

THE LINKS BETWEEN FREEDOM AND THE INTERNET IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A DEMOCRATIC COUP OR STATUS QUO TIME?

VZTAH MEZI SVOBODOU A INTERNETEM V JIHOVÝCHODNÍ ASII: ČAS NA DEMOKRATICKÝ PŘEVRAŤ, NEBO STATUS QUO?

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Abstrakt

Poslední dvě dekády přinesly v jihovýchodní Asii významný nárůst v počtu uživatelů internetu, stejně tak ale mnoho režimů začalo vytvářeno nové systémy kontroly internetu. Cílem této analýzy je proto vyhodnotit, jak se projevuje nárůst online populace a zároveň kontrol internetu na stavu svobod a demokracie v jihovýchodní Asii. K hlavním argumentům textu pak patří především zdůraznění ambivalentní role internetu na stavu demokracie ve zkoumaném regionu. Za pomoci shlukové analýzy byly identifikovány 4 samostatné skupiny států v závislosti na jejich stavu všech proměnných ve zkoumaných letech 2017 a 2020. Výsledky zkoumání pak poukázaly, že třebaže narostl počet online populace, celý proces doprovázelo omezování internetových svobod. Stejně tak se ukázalo, že procento internetové populace není dostatečně silnou proměnnou.

Klíčová slova: demokracie, digitalizace, internet, jihovýchodní Asie, cenzura, svoboda

Abstract

The last two decades have witnessed a striking increase in the number of Internet users as well as new mechanisms of Internet controls have been introduced in many regimes. The objective of this analysis is to appraise how the growth of online population and Internet controls impact on the state of freedoms and democracy in Southeast Asia. The authors argue that the Internet has maintained its ambivalent role within democracy in the examined region. Four groups of countries were identified in the cluster analysis in accordance with the state of variables in the examined years of 2017 and 2020. The results then stressed that the rising figures of online population had been accompanied by additional restrictions of Internet freedoms. At the same time, the percentage of online population has not proved to be a sufficiently significant variable.

Keywords: democracy, digitalisation, Internet, Southeast Asia, censorship, freedoms

Introduction

The third wave of democratisation has been renowned not only for the growth and blooming of new democracies around the world but also the coincident reverse waves (see Huntington 1991). Especially the last wave of democracy, however,

set up new conditions due to which many regimes could make use of or modify the tools of democracy to their own benefit (Curato, Fosati 2020), albeit in a distinctively limited manner in case of the former (Ufen 2008:155). The swift spread of modern technologies in the 1990s and 2000s also brought up a new course of (self-)censorship for the

journalists when characterising the political affairs (Rodan 1998; Yangyue 2014). Consequently, many citizens turned to the Internet in Southeast Asia as a rather safer environment. For that reason, at first, political blogs had become all the rage at first (Lai 2011), merely to be later expanded by the social media (Abbott 2013; Tapsell 2021). To no surprise, scholarly journals have also got acquainted with the importance of civil societies and their role in Southeast Asia when taking the Internet into account (e.g. Fraioli 2021).

Southeast Asia then symbolises an extraordinary region as the perception of democracy as a topic is as complex as human rights, for instance. And the role and position of civil society in given countries remained unexplained in respect of politics and the Internet (cf. Mauzy 1997; Weiss 2021). As other regions of the world, not only the countries of Southeast Asia are part of the “era of electoral authoritarianism” (Morse 2012: 161), wherein regimes use the process of elections to usurp the power, but also “digital democracy” (Lee 2017). It means that Southeast Asia may appropriately serve as a “natural laboratory” for analyses of democratic backsliding (Croissant, Haynes 2021).

Graph 1 exemplifies an omnibus summary of people (in %) who have used the Internet in the last two decades, ie, from 2000 to 2020. There are three identifiable trajectories with one group of countries consisting of Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore that have experienced the highest figures of online population, followed by the figures right in between (Vietnam and Thailand). The third group of countries is represented by Indonesia and Laos, sharing nearly the same figures, whilst being followed by the Philippines. And within this group, Burma and Cambodia ranked with the lowest scores. Interestingly, even the World Bank lacked in

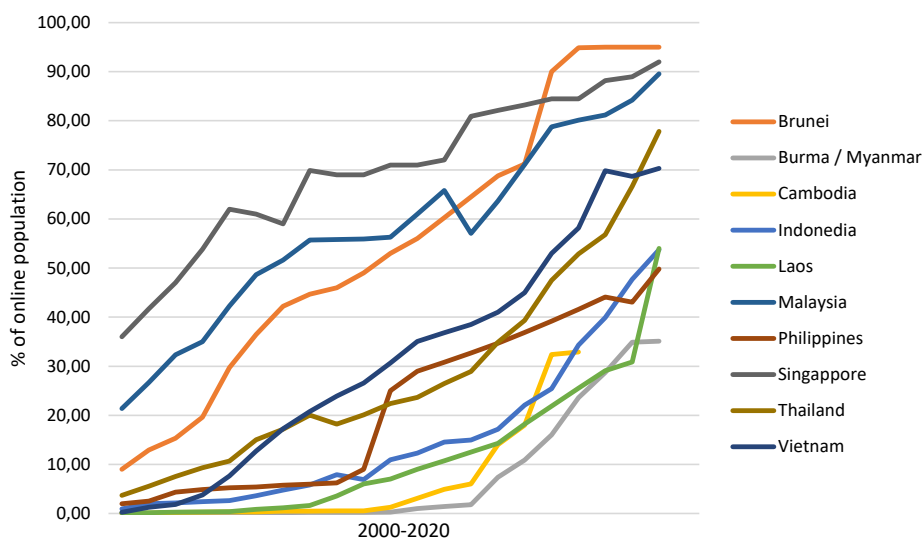
the data for this variable for 2018, 2019, and 2020 in case of Cambodia. And the lack of data pertaining to the region of Southeast Asia is yet to be elaborated on for this study. However, the gradual increase in the numbers of Internet users across this territory of 10 countries is apparent. And for that reason, this brief analysis shall draw attention to the use of Internet and link it to democracy and its freedoms as another eminent variable of comparative politics. The objective of this paper is to deliver a comparative study investigating solely the Southeast Asian countries. And hence, the authors propose the following research questions that are to be addressed:

RQ1: Has the growth of Internet users in Southeast Asia resulted in an increase in the level of democratic freedoms?

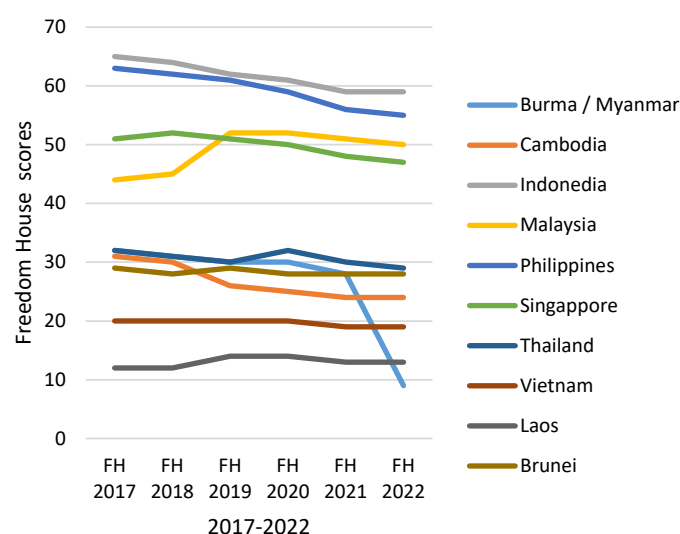
RQ2: What is the link between the level of censorship versus democracy and the percentage of Internet users?

Research Objectives and Methods

The original idea was to include all the ASEAN member states, making it 10 countries which would have covered the issue of Internet freedoms and censorship in connexion to the figures of online population. Unfortunately, this research objective turned out to be unfeasible owing to 3 reasons. First, a vast majority of studies had not included or considered Southeast Asia and if so, there were discrepancies in the data. Second, the data obtained from the three indices do not comply with the principles of long-term continuity. Whereas the World Bank's statistics on the percentage of online population may be dated back to 2000, its latest figures finalise in 2020 for the Southeast Asian countries. By contrast, the Freedom House reports



Graf 1: Percentage of online population in Southeast Asia
Source: Authors, based on the data from the World Bank



Graf 2: The Freedom House overall ranking

Source: Authors, based on the data from the Freedom House reports

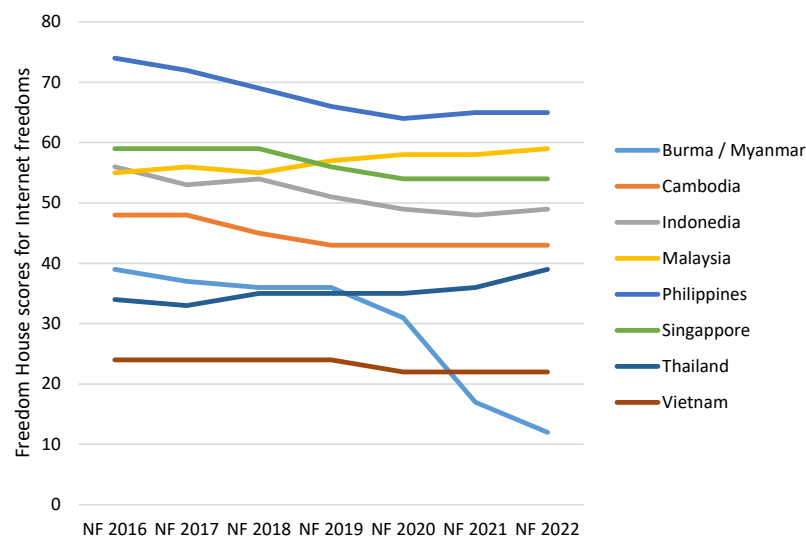
on Internet freedoms, as the most cited source in this area, started in 2016, whilst having the newest data from 2022. Third, due to the regime character and the state of democracy, some countries have not accounted for the time series whatsoever. In the concrete, Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei could not be therefore included in this analysis due to the absence of data. In some of the aforementioned cases, the datasets were also incomplete which would have biased the outcomes of the analysis. Thus, seven countries in total were part of the analysis. Having then recognised all the missing years and/or countries, the authors have decided to compare the default point of 2017 with 2020 which have already included the Covid-19 pandemic as well.

The level of democratic freedoms served as a dependent variable this analysis further pondered upon. For the statistical processing, the authors used the Freedom House classification of countries into three main groups and more importantly, the numeral assessment up to 100 as the highest figure symbolising a stable and democratic country. Graph 2 shows that out of all 10 countries, up to 2022, not even one scored 70 points on the 100-point scale. And on that account, the countries were either *Partly free* (Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines) or *Not free* at all (the other remaining countries). The independent variables consisted of online population and the level of Internet freedoms. Whilst the former was represented in the unit of percentage, the latter followed a numeral assessment of the same scale and pattern of Freedom House, merely within separate reports on the Internet and not the level of democracy per se.

Graph 3 vindicates the complexity of regime characters and its level of freedoms as all the countries ranked in the *Partly free* segment (Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, oscillating between 40 to 69 points), or the *Not free* ones (up

to 39 points as in case of the rest of the examined countries). Furthermore, this trend of constant levels of Internet (non)freedoms has exacerbated with distinctively decreasing inclinations (eg, Burma/Myanmar and the Philippines) or mixed tendencies (eg, Malaysia and Thailand). The online population, as simplified in this paper, stands for the percentage of people who have connected to the Internet whilst using any device, be it their laptop, computers, mobiles, television, gaming devices, etc. within the period of the previous three months, as delineated by the World Bank.

Methods-wise, the authors utilised the multi-dimensional statistical method of cluster analysis of which aim was to divide the region and its countries into clusters. This cluster analysis was delivered in the programme of *Statistica*. First and foremost, though the data had to be standardised whilst using a normality test. This step was crucial as it allowed the authors to opt for the variables represented by different units of measurement. In total, there were three variables in the analysis: the level of democratic freedoms (FH), Internet freedoms (NF), and the overall percentage of Internet users (IN) in each examined country. Accordingly, hierarchical clustering was then used to pictorialise and testify to the outcomes of cluster analysis. And finally, this cluster analysis was depicted as a dendrogram. The Euclidian distance of .99 was applied for the purpose of sorting the clusters, and it also measured and determined the distribution in accordance with the distance between respective clusters (ie, countries). And therefore, this analysis was meant to identify the key similarities and/or differences amongst the countries. For additional statistical analyses probing for general linear regression models, the authors used JASP. In this programme, the data had been addressed in terms of respective coefficients and levels of significance.



Graf 3: Internet freedoms in Southeast Asia

Source: Authors, based on the data from the Freedom House reports

Results

In 2017, the first examined year, a significant similarity was detected within four clusters. As depicted in Table 1 and the ensuing Figure 1 in the dendrogram form, Burma/Myanmar was the only completely separated country as its regime had been strongly closed and isolated yet until the 2010s, and even afterwards, the Burmese armed forces, the Tatmadaw, did not give up its position as a fundamental stakeholder which escalated in the 2021 coup. Malaysia and Singapore as two former British colonies were both located in the next cluster. Regardless of different religions and political milieus, Indonesia and the Philippines might be

Tab. I: Cluster analysis for 2017

Country	Cluster
Burma/Myanmar	1
Indonesia	2
Philippines	2
Malaysia	3
Singapore	3
Thailand	4
Vietnam	4

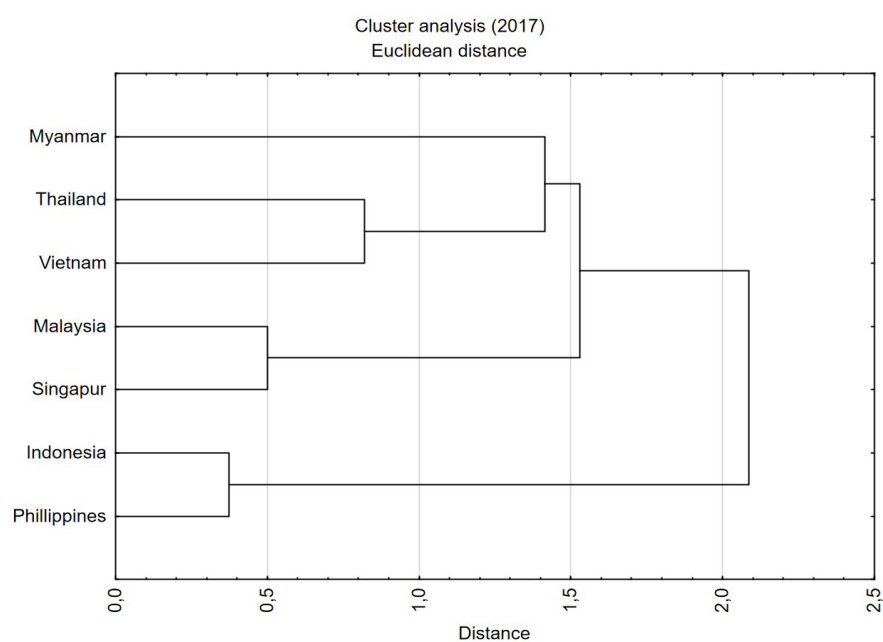


Fig. 1: Dendrogram for the 2017 results

found in one cluster. And lastly, Thailand and Vietnam were in the same group as two countries differentiating in the form of politics, regimes but less in the endeavours within political power.

At the same time, when addressing the relationship between the number of online people (IN), the state of Internet freedoms (NF), and democratic freedoms (FH), the analysis for 2017, as depicted in Table 3 and 4 in the Appendix, confirmed the level of significance of $<.001$. However, the R^2 figure showing the predictability of the democratic freedoms from the percentage of online population was too negligible. By contrast, 22.1% of democratic freedoms was predictable from the Internet freedoms in Southeast Asia. In respect of the coefficient, the only relevant one was in the latter case too as a positive coefficient (.892) signifies that an increase by one unit in the Internet freedoms will also mean an increase in democratic freedoms by the level of .892.

As Figure 2 as well as Table 2 stress, there has been no alteration in the clusters compared to the default year of 2017, whilst still having used the same Euclidian distance. Leaving Burma/Myanmar

separated, Thailand and Vietnam shared one cluster as did Malaysia and Singapore. The last cluster of countries was reserved for Thailand and Vietnam. The fact that countries have remained in the same clusters shall not imply any rigidity, though. The analysis manifested the lack of differentiation amongst the examined countries amid the period. Nevertheless, the total percentage of online population kept gradually increasing as already mentioned in Introduction. At the same time, during the examined period, many elections had been held too. Most importantly, it was the general elections in Malaysia (2018), Thailand (2019) after the 2014 coup, Singapore (2020), and the Philippines (2019), Burma (2020) resulting in a coup in 2021, and finally in Indonesia (2019), which was also accompanied by the presidential election. As long as the Internet has served as a key instrument in elections, be it for the ruling parties or the opposition, and the figures of people who used the Internet have been rising, thereupon the data confirmed that Southeast Asia has been experiencing the wave of democratic backsliding.

In the 2020 dataset, statistical analysis followed the very same pattern of 2017 (see Table 5 and 6) since the variable of online population had not been a strongly significant factor that would have predicted the level of democratic freedoms. The internet freedoms once again concurrently determined the level of democratic freedoms in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the coefficient figure (.967) was even slightly greater than in 2017. Despite the positive relationships and thus the lack of any inverse one, the overall capability of the variables, nevertheless, proved to be restrained in those general linear models, and thereby bringing negative answers to the research questions.

Tab. II: Cluster analysis for 2020

Country	Cluster
Burma/Myanmar	1
Indonesia	3
Philippines	3
Malaysia	2
Singapore	2
Thailand	4
Vietnam	4

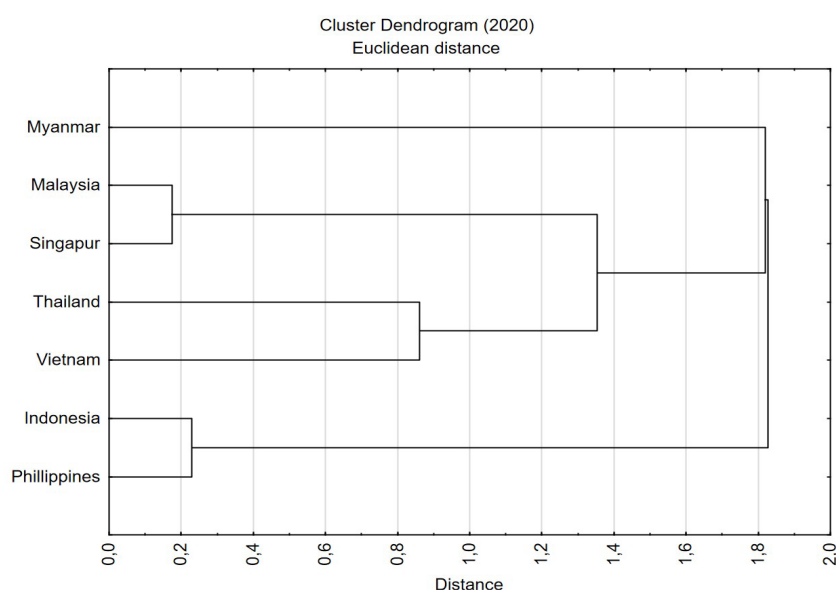


Fig. 2: Dendrogram for the 2020 results

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis confirmed, whilst investigating the role of the Internet and the state of democratic freedoms, that the growth of the former does not imply any increase and/or decrease in the latter. In addition, the statistical section manifested that the role of the Internet remained ambiguous and unable to explicate and/or determine the dependent variable (ie, democratic freedoms). Only the level of Internet freedoms has exhibited certain ties to the level of democratic freedoms. In line with Sinpeng (2020), who described the growth of Internet censorship in Southeast Asia, any prospects of the Internet to serve as a trigger of citizens' rallies in favour of democracy are of forlorn attempts, compared to the Arab Spring in the Middle East (see also Jayasuriya, Rodan 2007). In a juxtaposition, the role of ASEAN in the process of democratisation or any endorsement of Internet freedoms shall not be expected either (see Rüland 2021).

One of the certain limits of this analysis and, at the same time, a necessary aspect of further research in this area will be based on additional qualitative research since adding the context would elucidate the causes why the countries of which politics differ substantially at first sight share that many similarities in terms of the role of the Internet, respective censorship, and different types of social media. Field research in those countries may become a great asset, notwithstanding the complexities linked to the regimes in Southeast Asia (see Morgenbesser, Weiss 2018).

Regardless of the location, the origins of democratic backsliding may be found in the times of more than 15 years ago. Nonetheless, there have been even “benign patterns” deteriorating the conditions in Asia (Diamond 2020). Although Abbott (2012) spoke in favour of the Internet and its contribution to democratisation just one decade ago, Kurlantzick (2022) had predicted that there would be neither any increase in the level of democracy nor a palpable growth of support towards human rights in the countries of Southeast Asia soon. Yet Malaysia as the first country proved the opposite in 2022 as the opposition forces with the “PM-in-waiting”, Anwar Ibrahim, won the snap general election. And hence the question is whether it was a real harbinger of change or a mere continuation of status quo, as they say one swallow does not make a summer.

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Appendix

Tab. III: FH + IN (2017)

Model Summary - FH 2017						
Model		R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE	
H ₀		0.000	0.000	0.000	16.299	
H ₁		0.030	0.001	-0.166	17.597	
Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
H ₀	(Intercept)	42.250	5.762		7.332	< .001
H ₁	(Intercept)	41.137	16.467		2.498	0.047
	IN 2017	0.022	0.299	0.030	0.073	0.944

Tab. IV: FH + NF (2017)

Model Summary - FH 2017						
Model		R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE	
H ₀		0.000	0.000	0.000	16.299	
H ₁		0.854	0.730	0.685	9.147	
Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
H ₀	(Intercept)	42.250	5.762		7.332	< .001
H ₁	(Intercept)	-0.327	11.053		-0.030	0.977
	NF 2017	0.892	0.221	0.854	4.028	0.007

Tab. V: FH + IN (2020)

Model Summary - FH 2020						
Model		R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE	
H ₀		0.000	0.000	0.000	15.957	
H ₁		0.041	0.002	-0.198	17.465	
Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
H ₀	(Intercept)	43.429	6.031		7.201	< .001
H ₁	(Intercept)	41.391	23.232		1.782	0.135
	IN 2020	0.030	0.333	0.041	0.091	0.931

Tab. VI: FH + FN (2020)

Model Summary - FH 2020						
Model		R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE	
H ₀		0.000	0.000	0.000	16.146	
H ₁		0.863	0.744	0.702	8.815	
Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
H ₀	(Intercept)	41.125	5.709		7.204	< .001
H ₁	(Intercept)	-1.891	10.749		-0.176	0.866
	NF 2020	0.967	0.231	0.863	4.181	0.006