

# Digital Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: A Systematic Literature Review

Wijayanto<sup>1</sup>, Budi Setiyono<sup>2</sup>, Rina Martini<sup>3</sup>, Gita Nindya Elsitra<sup>4</sup>  
{wijanto@live.undip.ac.id<sup>1</sup>}

Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup>

**Abstract.** Digital revolution has impacted many aspects of human's life. Politics is not an exception. Not long ago, this digitalisation has given hope to democracy as reflected in the concept of digital democracy. However, the optimism seems to fade away. As many scholars have pointed out: the internet is no longer supporting democracy. Instead it has been seen as a threat to democracy. In this regards, a new concept starts to get more popular in political scholarships: digital authoritarianism. This paper aims to review recent studies on democracy in Southeast Asia focusing on the digital authoritarianism which is believed as happening on some of the Southeast Asian Countries. Some of the questions to answer are as follows: (1). Where does this concept of digital authoritarianism come from?; (2). To what extent does the digital authoritarianism happen in Southeast Asia?; (3). Which are the southeast Asian countries facing this situation?; (4). What are the characteristics of this situation?; (5) What are the underlying forces explaining this situation? To answer this question, the authors will review the recent studies on digital authoritarianism in Southeast Asia and beyond.

**Keywords:** Internet, Democracy, Digital Authoritarianism, Southeast Asia

## 1 Introduction

The expansion of technology in almost all aspects of human life, of course, has a dynamic effect. Politics is not an exception. Since the widespread use of the internet in the public sphere, scholars have begun to fill the debate space regarding how technology has an impact on society. This paper wants to emphasize that digital authoritarianism has occurred in democratic countries. More specifically, confirming that this phenomenon has spread to countries in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, it is a reminder for the erosion of civil liberties in cyberspace and one of the triggers for the massive decline of democracy.

However, what is digital authoritarianism? Where does it come from? How did it spread to Southeast Asia? Why digital authoritarianism can thrive? To answer this question, we need to first know the history of internet use and the dynamics of perspective on the transformation of the internet in society.

Founded in 1969 in the United States, the internet (from the word internetworking) was originally developed to share data and information between computers. Then, quite a while ago, in 1983 internet technology began to be used for military purposes and continued to spread to various parts of the world. It entered the Asian area in the late 1980s and was widely used by the public in the late 1990s. The Internet is definitely one of the most influential human innovations, at least in four respects: the transformation of computers, computer networking, the transformation of connective software, and the development of

communications infrastructure [1]. But it does not stop there, with a very massive development and distribution, the internet provides various conveniences in community interaction.

So, it is not surprising that at the beginning of its development, internet-technology was more specific, presenting various enthusiastic and optimistic views on its impact on society. New media, as an example, received enthusiastic response from scholars. No need to wait a long time, the inevitability of technological developments spreads to the political realm along with the beliefs of scholars regarding how the internet can stimulate political participation [2] and support the development of the values of freedom of expression in a democratic society [3]. To bring up various ideas, one of which is called cyber-utopianism which reflects the internet as a process of strengthening civic society through massive information dissemination [1], and low cost to network [4]. Even so, matters related to cyber security have received the attention of scholars since the late 1980s. Especially when the first cyber-attack occurred in 1988.

Even though the cyber environment's track record is not secure -and never completely secure, the fact is that there are still many scholars who believe that the internet can transform society for the better. At least until the 2000s [1]. One of the scholars, Manuel Castells, even explicitly claims the influence of the internet in overthrowing authoritarian regimes by stating that 'dictatorships could be overthrown with the bare hands of the people' [4]. It didn't take long for the utopia to turn into a dystopia.

Escaped from the spotlight of most political scholars in the west, online censorship has actually been carried out by authoritarian countries in Asia even before entering 2000. Say, since 1999, Saudi Arabia has started to take action to filter internet content after five years of the internet entering the country [1]. China has even implemented the same thing since 1994 [5]. This online censorship has become an alarm for political researchers, awakening society from the dream of cyber-utopianism. Especially after the signs of democracy regression are detected. The term digital authoritarianism has become the terminology chosen to overshadow this phenomenon.

Digital authoritarianism itself has not been explicitly defined by scholars. From many definitions in the literature, at least digital authoritarianism is seen in two perspectives. First, digital authoritarianism as a practice of repression and control in cyberspace in the form of privacy violations, dissemination of misinformation, content filtration, and so on [6][7][8]. In other words, this perspective sees digital authoritarianism as authoritarian behavior.

Some examples of scholars who view digital authoritarianism from this perspective are Andrea Wahlberg Scott who straightforwardly explains that:

“Digital authoritarianism is, in short, the use of different digital technologies with the purpose of surveilling, repressing and manipulating citizens [8].”

Previously, MAV Ambay III, N Gauchan, M Hasanah & NK Jaiwong in 'Dystopia is now: Digital authoritarianism and human rights in Asia' also described this phenomenon by emphasizing authoritarian practices, as follows.

“...practices using information and communication technology designed to either invade privacy, deny access to information, spread misinformation, limit expression, and limit political participation [6].”

Another view sees digital authoritarianism as a tool of authoritarian regimes to shape and manipulate people's behavior in cyberspace [9][5]. From this point of view, digital authoritarianism is also attached to authoritarian regimes, such as China and Russia. This view

was expressed, among others, by Lydia Khalil in her 2020 publication where she elaborated on digital authoritarianism as:

“...digital authoritarianism — also known as tech-enabled authoritarianism — is the use of technology by authoritarian governments not only to control, but to shape, the behaviour of its citizens via surveillance, repression, manipulation, censorship, and the provision of services in order to retain and expand political control [9].”

Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole also affirm a similar view by defining digital authoritarianism as follows:

“...the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations [5].”

This paper will enrich the two perspectives above by affirming that digital authoritarianism is not only carried out by authoritarian regimes, but has even become one of the catalysts for the phenomenon of democratic decline experienced in countries in Southeast Asia, especially in democratic countries such as Indonesia.

## **2 Methodology**

In order to examine digital authoritarianism in Southeast Asia, from its origins to why and to what extent it has spread, this paper gathers an analysis of various literacy and previous research. The results of these literature studies are also strengthened by the outputs obtained through discussion forums in the Summer Course series with the theme "Social Media Activism, Digital Resilience and Resistance to Democratic Regression."

The forum presents a broad perspective from various countries related to how technology impacts civil liberties and democracy in Southeast Asia. This Summer Course brings together individuals from many countries, including: Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Japan, Thailand, Australia, Netherlands, Germany, France, Croatia. Not only students, but also journalists and researchers. With this level of diversity, this Summer Course also presents 14 discussions in a period of two weeks, so that it can provide fresh air for global discussions regarding the decline of democracy and the role of digital technology.

### **2.1 The rising of Digital Authoritarian in Southeast Asia**

Digital authoritarianism is not a political phenomenon that has just emerged after the decline of democracy since nearly a decade. In this section, the author will discuss where, to what extent, and how digital authoritarianism emerged and developed in Southeast Asia.

#### **2.1.1 Where it came from?**

As already discussed, digital authoritarianism appears in countries that have been authoritarian since the absence of the internet. The global literacy spotlight is on China and Russia. These two countries have become sources and spreaders of digital authoritarianism with different models.

In Southeast Asia itself, China is the most pro-active country in the spread of digital authoritarianism in countries whose regimes have practiced authoritarian actions. Not only that, China is also the first autocratic country to take legal action to facilitate their digital authoritarianism. Russia, on the other hand, is spreading more digital authoritarianism in its

surrounding countries and Central Asia, although it continues to promote it to other countries in general [10].

Email arrived in China in 1987 and the internet used commercially has started to spread since 1994 [8]. Not long ago, in 1996, the Chinese government took legal action to secure cyberspace under government control through State Council Order No. 195 [8]. A year later, "The Great Firewall of China" was launched by the government, showing their seriousness to dominate cyberspace. Currently, websites from China are supervised by more than 60 agencies.

Since then, China has continued to make various efforts to spread digital authoritarianism to many countries, especially African countries and other countries in Asia [11]. Of course, Southeast Asia is no exception.

### **2.1.2 How it spreading massively?**

Russia and, in particular, China promoting digital authoritarianism in various ways. In order to analyze how digital authoritarianism spreads in the Southeast Asia area, the elaboration in this section will focus on China's efforts. Although, both Russia and China, both use buying and selling technology. However, Russia is known to have much cheaper technology than China in this regard, making it easier for them to promote digital authoritarianism to neighboring countries like Belarus [10]. However, that does not mean that China is losing its expertise in promoting digital authoritarianism.

Interestingly, in the context of Southeast Asia, China has approached countries that are already authoritarian or whose regimes prioritize political stability [8]. Thus, China is not half-hearted in holding various training workshops for civil servants in many countries in Southeast Asia. Of course it's related to methods to exercise control and repression against the opposition [8]. But, not only that, China also provides loans and investments to many developing countries in Southeast Asia, even in some cases getting access to data from users in several countries.

One of the major projects involving China and claimed to be one of the campaigns against digital authoritarianism practices is The Digital Silk Road (DSR), which is still part of The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This DSR was only mentioned in an international forum in 2015 in a white paper compiled by three Chinese government bodies: the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce. The goal is none other than to make China a powerful country in the field of digital technology with the jargon "digital silk road of the 21st Century" in the BRI project [8]. But this DSR also allows China to exert influence in global technological developments, from 5G infrastructure to exploiting data collected in countries that are members of the DSR [8].

In addition, the promotion of digital authoritarianism is also carried out with a strategy through buying and selling technology and systems carried out between China and countries in Southeast Asia [11]. For example, Malaysia has integrated facial-recognition technology into their military forces [5]. China is also actively conducting special trainings for government officials from several countries in Southeast Asia. Not only for other state apparatus, they also conduct training for journalists from more than 30 countries, with the aim of teaching how to censor and monitor various negative opinions that develop in the public sphere. Officially, this training course is held by the Chinese government for 2-3 weeks.

### 2.1.3 Beyond the regime differences, Digital Authoritarianism Spreading in Southeast Asia

Of the eleven countries in Southeast Asia, it seems that digital authoritarianism is not only spreading in authoritarian countries. Seven of these countries are already led by authoritarian regimes and apply digital repression in their political dynamics. They are Myanmar, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Laos, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Singapore [12]. However, that doesn't mean it just stops there, a democratic country like Indonesia is also not free from authoritarian practices, marked by the existence of cyber troops aimed at manipulating public opinion.

If examined, it is not surprising. Because almost all countries in Southeast Asia cooperate with China in terms of procurement and preparation of digital policies, which include: being involved in BRI, Smart/Safe City, Facial Recognition, smart policing, and Chinese technology [13].

## 2.2 Underlying Forces of Digital Authoritarianism

The spread of digital authoritarianism is not without reason. This authoritarian practice in cyberspace basically offers something the ruling regime wants: political stability. Obviously, this is because digital authoritarianism provides access to the incumbent to be able to control, monitor, and even manipulate negative opinions circulating in the community, as well as tame the regime's opposition.

Political stability turns out to be directly proportional to the regime's capability in using technology, it is also automatically in line with the level of digital repression that they do. The graph below illustrates this clearly. In Southeast Asia, political conflicts threaten the political stability of the ruling regime. Say like the political conflict that happened in Myanmar [14]. Even in a democratic country like Indonesia, the taming of opposition doesn't just happen once [15]. The empirical fact that democracies also participate in digital repression in order to achieve political stability widens the academic perspective. Thus, the previous definition of the concept of digital authoritarianism deserves to be rethought.

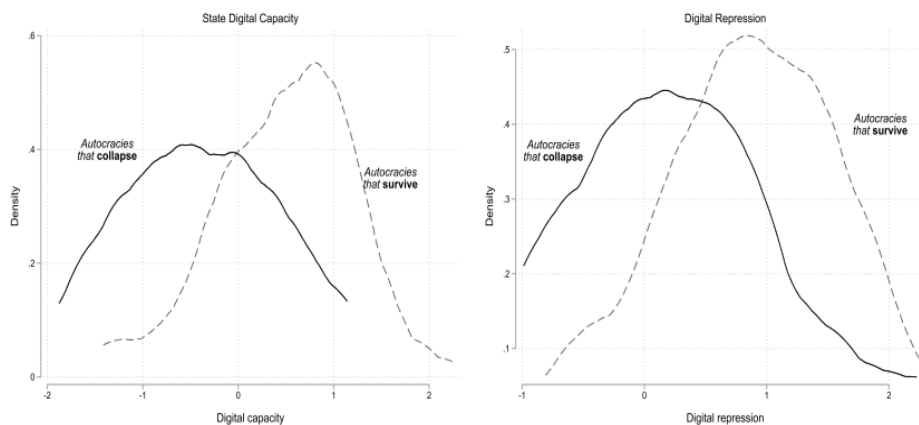


Fig. 1. State Digital Capacity and Digital Repression

### 3 Conclusion

In the end, digital authoritarianism is not something that is exclusively owned by superpower authoritarian countries like China and Russia. In other words, the use of technology to carry out authoritarian practices is beyond the regime's limits. Especially when the decline of democracy has become an increasingly complicated problem in many democratic countries in Indonesia. Even though seven out of eleven countries in Southeast Asia have been led by authoritarian regimes, it does not mean that digital authoritarianism stops there.

In fact, the existence of internet technology has become a new tool for the ruling government to carry out various authoritarian practices in cyberspace. Repression against the opposition and critical society also occurs in the cyber realm. Turning cyber-utopia into cyber-dystopia. The positive expectation that technological transformation will provide more capital for the strengthening of civil society has become far from reality. Digital authoritarianism not only narrows civil liberties in cyberspace, but also violates digital protection rights. Moreover, digital authoritarianism is a catalyst in the phenomenon of democratic decline.

### References

- [1] J. Curran, N. Fenton, and D. Freedman, *Misunderstanding the internet*. 2012.
- [2] J. T. Feezell, "Predicting Online Political Participation : The Importance of Selection Bias and Selective Exposure in the Online Setting," vol. 69, no. 3, pp. 495–509, 2018.
- [3] M. Lim, "Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia," *J. Contemp. Asia*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 636–657, 2013, doi: 10.1080/00472336.2013.769386.
- [4] C.-C. Chang and T.-H. Lin, "Autocracy login: internet censorship and civil society in the digital age," *Democratization*, vol. 27, no. 5, Jul. 2020, doi: 10.1080/13510347.2020.1747051.
- [5] A. Polyakova and C. Meserole, "Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models," *Foreign Policy, Democr. Disord. Ser.*, pp. 1–22, 2019.
- [6] M. Anthony, V. A. Iii, and N. Gauchan, "Dystopia is now : Digital authoritarianism and human rights in Asia," pp. 269–286, 2019.
- [7] A. Mare, "State-Ordered Internet Shutdowns and Digital Authoritarianism in Zimbabwe," *Int. J. Commun.*, vol. 14, pp. 4244–4263, 2020.
- [8] A. W. Scott, "Promoting digital authoritarianism: A study of China's Digital Silk Road," 2021.
- [9] L. Khalil, "Digital Authoritarianism , China and COVID," Sydney, 2020.
- [10] R. Morgus, "The Spread of Russia ' s Digital Authoritarianism," 2019.
- [11] D. Lilkov, "Made in China: Tackling Digital Authoritarianism," Brussels, 2020.
- [12] E. Frantz, A. Kendall-Taylor, and J. Wright, "Digital Repression in Autocracies," no. March, pp. 1–54, 2020.
- [13] S. Feldstein, "The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance Steven Feldstein," no. September, 2019.
- [14] M. A. Rahman, "Ethno-political Conflict : The Rohingya Vulnerability in Myanmar," *Int. J. Humanit. Soc. Sci. Stud.*, vol. II, no. I, pp. 288–295, 2015.
- [15] Wijayanto, "Democratic Regression and Authoritarian Practices in Indonesia," *Indones. J. Polit. Res.*, vol. 1, no. December, 2020.