Social Media, an Aid or Impediment for Asian Democracy?

East Asia Institute (EAI)

I. Rise of Social Media as Disinformation and Polarization Tools

The popularity of social media in Asia has grown at an exponential rate, in line with new and advanced technological innovations. While such advances aim to provide people with assistance in everyday life, there is an ongoing heated debate on social media's influence on the political landscape of democracies. Social media allows the public to communicate their political expressions and share ideas that can be translated to offline actions. It can be a liberating technology for those who are oppressed. On the other hand, social media can threaten democracy by further dividing the society through its echo-chamber function or by spreading disinformation and fake news which jeopardize democratic governance and weaken democratic institutions.

Meanwhile, it is relatively unclear as to what impact social media poses on governance in Asia mainly due to the lack of in-depth research on this topic. This online seminar aims to provide a preview of the upcoming publication by the Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN) "Social Media, Disinformation and Democracy in Asia," which encompasses research from 14 countries in Northeast Asia (Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand), and South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka). The full publication will be uploaded on the ADRN website (www.adrnresearch.org) in November 2020.

II. Country Cases of Disinformation in Social Media

Japan: Japanese Online Trolls Provoke Anti-Korean Sentiments

- *Record China*, a Japanese domestic portal site on China-related news, has been distributing news with intentions to improve the image of China, promote positive Japan-China relations, and spread the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda. It also has instigated negative views on South Korea, highlighting a starkly negative view on Japan-Korean relations, which could have contributed to an increase in anti-Korean sentiments in Japan in recent years.
- **Pro-China, Anti-Korea:** In 2019, *Record China* only covered non-political issues on China including sports, celebrities and trade despite the ongoing political tension between Japan and China, creating pro-China sentiments. On the other hand, the majority of Korea-related topics that *Record China* covered included sensitive diplomatic issues including Korean boycotts of Japanese products, comfort women, trade disputes, and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA).
- **Effects on democratic values:** This potentially undermines the quasi-alliance between Japan and Korea, the two major democracies in the region whose cooperation is essential in maintaining peace, stability, rule of law, and freedom in Asia. Such bias further polarizes the Japanese society along a social cleavage between supporters and opponents of human rights protection for people who have roots in foreign countries. In this end,

the Japanese viewers further need to raise awareness of Chinese influence in Asia, and cautions against China's potential manipulation behind pro-China and anti-Korean sentiments in Japanese news outlets.

South Korea: Already Polarized Korean Politics Worsens Under the Attack of Disinformation

- While the function of social media as a liberation tool still continues in South Korea, the rise of its negative functions also emerged, threatening democracy. In the context of South Korea, the amplifying effect of political polarization posed by social media is deemed the most serious challenge, as can be observed in the disinformation and political polarization cases.
- **Disinformation**: Two opinion rigging scandles in the 2012 presidential election by National Intelligence Service (NIS) and another in 2017 by a blogger who is related to an influential governor are two major examples of political disinformation on social media. During the 2012 presidential election, the NIS chief was involved in the case where NIS staff uploaded negative comments on social media against the liberal candidate, which led to the imprisonment of the NIS chief. In 2017, pro-liberal blogger named "Druking" allegedly used a macro system to sway the public opinion more favorable toward the liberal candidate.
- **Political polarization**: The political setting of South Korea in which civil society and political society are sharply divided allows social media to play a perfect role as an echo chamber. The tendency of people communicating with the group sharing similar beliefs reinforces their political views and blocks the chance to get exposed to alternative views. Extreme and often incorrect views tend to prevail in social media and contribute to political polarization. Political leaders try to align with the staunch, opinionated supporters who are active on social media. This hinders the middle ground between the two opposite forces, not allowing enough room for democratic compromise and deliberation.
- **Policy recommendations**: Detailed laws and regulations that seek a smart balance between guaranteeing freedom of expression and regulating disinformation, as well as principles and practices that filter facts from disinformation need to be established. At the same time, the users on social media should also be vigilant on and be aware of dangerous functions of social media.

The Philippines: Marcos Family Rose from Dictator to Hero with Social Media on Its Backing

- **Marcos family and social media**: In the Philippines, social media evidently became a platform for mobilizing political support especially during elections. In an effort to refurbish the image of the former President Ferdinand Marcos and reverse its losing streak in national elections, his son Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., intensively used social media to highlight the golden age of history under the Marcos regime. Through an enormous propaganda and disinformation drive on a network of webistes, Facebook, Youtube and social media influencers, the Marcos Jr. spread contents that denied the corruption, economic plunder and human rights transgressions of the Marcos time, while exaggerating its achievements. The disinformation campaign succeeded, as Bongbong Marcos was elected Senator in 2010 and his sister Imee Marcos was also elected Senator in 2019.
- **Disinformation and democracy:** Social media strategists are now fully centralized and integrated in the overall architecture of the candidates' political campaigns both at national and local levels. Populist leaders employ elite public relations firms and have engaged social media to spread their anti-establishment discourse. Such efforts include rejection of the legitimacy of prevailing democratic rules, dismissal of mainstream media, and allegations against liberal institutions that protect civil liberties and human rights. The spread of disinformation through social media has further strengthened personality-based politics and weakened rules-based governance in the Philippines.

Indonesia: Black Campaign Sways Voter Preference and Undermines Electoral Process

- Two major types of disinformation can be examined in Indonesia during the 2019 simultaneous election, in a country where social media exerts strong influence on political events with its people spending more than eight hours per day on social media in average.
- **Disinformation aiming candidates**: One case of disinformation was aimed to presidency and vice presidency candidates, to purposely defeat the contestants and shift the voting preference of the people by falsely accusing the candidates of being involved in social taboos of Indonesia. Black campaign spread where an Indonesian politician allegedly invited people to eat pork ("babi") after the election, which is a highly sensitive issue in Indonesia where the majority of the population is Muslims. However, the politician in fact mentioned of eating noodles ("bakmi").
- **Disinformation aiming the General Election Commission**: The second case of disinformation targetted the General Election Commission during the 2019 General Election, with intentions to undermine the electoral process and the authority of the elected candidate. Hoax campaigns were carried out to deliver the fake news that ballot papers were sent from China in order to manipulate the election. Misinformation also spread that Arief Budiman, the chairperson of the General Election Commission, is a Chinese descendant and lacks integrity. These altogether undermined the credibility of the electoral system and democracy as a whole.

India: Fight against Fake News amid Pandemic

- In India, the market share for WhatsApp application is phenomenal with more than 400 million active users in India, making it as one of the rapidly-growing platforms. Fake news on WhatsApp poses a bigger problem given its encrypted nature, and the fact that it is challenging to identify, report and remove contents. The Indian government has held social media intermediaries liable for curbing the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media, while the Facebook and Twitter maintained the stance that they were only platforms, not publishers, and therefore are not responsible for the content that is published on their platforms.
- **COVID-19:** Amid pandemic, Indian society is undergoing a surge of fake news and misinformation on social media often including conspiracy theories scapegoating certain countries, groups or communities for the spread of the virus. Two categories of misinformation have been spreading consistently-regarding Muslim culture and the government. In early March 2020 when the Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation took place in a mosque in Delhi, several thousand participants were confirmed with coronavirus, sparking a plethora of misinformation blaming the entire Muslim community. Another trend of misinformation includes using politicians or institutions as a believable source of misinformation on government announcement and advisories, as well as doctored statistics on positive cases or deaths.
- **Policy recommendations:** First, the government must enact appropriate legislations to hold social media intermediaries and culprits liable, while at the same time allowing freedom of expression. The social media industries should also develop and deploy technology that identifies fake news, and the media should promote self-regulation. The civil society and educational institutions, together with fact-checkers, need to increase digital literacy and raise awareness of its citizens.

Pakistan: Social Media is the Last Civic Space for Democratic Discourse

- Although in Pakistan social media is gaining prominence as a communication tool for political discourse, state regulation against social media and its hybrid democracy where military still holds dominance greatly restrict the freedom of speech on social media. Whereas legal regulation against social media began as an anti-terrorist

action against hate speech and extremism, it is now being used for political purposes in the legal regime of Pakistan, curbing people's rights and freedom.

- **State regulation:** In Pakistan, the government has the authority and the ability to enforce a strict policy against social media, often imposing disproportionately harsh punishments. For example, government organizations such as the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) have the authority to arbitrarily block or remove unlawful contents that are against the "glory of islam, integrity, security, defense, public order, contempt of court, decency, morality, incitement of any offense, etc." By law, social media companies including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc. operating in Pakistan are obliged to follow the guidance of the PTA. Such regulations also target journalists, opinion leaders and whistleblowers, leading to the self-censorship in media.

- **Political intentions:** In Pakistan's hybrid governance, social media is considered a tool of propaganda rather than a platform of information sharing. The government announced the "5th generation warfare" or "hybrid warfare" against social media, implying that social media is not deemed an independent source of information. In addition, systematic use of troll armies have been used by the state and political parties, labeling anyone who stands for citizens rights an anti-state activist. While traditional media is already under the state control, no TV channels are allowed to broadcast real-time and such regulation is also being applied on social media as well, making any kind of open discussion among citizens challenging. ∎

III. Moderator & Panelists

■ **Chin-en Wu** is an associate research fellow at the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, Taiwan. He received his PhD from the University of Michigan. He serves as one of the co-PIs of the Asian Barometer Survey. His main research interests include political economy, democratization, and the relationship between regime type and economic reforms.

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■ **Sook Jong Lee** is a professor of public administration at Sungkyunkwan University and senior fellow of the East Asia Institute. She has been directing the Asian Democracy Research Network since its formation in 2015, leading a network of about nineteen research organizations across Asia to promote democracy with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. Her recent publications include Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century (ed. 2016), and Keys to Successful Presidency in South Korea (ed. 2013 and 2016).

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■ **Sri Nuryanti** is a researcher at the Center for Political Studies, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Jakarta, Indonesia. She is the former Election Commissioner of the Indonesian General Election Commission 2007–12, where she successfully oversaw the Parliamentary election and Presidential election 2009, as well as local elections from 2007 to 2012. She is an active participant in various academic activities at the national as well as the international level. She is a Co-Secretary General of the Asia Pacific Peace Research Association and the Executive Council member of the International Peace Research Association. She is director in charge of the Electoral Research Institute, Jakarta, Indonesia.

■ **Aasiya Riaz** is joint director at PILDAT, the leading Pakistani think tank she co-founded in 2001, and she leads PILDAT's projects and activities. Trained in the field of media and political communication at the London School

of Economics, UK, Aasiya has also worked with the mainstream press and electronic media in Pakistan as a political analyst. She has been a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy, as well as a distinguished fellow at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at the Stanford University.