Competitive Political Regime and Internet Control: Case Studies of Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, political control of the Internet has become an important aspect of the broad research that explores the relationship between Internet technologies and politics. Unlike previous studies that focus on politically closed regimes, this thesis describes and explains the phenomenon of Internet control in competitive political settings which include various regime types ranging from electoral authoritarianism to liberal democracy. It argues that regime type per se is not the direct determinant of Internet control outcome. In fact, especially within the intermediate range of political regime continuum, an increase of democraticness does not always accompany a decrease of Internet control intensity. This thesis, then, selects three Southeast Asian countries with competitive political systems – Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia – that best present such a "regime-control" mismatch, and attempts to identify the major factors that cause or constrain Internet control practices. Field research, in the form of in-depth interviews with government officials, media practitioners, politicians, academics, and NGO activists, has been conducted in these countries to obtain first-hand reliable data.

Pointing out the indeterminacy of regime type, this thesis constructs an alternative model that addresses the intensity of online transgressiveness and the capacity of online civil society. While online transgressiveness propels governments to seek Internet control strategies, online civil society represents an inhibiting force, the cohesiveness of which determines the extent to which societal resistance against Internet censorship might succeed. In Malaysia, although a moderate-high level of transgressiveness has provided a stimulus for the government to suppress online activism and opposition

campaigns, a vibrant and cohesive online civil society, which often coordinates with opposition parties and other social forces, has effectively prevented the government from upgrading its Internet control arsenal. In Thailand, the combination of a high level of transgressiveness and a fragmented online civil society gives rise to extensive and systemic Internet control measures. By contrast, Indonesia faces moderate online transgression and moderate online civil society capacity. Internet control there operates, accordingly, at a moderate level. The findings from these country-cases bear out this study's theoretical framework.

In addition, this study also briefly tests the validity of this model to other cases of Southeast Asian competitive systems. The results confirm that, instead of regime type, online transgressiveness and civil society capacity collectively shape the outcomes of Internet control. In this way, this research projects a new framework for understanding the practice of Internet control, which has become a hot topic in the study of Internet politics and regime types more generally. It also speaks to the broad literature on political repression as well as that on democratization. Theoretical implications in these regards have been discussed. Meanwhile, it raises some further questions, about which more research should be done in the future.

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