When the People Have a Voice:
The Value of Free Social Media in Southeast Asia
By Mong Palatino

The recent coup in Thailand underscored a trend that is evident throughout Southeast Asia — growing numbers of the region’s citizens are turning to the Internet and social media platforms to express discontent with their governments and to engage in political discourse. In reaction, governments are seeking new and indirect ways to contain, and control, online dissent, writes Mong Palatino.

WHEN THE ROYAL THAI ARMY launched a coup in Thailand on May 22, the generals announced it through social media accounts. This makes sense, considering that about a third of Thailand’s population of 67 million has access to the Internet.

And after the army seized control of major media outlets, information about the coup and the political situation was widely shared through social media. This explains why the army, since it declared martial law in the early hours of May 20, has repeatedly asked Thai netizens to co-operate with the junta or else face prosecution. It even convened dozens of local Internet providers and told them to filter “inappropriate” websites and other web content it deemed harmful.

As mainstream media were put under tight regulation, only social media provided reliable updates about the coup, its impact on Thai politics and the opposition it sparked. “Flash mobs” organized via Twitter in the days following the Thai coup worried the military and have reportedly led to the arrest of some organizers who were tracked down by intelligence operatives tracing their mobile Internet use.

Despite threatening to impose a total Internet blackout, the army has so far failed to do this. Thankfully, many Thais did not flinch in giving regular reports about the new post-coup regime. Even the seemingly strange proliferation of “coup selfies” — citizens and tourists photographing themselves alongside soldiers — informed the world that soldiers were indeed deployed on the streets of Bangkok near malls, public transit stations and government buildings.

Thailand’s social media community, assuming the military does not derail it over time, perfectly illustrates the phenomenal rise of social media, not just there, but in the Southeast Asian region as a whole. It also confirms the status of Southeast Asia as one of the world’s most important IT markets. About 34 percent of the 600 million Southeast Asians have Internet access. Filipinos and Thais are among the most active social media users worldwide, according to global surveys. Indonesia, through its sheer size, is considered a strategic IT hub.

Southeast Asia’s social media activities are actually driving the growth of e-commerce, mobile gaming, startups and various software apps. But as the Thai coup underscored, the unrestrained advance of social media has made many leaders in the region suspicious of its political influence. And this cynical attitude is one reason why measures to regulate the Internet have also grown in recent years.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA VOTE

The most evident political value of social media is its increased role during elections. Social media campaigning is now necessary to win the support of young voters as politicians must speak the language of the Internet to effectively deliver their campaign platforms. They have to spend time interacting with voters and even non-voters in the virtual world to get the support of the networked generation.

Proof of this “new normal” is the way Indonesian elections have been strongly influenced by the expectations and reactions of the large social media community there. It is no longer enough that a candidate has party backing; he or she must have a dynamic online profile. In the current presidential race, which will be settled on July 9, both retired General Prabowo Subianto and Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo have sophisticated social media teams that trade accusations and allegations steadily on various platforms. Indeed, the campaign on social media is widely seen as perhaps the most important aspect of the race for urban voters.

Of course, political parties can ignore social media and still win elections. This happened in Cambodia in 2013, where the winning party — the long-ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) of Prime Minister Hun Sen — never integrated Internet campaigning into its overall election strategy. In contrast, the opposition actively campaigned through the Internet and recruited many volunteers; it still lost in the final count (although the opposition accused the government of electoral fraud), but it gained many seats in parliament at the expense of the ruling party, which has been in power for three decades.

Hun Sen, who is Southeast Asia’s longest serving head of state, publically expressed his frustration with many Facebook users during his first major post-election speech in parliament. “The government has no policy to close Facebook, but I would like to appeal to people not to let Facebook become a tool to damage social stability and insult people.”

LIGHT TOUCH REGULATION

As social media becomes more ubiquitous, governments respond by acknowledging its immense impact on information-sharing and global communication, but many of them also say it undermines traditional Asian values. Governments are aware of the Internet’s enormous popularity, especially among young people, which explains the reluctance to impose absolute online censorship. They avoid excessive web filtering in order not to provoke mass outrage, but they still try to tame the Internet through sophisticated measures that enhance the regulatory powers of the state while diminishing opportunities for online free expression.
The Power of Social Media to Transform Asia for Better and Worse

Politicians usually remind the public of their conservative heritage every time they introduce policies that restrict Internet activities to fight indecent behavior. Most often, the target is sexual content, something that is still taboo in many countries in the region.

Indonesia is most active in monitoring the web for immoral content. Police conduct random inspections in schools, where mobile phones of students are checked for porn downloads, and regulators sometimes block even legitimate and popular websites such as Reddit and Vimeo for purportedly allowing the uploading of porn videos on their portals.

But the war against indecent behavior can also intentionally or unintentionally target enemies and critics of the state. What if a ruling party accuses the opposition of engaging in immoral and indecent activities? What if online criticism of government policies is suddenly interpreted as a cybercrime?

When the nationwide implementation of Sharia Law in Brunei was announced earlier this year, it was met with fierce online reactions. The Sultan of Brunei quickly threatened netizens with prosecution if they “continue with their mockery” of the law.

Even before martial law was declared in Thailand, the police were warning social media users that it was a crime to “like” or share subversive Facebook posts or web content that undermined national security or insulted the monarchy.

Cambodia has a draft cybercrime law penalizing any online publication that “generates insecurity, instability, and political cohesiveness.” What exactly is “political cohesiveness?”

The Philippine Supreme Court, meanwhile, has affirmed the legality of a cybercrime law that

Singapore’s Internet policy is appropriately named “light touch,” which means only “minimum standards are set for the responsible use of the Internet.” This approach to regulating online activity essentially captures the policy framework adopted by many Southeast Asian governments: Minimum regulation that leads to effective control of the Internet.

In Singapore, this has meant requiring news websites to apply for a license that includes a condition demanding compliance within 24 hours if the government orders the removal of “content that is found to be in breach of content standards.” Further, political websites must reveal their sources of funding and submit the personal details of their editors and staff.

So far, mainstream news websites like Yahoo Singapore have been covered by this ruling, but a popular socio-political website Breakfast Network was forced to shut down last December after it failed to apply for a license. In this case, “light touch” became an indirect form of censorship.

CYBERCRIME AS AN EXCUSE

The most common and perhaps the least controversial Internet legislation deals with protecting the public from various cybercrimes such as data interference, computer fraud, illegal access, child pornography, hate speech and bullying. Governments find it easier to build a broad consensus for penalizing those who assault minors or insult and violate traditional norms.

As the Thai coup underscored, the unrestrained advance of social media has made many leaders in the region suspicious of its political influence. And this cynical attitude is one reason why measures to regulate the Internet have also grown in recent years.

As the Thai coup underscored, the unrestrained advance of social media has made many leaders in the region suspicious of its political influence. And this cynical attitude is one reason why measures to regulate the Internet have also grown in recent years.
contains a provision imposing a higher penalty for online libel than traditional libel.

As social media usage intensifies, the list of computer-related crimes is also growing. There is a recent worrying trend of public officials taking or threatening to take legal action against online critics. In Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is suing blogger Roy Ngering for libel over claims of corruption made on his blog. An apology from the blogger has not stopped the suit.

In Thailand, Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has filed a case against Malaysianakini, the country’s largest independent news portal, for allowing users to write and post “seditious” comments. Coup or no coup, Thailand is notorious for imprisoning citizens accused of sending SMS messages or writing web comments that allegedly insult the royal family — a crime under Thailand’s lèse majesté laws.

Cybercrime legislation is also a crucial policy tool to enhance trade, promote the growth of the IT sector, empower Internet users and protect data and national security systems from various cyber attacks. But in Southeast Asia, the policy objectives have been expanded to impose stricter control over the media and the Internet.

Myanmar and Vietnam provide examples of how online censorship is directly and indirectly undertaken by ruling parties.

**MYANMAR IN TRANSITION**

In Myanmar, there has been an easing of media regulations in recent years, but the lingering effect of censorship is still felt even in cyberspace. Connectivity problems often prevent many Burmese from accessing the web and Myanmar’s Internet woes are largely related to the country’s creaky infrastructure. However, the government is also accused of deliberately preventing the improvement of Internet connections in an effort to control the spread of critical information. Censorship also may be indirectly enforced by controlling Internet speed and making it difficult for citizens to acquire cheap telephone handsets and SIM cards.

In common with many societies in transition, Myanmar is currently besieged by growing ethnic and religious conflicts, some of which have turned violent, especially clashes between radical Buddhist monks and the Muslim minority. The crisis is reflected too in Myanmar’s social media, where young people who are hungry for information and political engagement are actively discussing and sharing their personal convictions. But what needs to be addressed is the alarming rise of racist remarks and hate speech on the Internet against the Muslim minority and other persecuted ethnic groups. If this threat is not immediately addressed, the military-backed government could invoke this as a reason to impose more restrictions on Myanmar’s new media.

**DISSIDENT BLOGGERS IN VIETNAM**

Vietnam’s mainstream media remain under strict state surveillance and licensing, while social media networks are regularly blocked. Dissident bloggers continue to push the boundaries despite arrests and harsh prison sentences.

The government often uses Article 88 of the Criminal Code, which bans anti-state propaganda, to detain bloggers who oppose the government. Last year, Decree 72 took effect, putting into force a law that many activists have described as the harshest legal offensive yet against freedom of information. The new regulation bans the sharing of news stories or “compilied information.” But the government claims it is intended only to protect intellectual property.

Also last year, Vietnam’s prime minister issued a directive ordering a crackdown on “reactionary” blogs. Broadly speaking, vague provisions in the law allow authorities to make arbitrary arrests with little accountability.

But if Vietnam scored low on Internet freedom because of its record of jailing dissident bloggers and blocking social networks, its netizens, meanwhile, are demonstrating the potential of the Internet to promote political causes. Doan Trang, a dissident blogger, observed that a growing number of Vietnamese bloggers have been tackling human rights and other political issues.

“Despite the emotional style which may sometimes reveal their non-professionalism, they filled the vacuum left by the mainstream media, which in most cases would only report news without producing any in-depth analysis,” he wrote on his blog.

Facebook is regularly blocked in Vietnam, but this hasn’t stopped Vietnamese users from maximizing it to promote various causes. They often create humorous Internet memes to dodge censors, which have proven effective in spreading news and alternative views. The recent maritime tension between China and Vietnam saw the emergence of a vibrant and nationalistic online campaign that united netizens in opposing China’s aggressive behavior in the South China Sea.

But for political analyst Patrick Sharpbaugh, this movement could have a lasting impact on domestic politics. “Once this latest flare-up has passed, users there will have had a strong taste of what it is like to feel comfortable with expressing political sentiment online,” he wrote on article-sharing website Medium on May 16.

Speaking of social media-driven protests, Malaysia’s Bersih (Clean) and the Philippines’ Million People March are outstanding examples of how the Internet can inspire offline political interventions. Bersih united thousands of Malaysians in opposing election fraud, which seriously undermined the legitimacy of the country’s ruling coalition in national elections last year.

Angered by seething corruption, Filipino netizens, meanwhile, succeeded in organizing a massive rally in the nation’s capital in the aftermath of the “pork barrel” scandal that tarred numerous high-profile legislators last year.

In Thailand, the anti-coup opposition has the potential to develop into a broad and popular pro-democracy campaign. Social media has been the primary tool used by protesters to share news, launch creative protests and organize opposition to the coup regime, which the military has worked hard to counter. It is anybody’s guess if the opposition will become a decisive factor as events unfold.

Could these various innovative protests lead to Arab Spring-like uprisings?

Perhaps yes. But so far, these protests have not yet reached the level where governments have been removed from power. The greater challenge is how to make social media in Southeast Asia more accessible to a wider audience, especially the poorest of the poor. Except for Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, Internet penetration remains low in the region. Social media influence may be growing, but it must reach the majority of the population to have a lasting and radical political impact.

For now, it seems that the governments of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have succeeded in creating at least one common platform across ASEAN — namely, a regulatory environment that is aimed at subtly and not so subtly undermining free speech and trying to control the media. This has to be reversed and, instead, Southeast Asian governments should embrace the liberating power of social media.

**Mong Palatino served for two terms in the Philippine House of Representatives. He is currently Southeast Asia Editor for Global Voices (globalvoicesonline.org).**