



Fake News in Southeast Asia: Shift toward Guided Journalism?

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Executive Summary

The following months of 2018 are expected to be momentous for the countries in Southeast Asia, given the impending events across the region being possible catalysts that shape regional geopolitics. General elections in Malaysia, Cambodia, possibly Thailand and gubernatorial elections in Indonesia in the lead-up to the 2019 general elections remain the likely rationale behind every political move by the incumbent governments. In addition, countries such as the Philippines and Myanmar are attempting to ward off international criticism over the former's war on drugs and the latter's handling of the ongoing Rohingya crisis. Therefore, it is significant to understand the common tool that the incumbent governments of these countries are trying to manipulate to mould public opinion, i.e. the media.

The denunciation of media is likely being used in an attempt to score political points in recent times. However, what are the measures adopted by the official channels of government to claim the lack of objectivity of media and also the spread of 'false news' as an attempt to undermine the regional governments' legitimacy? The general inclination of youth toward online sources for gleaning news, the government's need to control this source of information dissemination is understandable.

Coming at a time when these measures are likely to impact the local population's perception regarding the incumbent governments, the significant question is if these measures are likely to establish a governance pattern across Southeast Asia that may not be in tandem with the general Democratic characteristics. Authoritarian governments across the world attempt to legitimise their governance by conducting elections and 'securing' a victory, thus paving the way for a 'guided Democracy'. Similarly, are these Southeast Asian nations paving the way for times when 'guided journalism' will become the nature of the press in the region, thus questioning the sustenance of Democratic values in the region over the long-term?

The following report is an attempt to understand the relevance of the phenomenon of fake news in the region and how the trends are likely to change the political dynamics.

Fake News and Southeast Asia: Contemporary Relevance

In January, the Securities and Exchanges Commission (SEC) of the Philippines suspended the license of a prominent digital media group Rappler citing investment irregularities and foreign intervention in the operations of the media organisation. Unofficially, President Rodrigo Duterte had referred to the website, which had been known to have been critical of the government's policies, as spreading 'fake news'. Government critics and other independent news outlets in the country as well as international media called the suspension politically motivated and President Duterte's attempt to curtail criticism. Although in this case, the allegation by the President may have been stated to justify the SEC's action, the phenomenon of fake news is a sustained threat for the country.

In a study published by the University of Oxford in July 2016, it was revealed that the political party of President Duterte had installed an army of trolls or fake news peddlers during the 2016 Presidential elections in the country. Several social media personalities and pro-Duterte bloggers as well as political bots reportedly attempted the dissemination of false news and posted nationalist and pro-Duterte comments to promote the leader's cause. Furthermore, Duterte's critics faced online harassment in the form of hate messages that also threatened violence. The campaign, which apparently employed 400-500 cyber troops, was infused with 200,000 USD to spread the false propaganda.

Since the electoral victory of President Duterte, one of the constant allegations has been the harassment of prominent journalists who have been critical of President Duterte and his ostensible war on drugs and other policies. For a populist leader like Duterte, who has primarily taken a stance similar to that of US President Donald Trump, any media perceived to be critical of the government has been cited to be peddling 'fake news'. The political clampdown on independent journalism under the pretext of curtailing the spread of false news essentially impedes the sustenance of objective

media and civil society groups. Apart from the Philippines, it is important to understand how the other Southeast Asian nations fare in this scenario.

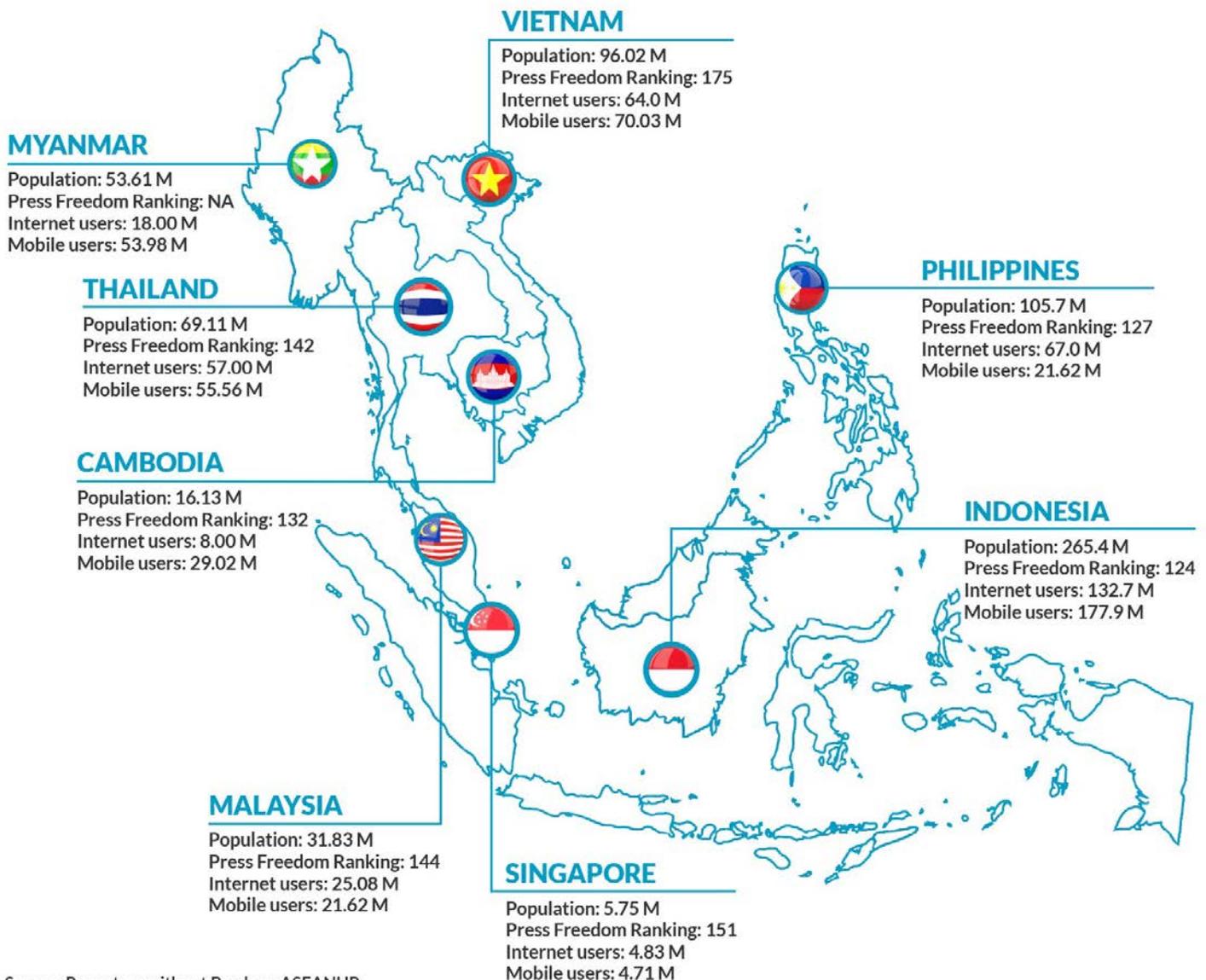
In Indonesia, the hardline Muslim group referred to as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) has increasingly gained significant following and influence from among the generally moderate Indonesian population over the last couple of years. Out of a population of approximately 265 million, around 132 million people are avid users of the internet and, in turn, social media. Social media as a tool against the Christian governor 'Ahok' galvanized significant support during the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in May 2017. The invoking of Islamic ideals led to the prominent Ahok being charged with blasphemy and eventually being convicted.

One of the most important moments which secured the numerical support for the FPI was the spread of a rumor in November 2016 which stated that the FPI leader Habib Rizieq had been beaten up by the Indonesian military at the FPI headquarters. Although fake, the issue evoked a sympathetic sentiment toward the FPI leader and the cause forwarded by the organisation. Similarly, two events by civil society groups instigated widespread anti-Communist protests at the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute in September 2017 because of 'fake news' that referred to the events to be sympathetic to the Communist ideology, a sensitive issue that evokes memories of mass killings in 1965-66. Following the incident, three leaders of an organized fake news syndicate called Saracen were arrested.

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reportedly received 1,203 complaints on false content, online impersonation and fake news. Many instances of fake news being disseminated have been reportedly recorded surrounding the country's electoral period. One of the most prominent instances regarding the spread of unauthenticated news or images in Myanmar was when Turkish Deputy PM Mehmet Simsek circulated a picture that depicted graphic images of corpses, referring them to be instances of the massacre of Rohingyas. The image was later pulled out by the leader after it was verified to be 'fake'.

These instances exemplify the actual challenge regarding the spread of unverified information online that plays on the sensitivities of the population. The governments in these countries have attempted to introduce measures that would stem the spread of such unverified information, although the widespread use of social and digital media undermines the mitigation measures to some extent. That being said, there have been instances wherein the governments in these countries have attempted to use the spread of such news to curtail a dissenting media. In that context, it is significant to understand the rationale for the government’s decisions to do so and the long-term impact on the operations of the media in these countries.

Digital Trends and Press Freedom in Southeast Asia



Source: Reporters without Borders; ASEANUP
 * Figures in Millions

Fake News and Southeast Asia: Contemporary Relevance

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With over half of the 629 million population of the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries under the age of 30, the control over media is comprehensible. The hardline Muslim group referred to as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) has increasingly gained significant following and influence from among the generally moderate Indonesian population over the last couple of years. Out of a population of approximately 265 million, around 132 million people are avid users of the internet and, in turn, social media. Social media as a tool against the Christian governor 'Ahok' galvanized significant support during the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in May 2017. The invoking of Islamic ideals led to the prominent Ahok being charged with blasphemy and eventually being convicted.

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Anti-communist protests in Jakarta following a rumour of a Communist meet in September 2017

Regional Geopolitics, Fake News and Freedom of Press

News and media remain significant tools to mould public opinion at a time when electoral politics in south and southeast Asia revolve around populist issues. Countries like the junta-ruled Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the region have traditionally been iron-fisted in their approach toward the operation of media in their territories. Despite these factors, independent, international media have continued to operate in these countries. Furthermore, Indonesia, housing the region's largest population and being the fastest growing economy, since its transition into Democracy has been characterised by a free and objective media. Similarly, the Philippines, since its transition into a Democratically-governed state in the 1980s has boasted of an independent media that has been able to be critical of the incumbent government and their policies when necessary. In that context, the primary question arises as to what are the factors that changed the status quo in a way that governments have become openly critical of media organisations and in some sense, demanding their loyalty or be targeted.

In December, two journalists affiliated with news agency Reuters and who were reporting on the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar were arrested by authorities under the Official Secrets Act stating that the journalists were in possession of documents that contained details about operations of security forces. The journalists have denied the accusation, while the international media and civil society groups have accused Naypyitaw of trying to filter dissent and news regarding the Rohingya issue. Similarly, the suspension of Rappler and the dilution of ownership of another independent news media ABS-CBN in the Philippines as well as the denunciation of media that was critical of President Duterte's war on drugs also underline a pattern of the government's attempt to control dissenting media and deter further similar actions. In Malaysia, PM Najib Razak has constnatly used fake news as a crutch against media that has highlighted his involvement in the over 1 billion USD corruption scandal referred to as the 1 Malaysia Berhad or 1MDB. Cambodian PM Hun Sen is perceived to have played a role in the closure of operations of the independent news outlet Cambodia Daily and

two other radio stations that did not exactly promote the government's policies. In Thailand, a cyber security law is in place that promises a prison sentence for being party to the spread of false information online.

While governments are ostensibly undertaking measures to curb the spread of false news and prevent rumours, these measures when perceived through the guise of electoral politics and populism are indicative of the need to control their country's media. At a time when these countries are attempting to ensure the support of a significantly young population, the media - particularly in the digital form assumes significance. With populist leaders such as Duterte attempting to consolidate his power, along with Cambodian leader Hun Sen's attempt to curtail any dissent or opposition like that of the Thai leadership's aim to prevent the emergence of any able opposition after the Shinawatra family, media remains a tool to spread homogeneous information. On the other hand, Malaysian PM Najib Razak while undermining the media to be fake is likely attempting to question the authenticity of the corruption allegations against him. For the relatively nascent government of Myanmar that is seeking to establish a footing, the perceived ethnic cleansing in Rakhine State has brought about significant international criticism.

Indonesia secured a rank of 124 out of a total 180 countries in the World Press Freedom rankings for 2017 released by Reporters without Borders, the highest among its Southeast Asian peers. A democratic country is essentially characterised with a free and objective media; however, these rankings as well as the continuing tightening of regulations by these regional governments are indicative of the perception of the governments to prevent any criticism from the media.

Additionally, governments are engaging with social media sites operating in these countries and ordering them to take down information perceived to be 'fake'. In economies such as that of those in Southeast Asia, which also hosts the most audience for these social media sites, these corporations are torn between securing data privacy and freedom or ensuring their sustained presence in the country by accepting the governments stipulates

Future Trends: Unverified News as the crutch to ‘Guided Journalism’?

One of the common characteristic of the contemporary demographic of Southeast Asia is the young population of the region. While this directly correlates with the widespread use of social media and the digital-cognisance of the population, the political actors also feel the need to control this sphere to ensure electoral support. In that context, the various government’s attempts to regulate the media, while ostensibly maybe an attempt to curb the spread of rumors, are likely an attempt to directly be able to appeal to the sentiments of the resident youth.

Given precedence of the use of acts and laws that cite National Security to legitimise arrests of journalists or civil society groups or suspend their operations, particularly across the region, the phenomenon of fake news is only likely to compound the challenge of press freedoms in the country. While fake news may be an essential aspect that undermines the spread of authentic information and allows space for spread of hostile and antagonistic sentiments, the widespread pattern of governance in the region underscores it to be a likely crutch for the idea of guided journalism. The detention of international journalists and threat of criminal prosecution sets the tone for a dangerous geopolitical space in the region, one that does not bode well for the progress and development that the region has envisaged for itself collectively.

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