

BOOK REVIEW

Politics in Southeast Asia in the Age of Social Media

Ed. by Ken MIICHI and Yuka KAYANE, Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2020*

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In 2018, the internet population in the world exceeded half of the total population. Now more than four billion people have access to the internet, three billion of whom use social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Social media enables everyone to transmit, share, and collect information at a very low cost. Social media is literally “social,” as it can influence users’ thoughts and behaviors. The internet and especially social media played very important roles in the so-called “Arab Spring” that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. Since then, the positive aspects of the use of social media, especially in countries where freedom of speech and of the press are restricted, have been emphasized. While the “old media” such as newspapers, radio broadcasting, and television can be controlled by the government relatively easily, the internet and social media are thought to be more difficult to control. Social media has become regarded as an important tool for overcoming government control, as it can lower the hurdle for political participation and for expressing critical opinions of the government, and thus it can strengthen democracy.

The negative aspects of the internet and social media use on democracy have been mostly overlooked until recently. However, power elites have gradually learned not only how to counter objections by the public through social media, but how to utilize social media to consolidate their political power. They attempt to spread discourses supporting their policies, justifying their misconduct such as human rights violations, or criticizing their political rivals through social media. Such attempts are made by spreading fake news and fomenting social as well as political cleavage and confrontation. Social media can be a serious threat to democracy when used to fragment society and to build walls to divide it.

Politics in Southeast Asia in the Age of Social Media, edited by Ken Miichi and Yuka Kayane, examines the positive as well as the negative impacts of the use of social media on politics in Southeast Asia. The penetration rate of social media in Southeast Asia is very high. While the average penetration rate of social media in the world’s population age thirteen and over was 58 percent in January 2019, in Southeast Asia, it was 78 percent. In addition, the average time people spend on social media is extremely long in Southeast Asia. While it is 2 hours 16 minutes a day globally, it is

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more than four hours in the Philippines and three and a half hours in Indonesia. As democracy has not been consolidated in most Southeast Asian countries, both positive and negative impacts of the increasing use of social media on democracy can be observed there.

The first two chapters of this book focus on Indonesia, whose democracy is the most consolidated in Southeast Asia. Chapter 1 examines the way political elites have tried to manipulate public opinion using social media. Political elites use social media to create an “enemy” and instill “fear” among the public, and to present themselves and their policies as a “saviors”. Chapter 2 analyzes how an Indonesian Muslim preacher, Abdul Somad, successfully scaled up support for Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikoesoemo in the 2019 presidential election. Abdul Somad used social media skillfully to frame the government as anti-Islamic and authoritarian and to create a sense of aversion to the incumbent president Joko Widodo among Muslims. While such social media strategies helped the political elites and the preacher to pursue their political goals to a certain extent, the strategies accelerated the fragmentation of society and the disfunction of democracy.

The next two chapters focus on the Philippines. Chapter 3 looks at why the approval rate of President Rodrigo Duterte remains extremely high despite the fact that his anti-drug policies have produced more than 10,000 casualties. It does so by analyzing the discourses on social media. Chapter 3 points out that the majority of the public who view themselves as “good citizens” see traditional elites and drug dealers/users as “immoral others”. Good citizens' anger and hope resonated well with the discourses, including fake information on Duterte in social media, and this constructed an image of Duterte as a “social bandit” saving good citizens from immoral others. Chapter 4 examines the impact of the increasing use of social media on security sector governance. By focusing on the Battle of Marawi in 2017, this chapter sheds light on the limitations of monitoring the military through social media.

The last three chapters deal with countries where democracy is less consolidated compared to Indonesia and the Philippines. Chapter 5 analyzes the impact of the use of social media on democracy in Malaysia. While the level of democratic consolidation is regarded as lower than Indonesia and the Philippines, the level of internet freedom in Malaysia is ranked higher than in Indonesia. Against this backdrop, this chapter finds that the increasing use of social media in Malaysia led to the first change of government achieved via an election and to a change in political dynamics. Chapter 6 examines the case of Myanmar after its shift to civilian rule in 2011. The increasing use of social media in Myanmar helped Aung San Suu Kyi and her party to win the general election in 2015 and gain power. On the other hand, the spread of hate speech and fake news about the Muslim population (known as Rohingya) in social media led to violent conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists. To prevent such conflicts from occurring and criticism of the government from spreading, the government started to strengthen restrictions on freedom of speech. The increasing use of social media both promoted and, at the same time, stagnated democratic consolidation in Myanmar. Chapter 7, in turn, studies the way the Thai government, which is controlled by the army, attempts to control information, by examining the operations of the Army Cyber Center. The confrontation between the pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin sides grew intense as the use of social media increased. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the government strengthened information controls on social media and thus stifled democracy.

The analyses in each chapter are very interesting and have a lot of insights into the relationship between the increasing use of social media and democracy. The negative impacts of the increasing use of social media that have been observed in the Southeast Asian countries could be precedents for more mature democratic countries. In fact, similar phenomena have been observed in highly democratized

countries. Worsening fragmentation of societies due to the misuse of social media has been observed in many. One prominent example is the United States, as we have observed how the fragmentation of the society has damaged democracy during and after the 2020 US presidential election. Thus, this edited volume provides plenty of food for thought regarding the relationship between social media and democracy beyond Southeast Asia.

It is a pity, however, that this book did not compare and analyze the findings of each chapter to generalize the relationship between democracy and social media overall. Of course, as the editors of this volume suggested, the use of social media is in the process of increasing. As related technologies are rapidly advancing, it is too soon to determine the impact of the increasing use of social media on democracy. Still, it would be more interesting if this volume conducted even a preliminary analysis on, for example, what could promote and prevent the negative impact of social media on democracy, by comparing the cases examined in this volume. In any case, going forward, it will be very important to analyze how to make the most of social media's positive aspects while limiting its negative influence on democracy or on daily life in general. Research in this regard is eagerly anticipated.