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Social media, activist movements,
and state power in Southeast Asia

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The Region

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Above: Men use computers at an internet cafe
in Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo: Reuters.

toleration, responsiveness, and repression. In fact, responsiveness and legitimacy are all the more crucial to the resilience of an authoritarian regime like Vietnam.

Authorities have sometimes looked to social media as a useful yardstick to gauge public grievances and, wherever appropriate, take remedial actions to mollify the masses. Such public grievances have centred on environmental concern 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,[12] a plan to fell nearly 7,000 trees in the capital of Hanoi,[13] or a calamitous fish kill along the country's central coastline.[14]

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 certain area quickly spreads to another, perpetuating a spiralling 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 (see Chart 2). Since 2008, Facebook has become part and parcel of Vietnam's online censorship regime. 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 they may have realized that it is a tall order to build a domestic social networking site that could stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of China's WeChat or

Weibo. In that context, it remains to be seen if Vietnam has the incentive to erect a China-style internet firewall, given that it has been able to somehow co-opt Facebook and YouTube.

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Digital media: an emerging barometer of public opinion in Malaysia

Pauline Pooi Yin Leong

Digital media has become an essential communication channel for both the government and the opposition in Malaysia, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media is the platform that politicians and their parties use to issue press releases and to livestream their press conferences. It has also become a barometer of public opinion as it facilitates reactions from netizens about current socio-political issues. While Facebook dominates the digital landscape, younger Malaysians prefer other social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit. In fact, the Malaysian Twitter community calls itself Twitterjaya, a play on the word Putrajaya, which is the name of the seat of government in Malaysia.

Syahredzan Johan, a prominent lawyer who joined Twitter in 2009, wrote that "[t]he social aspects of Twitter have evolved into a socio-political gauge of national sentiments".[1] Indeed, public uproar on social media over certain government initiatives and policies have resulted in reversals and apologies. For example, when the country was under a Movement Control Order (MCO) due to COVID-19 in 2020, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development published a series of posters on Facebook and Instagram advising married women on how to manage their households and avoid domestic arguments. This included dressing well, not nagging, and speaking coyly with a feminine laugh—mimicking the voice of Doraemon, a Japanese cartoon cat.[2] Public flack over the ministry's statements, especially on social media, led it to apologize and delete the posts. The Higher Education Minister also received public criticism for suggesting a TikTok competition to persuade Malaysian youths to stay at home.[3] Netizens pointed out that the minister should have focused on the welfare and learning of undergraduate students instead.

Malaysian politicians are aware that their online reputation has an impact on their political fortunes. For example, the appointment of Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin

by the King as the country's eighth prime minister on 1 March 2020 came under a cloud of protest. Muhyiddin had been centrally associated with the "Sheraton Move" that saw more than 30 MPs defecting from the then Pakatan Harapan government, causing its collapse. Social media users vented their frustrations online. The hashtag "#NotMyPM" trended on Twitter with more than 47,000 tweets. However, others disagreed with the sentiment: they felt that it was disrespectful to the King, while Muhyiddin's supporters congratulated him on his appointment.[4] Realising the damage to his political reputation, Muhyiddin rebranded himself as abah ("father"), relying on his easy-going paternal demeanour during press conferences when he marked his hundredth day in office.[5]

Other ministers linked to the Sheraton Move also attempted to reinvent themselves. Women, Family, and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Rina Mohd Harun's recent 2021 Hari Raya fashion photo shoot at her ministerial office to showcase her transformative weight loss did not sit well with Twitterjaya. Netizens criticised her for focusing more on her personal achievements than her role in assisting women and children affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Online political communication requires sophistication and subtlety, as shown by Science, Technology, and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin. When he suffered minor injuries after hitting a pothole while cycling in Banting, Selangor, the newly elected president of the Negeri Sembilan Cycling Association tweeted, "Pothole, ditch, KJ. 2020 keeps giving", together with pictures of his bruised face and the accident area. Many Twitter users commiserated with him, sharing their own personal experiences of being similarly injured.[6] The Kuala Langat district's Public Works Department (PWD), which is responsible for road conditions in Banting, apologized and immediately filled up the pothole. Critics, however, decried the department's double standards, stating that it should also apologize to other road users who have been similarly injured. In response to the criticisms, Khairy

said that the PWD should not just pay attention to the issue because of his status, but should take pro-active measures to address it. He mooted the idea of a special online complaints portal for potholes, saying he would discuss this with the Works Ministry as soon as possible.[7] Khairy's ability to deflect criticisms and turn matters into positive publicity shows his finesse in navigating the possible potholes (pun intended) in the online environment.

While public opinion on digital media may not represent the full spectrum and diversity of views in Malaysia, it is, to a significant extent, a barometer of the sentiments of politically aware citizens. These articulate members of the online community may not exemplify the majority, but their discussions may gain sufficient traction and thus influence the direction of mass public opinion. For example, a Twitter campaign #KitaMintaLima (We Ask for Five) urged the King to grant five specific requests from the people to combat the economic and public health issues that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These requests were compiled from netizens' comments on an Istana Negara Facebook post, which showed the monarch granting Prime Minister Muhyiddin an audience for a pre-Cabinet meeting. If the five requests could not be fulfilled, then the campaign poster urged for a change of government.[8] More than 48,000 tweets with the hashtag were posted, which made it one of Twitter's top trending topics in Malaysia.

As we can see, there is always the possibility that ideas which emerge online ignite the imagination of the masses and lead to offline ground activism. Politicians from both sides of the divide are conscious of this possibility, and hence actively monitor current trends on digital media. The next general election, which must be held by 2023, is likely to see a highly contested online battle as the politicians and their parties fight for sufficient votes to ensure their survival.

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