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.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ABSTRACT

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of this study 1

1.2 Literature review 4

1.2.1 Media politics 4

1.2.2 Internet politics 7

1.3 Presenting the puzzle 17

1.4 Research design 21

1.5 The Outline of the thesis 25

## CHAPTER 2 INTERNET CONTROL AND POLITICAL REGIME IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: PRELIMINARY INFORMATION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

2.1 Understanding and conceptualizing Internet control 28

2.1.1 The Nature and Development of the Internet 28

2.1.2 Conceptualizing Internet control as political repression 33

2.1.3 The Repertoire of Internet Control 36

2.2 Understanding and mapping political regimes 52

2.2.1 The new institutionalism and the revival of regime studies 52

2.2.2 Concept and typology of political regime 54

2.2.3 The “regime-control” mismatch in Southeast Asia 63

## CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
3.1 What do studies on political repression say and not say? 66
  3.1.1 Agency-level explanations: the central role of threat 66
  3.1.2 Historical institutionalism and contextual factors 70
3.2 Transgressiveness, online civil society and government responses 74
  3.2.1 Online transgressiveness 74
  3.2.2 Capacity of online civil society 80
  3.2.3 Remaining question 85
3.3 Contextual conditions and the beginning of Internet development 85
3.4 Conclusion 93

CHAPTER 4  INTERNET CONTROL IN A COMPETITIVE
AUTHORITARIAN REGIME: CASE STUDY OF
MALAYSIA

4.1 Introduction 96
4.2 Authoritarian paradox: contextual conditions and Internet development 99
  4.2.1 Competitive authoritarianism in Malaysia 100
  4.2.2 Envisioning a knowledge-based economy: the Multimedia Super Corridor and Bill of Guarantee 103
  4.2.3 The reformasi movement: change and continuity in Malaysian politics 106
  4.2.4 Malaysian Internet space: an online public sphere in formation 108
4.3 Critical juncture: the 2008 general election and the trend of Internet repression 114
  4.3.1 Political tsunami on 8th March 115
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Transgression on the Malaysian cyberspace</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Explaining Malaysia’s Internet control outcome</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4 Sarawak Report vs. Sarawak Reports: new transgression on the cyberspace</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Conclusion</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 5 CONTROLLING THE INTERNET IN AN UNSTABLE DEMOCRACY: CASE STUDY OF THAILAND**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Contextual conditions in the 1990s: the Internet’s introduction in a time of democratization</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 Political and social contexts in Thailand</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 Liberalization during 1990s</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3 How was Thailand networked?</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4 Early institutions for regulating the Net</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5 Political consequences of early interaction</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Internet development under the opportunist (populist) rule</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 “People’s Constitution” and the rise of a populist government</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 The Thaksinization of Thai telecommunications</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Online challengers and selective control methods</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Transgressiveness, online civil society, and Thailand’s Internet control</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 The 2006 coup and protracted political turbulence</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 Transgression on Thai cyberspace</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3 Explaining Thailand’s Internet control outcome</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.5 Conclusion

CHAPTER 6  INTERNET CONTROL IN THE ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY:  
CASE STUDY OF INDONESIA

6.1 Introduction

6.2 The Internet and the “New Order”  
6.2.1 Understanding the “New Order”  
6.2.2 Economic liberalization, elite disunity, and the collapse of the “New Order”  
6.2.3 Early development and political use of the Internet  
6.2.4 Governmental responses toward cyberspace

6.3 The Internet and democratic consolidation  
6.3.1 Electoral democracy in Indonesia: “irony of success?”  
6.3.2 Transgression in Indonesian cyberspace  
6.3.3 Explaining Indonesia’s Internet control outcome

6.4 Conclusion

CHAPTER 7  INTERNET CONTROL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: CONGRUENT CASES OF COMPETITIVE POLITICAL REGIMES

7.1 Introduction

7.2 Contextual conditions and political systems in Cambodia, Singapore and the Philippines  
7.2.1 Historical development  
7.2.2 Political regimes

7.3 Transgression, online civil society and Internet control
7.3.1 Cambodia 251
7.3.2 Singapore 255
7.3.3 The Philippines 260

7.4 Conclusion 264

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

8.1 Major findings of this study 267
8.2 Alternative explanations of Internet control 274
8.3 Theoretical implications 279
8.4 The way ahead 283

BIBLIOGRAPHY 286

APPENDIX A NOTES ON INTERVIEW METHOD 336

APPENDIX B MEASURING TRANSGRESSIVENESS AND CIVIL SOCIETY CAPACITY 347