Philippines: Persistent patterns, perennial problems. *South East Asia Research*, 24(3), 328–340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X16659730>
- Talamayan, F. (2020). Policing Cyberspace: Understanding Online Repression in Thailand and the Philippines. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 8(2), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v8i2.6769>
- Tyson, A., & Apresian, S. (2021). What's Wrong With Us? An Analysis of Indonesian President Joko Widodo's Public Speeches from 2017 to 2018. *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, 9(2), 219–239. <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v9i2.7318>
- Undi18 (Persatuan Pengundi Muda). (2022). Undi18. *Youtube*. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHm6jB9JkBBT9Fc6JThntWg>
- United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (1966). *International Covenant on the Civil and Political Rights*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>
- Valenzuela, J. (1992). Labour movements and political systems: Some variations. In M. Regini (Eds.), *The Future of Labour Movements* (pp. 53–101). Sage.
- Watt, E. (2017). The right to privacy and the future of mass surveillance. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 21(7), 773–799. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1298091>
- Zuboff, S. (2015). Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization. *Journal of Information Technology Impact*, 30(1), 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5>