

Democracy Disconnected: Social Media's Caustic Influence on Southeast Asia's Fragile Republics | Brookings Institution

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A new report from Brookings Institution looks at social media in Southeast Asia: the history of its penetration into political life, its persuasive power, its manipulation by political actors, and potential solutions to mitigate its worst influences.

Contrary to once idealistic expectations that social media would usher in a new era of unity and democratization, technology's empowerment of the masses seems to have engendered societies in which people are more isolated and polarized than ever before. Southeast Asia serves as a particularly interesting case study on the pernicious effects that social media has exerted on the political environment. In the absence of moderating influences such as a strong education system, well-developed legal framework, and robust, independent media, rumors and falsehoods have spread largely unimpeded online. Such disinformation has stoked long-standing communal conflicts and provided an opportunity for domestic and foreign actors alike to stymie and potentially reverse democratic gains. These detrimental effects on fragile democracies along China's periphery threaten to erode Washington's influence in the region, which in turn is likely to have more far-reaching effects.

[...]

Continued technological innovations portend a future in which it will be even more difficult to discern the truth of information shared online. Attempts to curtail the spread of disinformation through legal and technological means are likely to prove ineffective given the politicization of institutions in the region and the exponential rise in the amount of information shared online. Rather, efforts should be taken to make populations more resistant to the siren song of disinformation. Through education and the rebuilding of physical communities, individuals can become more comfortable living in a complex and nuanced world.

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