ASEANFocus

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION PROVIDING CONCISE ANALYSES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ASEAN MATTERS

Digitalisation in ASEAN

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Contents

Editorial Notes

Many landmark developments have unfolded across the world and the region in the final quarter of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage on, leaving serious public health, economic and psychological upheavals in its wake. Yet, one silver lining has emerged with the impending roll-out of COVID-19 vaccination in the region, as ASEAN member states tap on both global manufacturers and join the race to develop their own home-grown vaccines with countries like Singapore playing a part in creating sustainable distribution supply chains in the region.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, ASEAN Leaders reaffirmed their commitment to help the region build back better during the 37th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in November 2020. Among the Summit's key outcomes that demonstrate ASEAN's firm resolve to sustain the multilateral trading system and economic recovery was the long-awaited signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement on 15 November 2020. The mammoth ASEAN-led trade deal joins some of the world's largest economies, linking their technological, manufacturing and agricultural powerhouses together. *ASEANFocus* is privileged to feature the *Insider Views* of H.E. Pham Binh Minh, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, who sheds light on how Vietnam has fostered a "cohesive and responsive ASEAN" amid the pandemic disruptions and growing geopolitical turbulence in the region.

In another momentous development, Joe Biden emerged victorious after the drawn-out presidential election in November with the message "America is back". To help make sense of the incoming Administration's foreign policy objectives for Southeast Asia and prospects for ASEAN-US relations, *ASEANFocus* convened a roundtable featuring the views of eminent persons and experts from ASEAN member states, namely Dr. Vannarith Chheang, Dr. Dino Patti Djalal, Mr. Liew Chin Tong, Dr. Rosalie Arcala Hall, Dr. Joseph Liow, Dr. Pongphisoot Busbarat and Mr. Pham Quang Vinh.

With the pandemic forcing the world to pivot almost entirely online, the role and importance of digital technologies has never been more prominent in 2020. In this respect, Ms. Hoang Thi Ha examines the benefits and limitations of ASEAN's digital diplomacy through the conduct of its online meetings this year. While emerging and disruptive technologies raise exciting new possibilities for economies and communities alike, the rapid turn to technological tools and solutions also begets new concerns relating to personal privacy, security and resilience in the online sphere. This issue therefore casts *Spotlight* on the multi-faceted phenomenon of digitalisation in Southeast Asia. Dr. Yatun Sastramidjaja starts off with an overview of the complexities of digital technologies on political developments in Southeast Asia. Mr. Damar Juniarto, Dr. Pauline Leong and Ms. Moe Thuzar enrich the debate by sharing their respective country perspectives on how digital technologies have been leveraged to either expand political participation or tighten state control over the political discourse. Ms. Qiu Jiahui and Ms. Melinda Martinus explore how youth activism across the region has been empowered through the utilisation of digital platforms.

In the economic arena, Dr. Javier Lopez Gonzalez suggests government strategies to enable small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to participate in and harness digital trade. Dr. Lurong Chen underlines the importance of strengthening digital connectivity in the region to facilitate and promote e-commerce. Dr. Kobi Leins and Dr. Lesley Seebeck emphasise the need for ASEAN countries to proactively participate in the evolving global governance over artificial intelligence (AI). Mr. Andrew Lowenthal explains how government policies and civil society advocacy will shape the management and protection of digital rights. Dr. Cyn-Young Park argues that improved access and adoption of digital technologies, when coupled with adequate investment in reskilling, upskilling and labour policies, can drive inclusive growth in the ASEAN region. *ASEAN in Figures* caps off the discussion by illustrating Southeast Asia's cyber landscape with statistics on digital economy, internet penetration rates, digital readiness, and more.

As 2020 draws to a close, this issue's *Sights and Sounds* celebrates some of Southeast Asia's traditions that have endured the passage of time. Mr. Kevin Neo makes a toast to the region's unique culture of making and imbibing liquors, while Ms. Nur Syafiqah Binte Mohd Taufek and Ms. Siti Syazwani Binte Zainal Abidin chart the origins and evolution of modest hijab fashion and its evolving meaning in Southeast Asia.

On a final note, we at the ASEAN Studies Centre are honoured to be conferred the prestigious ASEAN Prize 2020. This award has inspired us to continue our efforts to promote the research and understanding of ASEAN and support the ASEAN community-building process. We wish to thank all our colleagues and friends for their confidence in us. We would also like to extend our deepest appreciation to all our esteemed contributors this past year for sharing their valued insights, and our stakeholders and readers for their unwavering engagement and support.

We wish you a stable, peaceful and happy 2021! ⚜

Meeting Online: A New Normal in ASEAN?

Hoang Thi Ha examines the contributions and constraints of digital diplomacy in ASEAN.

The COVID-19 pandemic has cost millions of lives, inflicted untold economic sufferings, and upended the entire world. Unlike previous crises, all this is taking place in a social distancing environment with closed borders and limited travel across nations. ASEAN's traditional response to crisis situations is to convene high-level emergency meetings to discuss regional solutions. That was the case when the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) hit the region in 2003, or when the tsunami struck Indian Ocean Rim countries in 2005. But the contagious power of COVID-19 disabuses the organisation of its traditional interface platform, which begs the question: How has ASEAN made its presence and impact felt in these extraordinary moments and can digital diplomacy fill the gap?

The Boom of Online Meetings in 2020

Since the early 2000s, ASEAN had been discussing the need to streamline its meetings through video-conferencing but there was little appetite to see this through – probably because of a path-dependent mindset that saw little incentive to change ASEAN's interface meeting culture and a shared fondness for travel that is perhaps very human. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced change upon the way ASEAN conducts its business – virtual meetings and online interactions become an immediate necessity, not a remote possibility, which is enabled by digital communication technologies. ASEAN has thus fully utilised digital diplomacy, with all of its meetings across all sectors, including those with its

Dialogue Partners, from working-group to ministerial and summit levels, being held virtually since April 2020. Digital diplomacy has indeed helped ASEAN countries continue their dialogue and coordination, and mobilise regional mechanisms in tackling the COVID-19 crisis.

There are obvious benefits of meeting online in logistical terms. Vietnam has rallied a very productive Chairmanship year even as its government cut down on domestic and international meeting budget by 70% in 2020. Video-conferencing is a time-efficient and cost-effective way to relieve the burgeoning travel and hosting expenses for around 1500 ASEAN meetings a year. The bulk of the ASEAN Secretariat's annual operational budget is spent on official travel. As part of their membership duty, ASEAN countries regularly host ASEAN meetings, especially during their turn of ASEAN chairmanship, coordinatorship or sectoral chairmanships. Many are willing to do so and even make these events a big show for domestic and international audiences. But it is a heavy burden for small countries like Brunei and Laos not only in financial terms but also in manpower. In April 2013, Brunei hosted a streamlined ASEAN Summit with no ministerial or leaders' sideline meetings, whereas Laos combined both the 28th and 29th ASEAN summits in September 2016.

The accessibility of video-conferencing has also contributed to a more responsive and inclusive ASEAN this year by enabling timely consultations with relevant stakeholders and sectors on critical issues during the pandemic, for example food security and trade-related matters. Besides, the short online attention span means that the duration of most ASEAN virtual meetings is shorter, the agenda more streamlined and the discussion more focused and result-oriented. The fact that ASEAN and its five Dialogue Partners managed to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations and sign the agreement this year is a prime testament that digital diplomacy works so long as there is strong political will, hard work and good coordination among the countries concerned. Another example is the Memorandum of Understanding on the Implementation of Non-Tariff Measures on Essential Goods, which was negotiated and concluded within a record short timeframe of five months.

Opening Ceremony of the 37th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits on 12 November 2020

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Online versus On-site

Video-conferencing is not without its inherent limitations. Even with the best preparations, technical glitches do occasionally happen, such as unstable internet connection or poor audio and visual quality which affect the flow of discussion. Other physical constraints include limited attention span online, especially at the ministerial and summit levels, and different time zones. For instance, getting the time right to convene an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting with 27 members spreading over six geographical regions is almost next to impossible. Cybersecurity is another key concern, particularly for confidential negotiations such as on the code of conduct in the South China Sea (COC) which did not resume official talks this year.

Beyond these technical and physical constraints, video-conferencing misses out on something very elemental about ASEAN. The vibe of direct interactions, the sense of urgency and the pressure of delivery can push diplomats on the ground to go extra lengths in proposing innovative formulations and making compromises to reach consensus on contentious issues. In many cases, sideline caucuses or last-minute meetings until wee hours help break through the impasse. In an online context, this can only be done through many preparatory meetings and drafting sessions for an extended period of time well in advance, with many chat-box communications in different sub-groups, to persuade and consult each other virtually. Online or on-site, it requires a lot of preparatory work, inter-sessional communication and consultation, and especially the Chair's ability to reconcile differences and forge consensus.

ASEAN meetings are not about outcome documents only. Its regular gatherings among regional leaders and officials provide a diplomatic ecosystem where many informal and sideline engagements take place. Social activities such as "playing golf together, eating Durians and doing the Karaoke" or sightseeing tours and cultural performances have helped cultivate the personal bonding and camaraderie among ASEAN leadership and officialdom. In other words, it is through these selfie moments, not ASEAN official handshake photo ops, that a sense of community has been inculcated throughout many decades. As noted by Prof. Wang Gungwu: "Three generations of officials and bureaucrats in the region have met frequently in the ASEAN context, working together and growing up together with ASEAN."

Since ASEAN community-building remains in its nascent phase, it is too soon to call its traditional diplomacy a thing of the past. True to the saying "Technology cannot replace human touch", ASEAN gatherings engender a sense of familiarity and a give-and-take approach which in turn facilitate consensus-building on contentious issues. In an online setting, the drive to push maximalist national positions goes high and the spirit of compromise can be undermined. For instance, at the virtual 41st General Assembly of ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) in September, the head of the Indonesian

The virtual signing ceremony of RCEP on 15 November 2020

ASEAN Secretariat

delegation delivered almost an ultimatum on either adopting his proposed resolution on the Rohingya or having no outcome document at all. It appeared that he was tuning in to his domestic constituencies rather than giving due respect to regional sensitivities.

In the context of ASEAN external relations, how video-conferencing will impact ASEAN centrality – if this trend holds – needs to be watched carefully. Much of ASEAN centrality has been attributed to its convening power. "Showing up" at ASEAN high-level meetings is considered a high mark of external partners' commitment to engagement with ASEAN and their staying power in the region. Yet, the online context has somewhat relieved the pressure to "show up" even virtually. A good number of foreign ministers of non-ASEAN members – including some major powers – did not attend the 2020 ARF, some of whom just sent their respective Ambassadors to ASEAN or a pre-recorded message. US President Trump continued to skip the ASEAN Summitry this year even though it would have taken him only a couple of hours online. It remains to be seen whether the Biden Administration would keep to the promise of "return to the table", when it comes to summit engagement with ASEAN.

Going forward, there are good reasons for ASEAN to utilise more online meetings beyond COVID-19, especially for technical discussions and emergency situations. Online meetings will likely be further embedded in ASEAN's workings as a readily available channel whenever there is a need for quick regional consultation and response. At the same time, ASEAN traditional diplomacy which places emphasis on building trust and understanding through personal contact retains its merits, especially at the summit and ministerial levels where member states' political commitment to the ASEAN project must be demonstrated and sustained. It is not an either-or between *talking online* and *meeting on-site*, but a flexible combination of both to promote operational efficiency while preserving the venue for diplomacy and regional statecraft. ▧

Ms. Hoang Thi Ha is Fellow and Lead Researcher (Political-Security Affairs) at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Roundtable: "America is Back." To Southeast Asia?

ASEANFocus invites regional experts to share their perspectives on the Biden Administration's foreign policy, and what it means for the region.

Dr. CHHEANG Vannarith
President, Asian Vision Institute (AVI)

Dr. Dino Patti DJALAL
Founder and Chairman of Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), Former Deputy Foreign Minister and Former Ambassador of Indonesia to the US

Mr. LIEW Chin Tong
Former Deputy Defence Minister of Malaysia

Dr. Rosalie Arcala HALL
President, Philippine Political Science Association

Dr. Joseph LIOW
Dean of College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University

Dr. Pongphisoot BUSBARAT
Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University

Mr. PHAM Quang Vinh
Former Deputy Foreign Minister and Former Ambassador of Vietnam to the US

AF: What do you think of President Biden's foreign policy background and his likely foreign policy team?

DJALAL: Biden is one of the most foreign policy-ready US Presidents in recent times. His experience as Vice President for eight years and also his previous experience in the US Senate for 36 years where he handled foreign policy issues extensively place him as a strong foreign policy President. His knowledge, experience and judgement – three critical aspects of policy making – will produce an American foreign policy with more substance, compared to that of President Trump. His foreign policy team also has a credible track record, especially in the persons of Anthony Blinken and Jake Sullivan.

HALL: The Biden Administration will promote soft power alongside more definitive military commitments to allies. While the Trump Administration reversed many elements of Obama's "Asia pivot", it did enhance the Quad framework which holds greater promise now by having Japan, Australia and India cooperate more closely on

security matters. The Biden Administration will likely build upon these efforts. It will also put greater emphasis on upholding the rule of law in international conduct, and tying security and trade concerns more closely with the democracy agenda so as to restore confidence that it remains committed to global leadership and the liberal international order.

LIOW: Biden has extensive experience in foreign policy, having spent almost four decades in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including as its Chair for many years. As for his foreign policy team, there are a number of familiar faces. His Asia team has strong candidates, many of whom were from the Obama Administration. These include Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, who was advisor to Biden when he was Vice-President. For more senior positions, Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan are widely been seen as good choices for the offices of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor respectively, while Katherine Tai has substantial experience litigating trade disputes with China in the WTO, which she would bring

to the office of US Trade Representative if confirmed. She is also a Mandarin speaker. Compared to his fellow Cabinet nominees, Lloyd Austin, President-elect Biden's nominee for Secretary of Defense, is less familiar with Asia, having focused on the Middle East and counter-insurgency for much of the final years of his career.

PHAM: Biden will strive to restore US global credibility, and his foreign policy team will strongly advocate American leadership, values, alliances and partnerships at both bilateral and multilateral levels. But I don't expect that to be just an Obama 2.0 or a mere negation of Trump. The world has changed and America has turned more transactional. Biden could bring America back to the Paris climate accord or even the Iran nuclear deal, but his approach to the China challenge or the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) would have evolved since Obama's time. Biden may also find himself getting along with some of the Trump Administration's foreign policy legacies.

AF: In what aspects would the Biden Administration's foreign policy differ from the Obama Administration and why?

CHHEANG: Key foreign policy objectives from the Obama Administration will continue, but with a greater focus on great power competition vis-à-vis China and Russia. Relations with Asian and European allies and strategic partners will be enhanced. These strategic adjustments are largely driven by the perceived structural threats and challenges from China and Russia, and the urgency to restore trust and credibility in the US-led alliance system. In addition, US normative power and global leadership role will gain new impetus after four years of decline under the Trump Administration.

LIOW: I expect the Biden Administration to take a tougher line on China than Obama did, although we should also expect his team to do something of a review of existing policy before outlining their own approach. This means that even as they are likely to continue the current tough stance towards Beijing, there will still be some recalibration. I think those who might eventually end up in the Biden team would have spent the last four years not only observing the Trump Administration's policies closely, and how regional states have reacted to them, but they would also have tuned in to regional reflections on Obama's policies. On the South China Sea (SCS) for instance, Obama has been heavily criticised for a weak freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) strategy. It is widely accepted that Obama had not been tough enough on China and had not done enough to influence Chinese economic behaviour.

BUSBARAT: The general direction of Biden's foreign policy is likely to resemble that of the Obama Administration. However, unlike Obama's cautious approach towards China, Biden's China policy is likely to continue Trump's hard-line approach. Yet, contrasting to Trump, Biden will consult closely with US allies and utilise multilateral and regional mechanisms as his foreign policy tools. US-China power competition therefore will

still loom large in the region. Biden's policy in the region will settle somewhere in the middle between Obama's soft multilateralist approach and Trump's harsh unilateralist approach.

AF: What are the prospects of US engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN-US relations under the Biden Administration?

CHHEANG: The Biden Administration will likely continue the key elements of Obama's Rebalance towards Asia, but with a more nuanced position on China. It can be a Rebalance 2.0 that seeks to re-assert the rules-based international order and takes a tougher stand on China. The US will likely reinvigorate its multi-layered partnership building with ASEAN and Southeast Asia at bilateral, sub-regional and regional levels. The Mekong-US Partnership, an updated version of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), will be reinforced as the Mekong region is emerging as a new strategic frontier in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, human rights and democracy issues will likely feature more prominently in US-ASEAN relations.

DJALAL: I think President Biden will reactivate US engagement with Southeast Asia, including US-ASEAN relations. Biden is likely to immediately nominate the American Ambassador to ASEAN and also the American Ambassador to Singapore, which have been vacant for some time now. It is likely that Biden will see Southeast Asia as an important strategic arena to push back China's growing influence in the region.

LIEW: The Biden Administration might help repair US image that took a hit under President Trump. He is also seen as composed, reasonable and predictable in his foreign policy decisions. His Administration must step up engagement with ASEAN in both method and level of representation. Key reassurance initiatives during the Trump Administration are perceived with varied reservations across the region. US engagement with Southeast Asia must recognise the region's importance and potential in its own right, and not simply be a function of US strategy against China. Deeper and more meaningful defence collaboration, in the form of exercises, exchanges and asset transfers must take place beyond the rhetoric on the SCS.

The 8th ASEAN-US Summit on 14 November 2020

HALL: There will be an upgrade of US engagement with Southeast Asian countries bilaterally and with ASEAN. The Biden Administration will "show up" and signal the seriousness of its intent by attending more summits, doing more military exercises and bringing more trade to the region. While Washington is not likely going to match Chinese economic footprint already in place and rooted in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, it could support norm-making by emphasising the need to address the challenges associated with untrammeled infrastructure push, particularly in the areas of climate change and human security, including economic displacement.

LIOW: It should be reminded that Southeast Asia is not a priority region for the US. Having said that, I do think Biden will pay more personal attention to the region compared to Trump. He will likely work harder to come to our part of the world more often, but in the larger scheme of American priorities, we do not rank very high. It is a harsh point to make, but a reality. In the immediate term, Biden will probably focus more on the Transatlantic relationship. It requires more urgent repair, and will also probably be his starting point to a more multilateral approach to China.

BUSBARAT: Biden's Southeast Asia policy may resemble Obama's in the sense that engagement with Southeast Asia is a platform of his East Asia policy. Biden will likely build on the existing initiatives with Southeast Asia, including strengthening American engagement with ASEAN-led mechanisms and supporting sub-regional platforms where US leadership is deemed significant, such as the Mekong-US Partnership, Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). The US Navy's recent idea of reviving the First Fleet to operate across Indo-Pacific suggests that the US aims to expand its regional security commitments with its allies and partners. The region will hence experience more security engagements with US military in the coming future.

PHAM: ASEAN and Southeast Asia will again be a policy priority in Biden's overall Asia strategy. This will be a continuity from Obama's, and at the same time the Biden team will carry on, to a certain extent, Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy. In this region, Biden will face the challenge of restoring US credibility that has been undermined in different ways by the previous administrations. To this end, the US should focus more on building a rules-based regional architecture and fostering relations with ASEAN and other emerging partners beyond US traditional allies.

AF: What are the potential challenges and constraints facing the Biden Administration as it seeks to reinstate US standing in the region?

CHHEANG: Restoring trust, credibility and leadership requires time, efforts, resources, consistency and sincerity. The Biden Administration will need at least one to two years to reset and redraw US comprehensive engagement with the region. Washington needs to increase its economic presence and invest more in infrastructure development so as to effectively compete with China as many Southeast Asian countries prioritise economic interest in their foreign policy objectives. This requires the US to deliver tangible benefits to the region such as high-quality infrastructure development, including critical digital infrastructure, and deepen trade and investment ties.

DJALAL: The main challenge for the Biden Administration is to consistently show up at regional meetings such as the East Asia Summit and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). This has been a long-standing problem for previous US Presidents. They may show up in the first year but miss subsequent meetings. Another challenge is Biden's preoccupation with pressing domestic priorities, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic where America now has the world's highest cases and death rates, and also arresting economic recession and unemployment. To a considerable degree,

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this will turn Biden's attention towards home affairs a lot more than to international affairs.

LIEW: The Biden Administration will have to contend with the fact that COVID-19 may drastically change the economic and security outlooks of Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Some countries will have to move away from export-oriented manufacturing in order to shield their economies from slumped global demands. This may completely change how trade deals will work and impose additional costs for American firms to enter Southeast Asian markets. Security-wise, military exercises and some military-to-military exchanges have either been postponed or cancelled in some ASEAN countries, which will necessarily limit the breadth and depth of US security engagements in the region.

LIOW: The biggest will by far be domestic politics. If there is one thing we should all learn from the recent US presidential and congressional elections, it is that the American electorate is even more deeply divided than four years ago. The pollsters that predicted a Democrat landslide victory were off once again. Biden's immediate priority will be to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and that will preoccupy him for the better part of his first year, if not longer. He needs to also get the economy going again. While it certainly cannot be resolved in one term, Biden will have to start undoing the hyper-polarisation that has seized the country. At the same time, he will also have to manage his Democrat party, which has large segments swinging to the extreme left.

BUSBARAT: China's ability to influence other smaller countries in Beijing's favour will probably be the biggest challenge to US role in the region. This also impacts ASEAN unity and undermines ASEAN's ability to maintain its collective action, making it more difficult for the Biden Administration to readjust the power shift in the region. A harsh push from Washington could deepen the divide within ASEAN and regional states would see US moves through the frame of US-China strategic competition that will force the region to take sides. Besides, Biden's potential overemphasis on human rights and democracy will also alienate his Southeast Asian counterparts and disturb bilateral relations. Washington's promotion of liberal values will likely be seen as interference in the domestic politics of regional states, and may push some of them further towards Beijing. US policy towards the region therefore needs to be well calibrated.

AF: What do you predict about the Biden Administration's position on the Indo-Pacific and the future of the Quad?

DJALAL: Biden will continue President Trump's policy on the Indo-Pacific and will probably use this as a way to contain, marginalise or exclude China. Biden is likely to regard the Indo-Pacific as the core for global strategic and economic affairs. Biden will also likely maintain the role of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, but will be careful to not sideline ASEAN centrality.

HALL: The Biden Administration will continue the pivot to the Indo-Pacific and enhance the Quad. The pandemic has exposed the gaps and vulnerabilities in trade and economic relationships of Japan, India, Australia, but it also brought out the resilience of democratic principles amidst public health emergencies. Going forward, security will take on a more nuanced meaning for the Quad members, and its intersection with democratic principles will probably play out more significantly.

LIOW: I think the Indo-Pacific will remain the overarching strategic concept that will continue to inform US policy in Asia during the Biden Administration, especially in terms of its conceptualisation of the seamless geostrategic contiguity of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. As for the Quad, I would like to see it continue but evolve in terms of its scope. Currently, it places a lot of currency on the strategic aspect, which is fine, but it should also introduce some economic, trade and diplomatic initiatives. This would give it the form, if not substance, of a more comprehensive engagement strategy, which would in turn make it more appealing to the region.

PHAM: The question at issue would be the Indo-Pacific and China, rather than the Quad. The Biden team may adopt the term Indo-Pacific due to the increasing recognition of the inter-link between the two regions which is also the expanded arena of US-China strategic competition. Again, the team will build upon, rather than get rid of, Trump's legacies, albeit in a selective way and with adjustments. In this context, they may again refocus on building a broader base of partnerships in the region. The Quad may be part of this but would not be a spearhead against China as may be envisaged wishfully.

AF: What do you predict about the Biden Administration's policy towards China, and how would it impact Southeast Asia?

CHHEANG: Biden's China policy would be tough but with more predictability and consistency than the Trump Administration. US-China strategic rivalry will likely lead to a geopolitical faultline in Southeast Asia which in turn will cause security dilemmas for some regional states. The key question is how these countries would exert their agency despite their power asymmetry with major powers. In the event of a military confrontation between the US and China – the likelihood is very low though – regional countries will be forced to take sides against their will and interest.

DJALAL: President-elect Joe Biden will remain tough on China and engaged in a competitive relationship with Beijing, but his policy towards China will be more nuanced and more measured. There is a possibility that there will be more areas of cooperation with China, such as on climate change, North Korea, and possibly Iran. But on some issues, such as cyber security, 5G, SCS and military-to-military relations, Biden will probably remain fearlessly competitive and distrustful of China.

US President-elect Joe Biden

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LIEW: The Biden Administration will continue the trajectory of the current US foreign policy which sees China as a strategic competitor. Biden has been critical of China in the past, calling it "hi-tech authoritarianism", criticising its trade practices, corruption cases and human rights violations in Uighurs and Hong Kong. However, Biden might soften his rhetoric in order to seek cooperation with China, especially on COVID-19, climate change and other global governance issues. It is uncertain how China will react towards the new Administration, which would have a bearing on Southeast Asia.

HALL: The Biden Administration will tone down Trump's hard-line stance towards China, but the competitive approach in the US' China policy will likely continue, especially in the areas of trade and technology, anchored in bipartisan consensus and more China-wary American public. This will create economic uncertainties for Southeast Asian countries whose trade depends on both powers. A ban on Huawei and other considered-sensitive Chinese technologies will affect many regional countries whose communications systems depend on them. Rather than presenting China as an economic rival or a hegemonic challenger, the Biden Administration should switch towards a narrative about China that is more amenable to Southeast Asian audiences, e.g. China poses a threat to the rule of law and the global commons and freedoms.

LIOW: There are several assumptions that I think will shape the Administration's China policy. First, the current robust approach must basically be continued. Second, as a multilateralist, Biden would want his Administration to work with friends and partners to seek some alignment of China policies. If these two assumptions hold true, it then follows that Biden would be interested to know what role Southeast Asia is prepared to play in a wider

effort to pressure China on issues such as its geostrategic assertiveness, territorial claims, economic protectionism, etc. This will be a test for Southeast Asian states, many of which have developed close economic and political ties with China and would rather not be caught in the middle.

BUSBARAT: I expect Biden's China policy to continue the degree of competition and many policy directions from Trump. Biden will likely take human rights and democracy as core elements in US policy towards China, in a less transactional fashion than Trump. Biden will inherit Trump's policy tools such as enhanced military presence and security engagements through the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad. At this, Southeast Asia will likely be in the spotlight as Washington seeks to enhance security partnerships with key regional states and attaches importance to ASEAN as the provider of regional multilateral platforms. The US will likely support a broad array of sub-regional arrangements in the Mekong Basin. The Mekong-US Partnership may receive more funding for its activities, and Thailand may expect more US support of its ACMECS brainchild as Washington continues to push back against China's influence in the sub-region.

PHAM: US-China strategic competition will continue, but may be managed in a more predictable manner under Biden. This will engender some strategic stability, enable some cooperation such as on climate change, and reduce the risks of unintended frictions. In general, that would be a relief for Southeast Asia. There will also be more consultation with US allies and partners (although there is the concern that this may entail US greater pressure on these countries to take sides with Washington). Yet, even with bipartisan consensus on the China challenge, a coherent and effective US strategy to deal with China's rise remains elusive. Here, Trump has done his successor a favour. Biden would just wait for a while before revisiting

US tariffs levied on China excessively by Trump. Southeast Asia will then have to hold its breath a little longer.

AF: The Trump Administration has stepped up its push-back against China's claims and actions in the SCS. Do you think the Biden Administration would continue this trajectory?

HALL: The Biden Administration will likely continue US FONOPs that have been scaled up in the SCS under Trump's watch. It will also take a robust diplomatic offensive towards defending the rule of law in maritime governance. The US will likely enhance bilateral commitments to its allies' military modernisation so that they could build up their capabilities which are better-synced to US insertions, where needed.

LIEW: My position is that we welcome the US as a resident power but hope its power is exercised with restraint and in a measured manner. The Biden Administration is unlikely to change many of the previous defence engagements and activities in the SCS, COVID-19 notwithstanding. The US has been and will continue to be in the area regardless of who sits in the Oval Office. As long as America maintains treaty alliances with and military presence in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, we expect that American presence in the SCS is a continued reality given the logistical importance of this maritime domain to US military operations.

PHAM: Again, this is not just the SCS but part of the China challenge. The US' baseline in pushing back against China in the SCS was raised under Trump and its FONOPs also carried the message of containment and deterrence. Biden will probably continue Obama's policy of more diplomatic engagement but he will also inherit Trump's legacies on the SCS in many aspects, including robust FONOPS, denunciation of China's baseless excessive claims and its assertive actions in the SCS, and sanctions against relevant Chinese entities that are being introduced into legislation.

AF: What are the potential stumbling blocks in your country's bilateral relations with the US under the Biden Administration?

CHHEANG: Human rights issue has been the main obstacle in Cambodia-US relations, which gets further complicated by domestic political dynamics in Cambodia. The relationship has also been adversely affected by the perception among some US foreign-policy makers that Cambodia is a vassal state of China, especially over the rumours that China plans to build its military bases in the coastal provinces of Cambodia.

DJALAL: There would be fewer stumbling blocks in US-Indonesia under the Biden Administration, compared to under President Trump. Biden would be seen as friendlier to Islamic constituents, relative to Trump. But Indonesian politicians are suspicious and nervous that the Biden Administration would be more intrusive and interventionist, compared to the Trump Administration.

LIEW: Israel and the Middle East issues will always be a thorn in Malaysia-US bilateral relations, and this might continue to be so under Biden given his strong support for Israel. The Biden Administration will also have to take care in balancing its 'principles-focused' foreign policy with the practical realities facing ASEAN nations. If Biden is to have a successful engagement with these nations, his foreign policy advisors must focus on the political, economic and security realities in ASEAN.

HALL: During the Duterte Administration, the Philippines has warmed up towards China and Russia while its relationship with the US entered a "cooling off" period. Given Duterte's temperamental tendency, uncertainties in bilateral relations will continue until the next presidential elections in May 2022. Previously, US criticism of Duterte's human rights record elicited his knee-jerk reactions, including the threat to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA). Thus, any overture by Biden on human rights and democracy issues will

The USS Barry conducting routine operations in the South China Sea on 21 November 2020

Molly Crawford@US Navy

Leaders of the TPP negotiating states in 2010

Gobierno de Chile/
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likely ruffle Duterte's feathers anew. Besides, absent a clear US stance on the SCS beyond its FONOPs, Manila is unable to leverage its position against China's continued militarisation in the area. Philippine military modernisation in the past decades has been underwritten by the US, and if the VFA termination comes to pass, Duterte may look to Beijing and Moscow for collaborations of the same kind. Furthermore, COVID-19 has inflicted huge economic losses on the Philippines and deepened the country's vulnerability to China's economic influence. There is a need for the Biden Administration to invest anew on diplomacy, security and economic engagement with Manila.

LIOW: I don't think there are any apparent potential stumbling blocks. Singapore's relations with the US have grown deep roots across a whole range of issues. Singapore has been, and remains, a strong advocate of US presence in the neighbourhood, and has always maintained that the US is a Pacific power with significant interests in the region, including Southeast Asia. Looking ahead, there might be some challenges depending on how the Biden Administration intends to recalibrate US policy on China. It is in Singapore's interest to maintain good relations with both the US and China, and it has made clear that it has no intention of choosing one side over the other. Any "choice" that it makes will be issue-dependent and based on calculations of its own interests, and not those of either external power.

BUSBARAT: The potential stumbling block in Thailand-US relations lies in Thailand's domestic political struggle as its conservative establishment attempts to tighten political and social control. The Biden Administration's tough stance on undemocratic values may impact US relationship with the Thai establishment which has a longstanding historical connection dating back to the Cold War. Biden needs to balance between keeping US friends within the Thai establishment and promoting democratisation in Thailand. The Thai establishment has also cultivated a good relationship with Beijing, which can become their bargaining leverage vis-à-vis Washington. The US will need to weigh this factor more carefully given the need to maintain its access to Thailand's military facilities and security cooperation.

PHAM: Vietnam and the US have built solid foundations for stronger partnership over the past 25 years, through the change of Administrations in Washington, including during the Trump presidency. Differences are to be expected in any partnership. Under Trump, US trade deficit with Vietnam might be a sensitive issue but the overall relations have been boosted in many other areas. Under Biden, human rights issues would feature more prominently in US relations with other countries, including Vietnam. But I believe the two countries can manage well the differences while continuing to enhance cooperation on emerging important areas such as climate change and clean energy.

AF: Do you think the Biden Administration will rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership?

LIEW: I believe that it would likely do so, especially after the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which does not include the US. But with many conditions under the current Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to be renegotiated, it might take some time before that happens.

LIOW: I would like it to, but I don't think it will, not immediately anyway. While Biden did allude to the possibility of renegotiating the TPP, there is now too much water under the bridge on this issue. The region has moved on after US withdrawal from the TPP four years ago. They have signed the CPTPP, and now the RCEP. In a sense, the ball is in the US court in terms of signalling its interest to initiate discussions of American involvement in the regional trade architecture, but it may not be the TPP or the CPTPP. This is one area where US leadership has been absent, and in my humble opinion it has worked to the detriment of American national interest, in particular, its ability to meet the economic challenge of China in the region.

PHAM: The American public have become much more cautious of free trade and the Biden Administration will have to tune in to this prevailing sentiment in US domestic politics. Biden himself admitted that free trade deals would not be his immediate policy priority even though Washington fully reckons that US engagement in the Indo-Pacific must be as much economic as it is strategic. Biden may seek to achieve something like the TPP ultimately. But this will take some time, as he has to convince his people and attend to problems at home first.▨

Leveraging the Digital Sphere for Democracy in Southeast Asia

Yatun Sastramidjaja examines how the digital sphere has been used for both democratisation and state power consolidation.

Over the past decade, the digital sphere has been a double-edged sword for democratisation and democratic processes in Southeast Asia. The boom of social media in the region between mid-2000s and early 2010s raised hopes that it would make political participation accessible for all and provide citizens with an effective tool to hold powerholders accountable and push for democratic change. But that enthusiasm has faded as the democratic potential of social media has proven to be limited and flawed. Rather than being a great equaliser, social media is now considered a great engine of polarisation and disinformation. The Oxford Internet Institute's most recent global inventory of organised social media manipulation, titled *The Global Disinformation Order* (2019), flagged seven Southeast Asian countries as problematic for the extent to which social media is being exploited by political elites and their cyber troops to spread disinformation and undermine democracy.

On the other end of the political spectrum, recent grassroots mobilisations in Southeast Asia, mostly led by digitally-savvy youths, continue to effectively leverage the digital sphere for democratic processes. The question is therefore no longer to what extent digital technologies may impact democratic processes, whether positively or negatively, but how the digital sphere itself is being transformed in these youth movements. For them, the "digital" is more than just a tool to be used in "real-world" struggles. It is their mode of claiming and performing an emerging citizen identity that shuns and transcends existing political fault-lines which have hitherto hampered democratic efforts in their respective countries.

From Tool of Protest to Tool of Power

The corporate world conveniently views social media simply as the neutral digital space that connects its manifold users. Dodging accountability for data mining and false contents, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg repeatedly claims that his social media enterprise is merely a "tech company", implying that technology is inherently void of meaning and intent. Similar views of cyberspace as an "empty" technological space initially led Southeast Asian states to pay little attention to the Internet as a civic space. Naturally, then, the Internet became a safe haven for civic groups that quickly seized the new political opportunities it provided. In the mid-2000s, Southeast Asia underwent the transition from the Web 1.0's static websites to the Web 2.0's participatory social media platforms, accompanied by the rise of cheap smartphones that bypassed inadequate Internet cable infrastructures. This led to a vibrant online public sphere in which civic groups confidently pushed the boundaries of the permissible to air popular grievances and pressure authorities for greater transparency and good governance.

By the 2010s, following the inspiring example of the 2010–2011 Arab Spring, civil society across the region was hopeful that social media provided them with a vital tool to push for democratisation. In Malaysia, this was manifested in the "Bersih" movement of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections. Social media began to play a key role since the "Bersih 2.0" rally of 2011, leading to the electoral defeat of the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition in 2018. In Indonesia, the electoral victory of the reformist

Protesters take shelter from police water cannons in Bangkok, Thailand

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political outsider Joko Widodo in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2014 presidential election was boosted by the vigorous social media campaigns run by young volunteers. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, massive online protests and petitions succeeded in forcing concessions from the government on unpopular policies. These experiences instilled a strong sense of collective agency across Southeast Asian populations, facilitated by the new tool of social media.

Yet, hopes for democratic change proved to be premature. In Malaysia, the regime change was short-lived. In Indonesia, entrenched clientelism remained intact and corruption rampant. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it became clear that social media-driven mobilisations alone were not enough to leverage political opportunities for democratisation. At the same time, social media-driven protests awoke national authorities to the potential risks that an unfettered cyberspace might pose to national stability as well as their positions in power. Hence, finally recognising the digital sphere as a political battleground rather than an empty vessel, Southeast Asian states have responded in two ways: (i) implementing or tightening cyberlaws to regulate and restrict online political communications, typically on grounds of cybersecurity and national cohesion concerns, combined with anti-defamation and disinformation decrees; and (ii) also leveraging the digital sphere for regime consolidation and to increase popular support.

Ironically, the first type of response constructs disinformation as a threat to cybersecurity and national cohesion whereas the second type has led national authorities themselves onto a gliding scale of online propaganda. As a result, online propaganda as a political strategy, often with the use of cyber troops to spread hyper-partisan rhetoric on social media, has been on the rise in Southeast Asia especially since 2016. It is increasingly common to employ cyber troops to defend government policies and interests and discredit opponents, either through official social media teams of state public relations divisions, or through shadowy networks of operators of fake social media accounts and automated bots.

In Indonesia, both types of state online responses have become professionalised and more sophisticated especially since the 2019 elections, in which online campaign strategists for both incumbent president Joko Widodo and his contender Prabowo Subianto systematically deployed "buzzers" and bots to champion their candidate and attack the other on a massive scale. While this led to a stark polarisation of the online political landscape during the campaign period, Prabowo's inclusion into Widodo's cabinet after the elections allowed the government to develop a streamlined strategy of online propaganda to promote a single political narrative. With considerable resources being allocated to social media campaigns, the government's narrative has since increasingly come to dominate Indonesia's digital sphere.

The Transnational Power of Digital Youths

The youth-led protest movements in Indonesia and Thailand over the recent months show that the digital sphere continues to play a crucial role in the push for democratisation – especially for youths who were born into the digital era and embrace digital technologies as the organising principle of their movements. For them, there is no clear separation between online and offline action, nor between popular and political culture.

This blurring of boundaries is illustrated by recent protest scenes on the streets of Bangkok, where young demonstrators made the famous three-finger salute with one hand (adopted from the movie *The Hunger Games*), while holding a smartphone in the other to livestream the protest on social media. The physical action is thus designed to feed into the online action, and vice versa, so that the physical and digital spheres of protest mutually reinforce one another. This increases the impact of both and makes the protest less vulnerable to repression in either cyberspace or on the streets. Creative uses of digital technologies also facilitated a series of pop-up rallies by which they dodged the government's emergency ban on large gatherings. In response, the government pressured Internet providers and social media platforms to take down the protesters' pages and block access to popular messaging apps such as Telegram. But since the protesters did not depend on specific social media platforms, this did little to discourage them.

This protest strategy is clearly inspired by the "Be Water" tactics that activist youths in Hong Kong developed in response to growing repression. Indeed, activist youths in Thailand have been in close contact with peers from the Hong Kong protest movement as well as the Sunflower movement in Taiwan since 2016, when they formed the Network of Young Democratic Asians. In its current reincarnation as the Milk Tea Alliance, the network has expanded to youth movements in India, while contacts with activist youths in Indonesia are being forged. Digital technologies certainly facilitated the emergence and evolution of these transnational solidarity networks, by easing communications and idea exchanges and creating a common ground of generational experiences that have shaped a shared citizen identity as activist digital youths. While it remains to be seen if this transnational youth resistance is capable of bringing about political change, it is already giving shape to significant micro-level transformations in political culture.▨

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The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism in Indonesia

Damar Juniarto discusses the challenge of digital authoritarianism to Indonesia's democracy.

In December 2020, the Indonesian government decided to press ahead with its regional elections despite the raging COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, many international ratings are pointing to a democratic recession in the country. Indonesia's democracy index compiled by The Economist Intelligence Unit fell from 48th out of 167 countries in 2016 to 64th in 2018, with a score of only 6.39 – at the bottom of the "flawed democracies" category. Likewise, IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices (2019) report indicated a decline in Indonesia's democracy, especially in the civic space. In Freedom House 2020 report, Indonesia's score fell to 61 from 62 in 2019 as the country continues to struggle with such challenges as systemic corruption, discrimination and violence against minority groups, separatist tensions in the Papua region, and the politicised use of defamation and blasphemy laws.

Indonesia is not a unique case of democratic backsliding as the world has been in the grip of a democratic recession for the past 15 years. But unlike previous democratic recession periods, where the army or other non-democratic players were the primary actors driving the process, the vanguards of democratic decline today are populist politicians who get broad support from the people. As analysed by many experts, this democratic recession in Indonesia can be observed from various government actions, such as suppressing opposition parties through hegemony or force, using criminalisation to suppress populist Islamic groups, focusing on infrastructure development while ignoring its implications to human rights and the environment, giving room to anti-democratic ideologies and groups, and hijacking state institutions for the purpose of power.

There have been recent events that point to the emergence of digital authoritarianism in Indonesia, including the imposition of the Job Creation Law and the increase of digital attacks on critic groups. There were 31 digital attacks in October 2020, a sharp increase from an average of 8 incidents per month as monitored by the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network. Technological oppression with the aim of weakening critic groups who reject government policies that are considered contrary to civil rights is seen commonly in the form of Whatsapp and social media account takeovers, robo-calls from foreign numbers, doxing, website hacking, online trolling with mobilisation led by political influencers and assisted by troll farms and bot accounts. This situation is troubling because if the use of social media as a tool for repression is accelerating, it will lead to democratic breakdown.

There is, however, cause for optimism because civil rights groups in Indonesia are well aware of the delusions of democracy lured by a populist agenda. Various organisations across sectors, in conjunction with a network of academics, have been seeking to shed light on the dangers that are in sight.

Pro-democracy movements in Indonesia must now come face to face with the communication technology that played a central role in overthrowing the Suharto dictatorship and strengthening the anti-corruption movement and the peasants movement, but now has been turned into a threat to democracy, aside from the physical threat they face. These movements have targeted at government propaganda in cyberspace which has manipulated information with computational propaganda techniques and populist campaign jargons. Examples include the government's handling of COVID-19 and its response to West Papua's statement of independence in early December 2020. Defence of democracy in the digital space in Indonesia is fraught with a lot of challenges and uncertainties ahead.

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Demonstrations against Indonesia's Omnibus Law in Jakarta

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Digital Democracy in Malaysia

Pauline Leong examines the impact of digital technologies on the democratic process in Malaysia and its potential in the next general election.

Malaysia is a federation of 13 states and three federal territories. After achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia was governed by the Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance for more than 60 years until it lost its political dominance at the historic 14th general election in 2018. One key reason for BN's grip on power was its ability to control traditional media through legislation and ownership – direct and indirect. Newspapers, television and radio promulgated the official government narrative and the opposition had very little room to reach the public.

In 1996, the BN government initiated the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) to reap the benefits of the digital economy but this became a double-edged sword. While the digital push opened up new financial frontiers, the materialisation of information communication technologies (ICTs) made the public sphere more accessible to the masses, through bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The opposition in Malaysia, which has previously been shunted from BN-controlled traditional media, found its footing in the *laissez-faire* digital media, which enabled alternative views to publicly surface and challenge the hegemony. Digital technologies became a game changer in the democratic process in Malaysia.

Since then, digital technologies played a pivotal role in the democratic process. The 1999 general election marked the start of the use of digital media in political communication, through e-mail lists and Usenet newsgroups. In fact, Malaysia's first online news portal, Malaysiakini, was launched on 20 November 1999. By the 11th general election in 2004, there was significant use of mobile phones and short-messaging services (SMS) in campaigning. The 12th general election in 2008 was dominated by influential socio-political bloggers, most of whom were highly critical of the BN administration. This watershed election saw the opposition making huge gains by wresting control of five out of 13 states and breaking BN's two-third majority stronghold in the Parliament. The opposition continued its advance in the 13th general election in 2013 by leveraging on social media, especially Facebook. While it did not manage to overthrow BN, it won the popular vote (51%).

The political tsunami happened in the 14th general election in 2018 when the opposition Pakatan Harapan (PH) alliance, through the use of Facebook Live and WhatsApp, managed to unseat the incumbent BN. However, the PH government lost power at the end of February 2020, when then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad resigned, following the defection of more than 30 PH federal lawmakers, which caused it to lose its parliamentary majority. Currently, Malaysia is governed by the Perikatan Nasional (PN) alliance, led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin.

Today, digital technologies have become part and parcel of the political environment, and a key source of political communication, participation and mobilisation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a group of youths from civil society, frustrated by the PN government's suspension of the Parliament since December 2019 and its refusal to hold online sessions, decided to demonstrate that a digital parliament is possible by hosting virtual proceedings on 4-5 July 2020. During the online mock sessions, 222 "parliamentary representatives" participated in debates and voting through Microsoft Teams on motions such as the economic stimulus package for youths. The event, which was broadcast on Facebook, had 88,000 views, with 561 shares and 693 reactions. While this initiative received positive feedback and support, several participants were questioned by the police after the conclusion of the virtual Parliament sitting. Member of Parliament (MP) for Bukit Gelugor, Ramkarpal Singh, said that this move can be seen as an "act of intimidation".

It is expected that ICTs will play an increasing role in the next 15th general election, which must be held by 2023. This is because a significant number of new first-time voters, about 7.8 million, will cast their ballot, thanks to the passing of the Undi18 (Vote18) bill in July 2019, which also includes automatic voter registration. Thus, it is no surprise that former Youth and Sports Minister, Syed Saddiq, currently MP of Muar, started a new political party called Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) in anticipation of this new voting bloc. Digital technologies such as TikTok are likely to be employed as campaign tools to reach out to these voters in an increasingly competitive political climate in Malaysia.

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A Malaysian citizen casts a vote during the 2018 Malaysian General Election

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Spotlight: Digitalisation in Southeast Asia

Democracy and the Digital Sphere in Myanmar

Moe Thuzar describes the Internet explosion in Myanmar and how it has animated the country's political climate.

Access to the Internet in Myanmar started in 2000 but it remained an out-of-reach luxury for most of Myanmar's 52 million population in the subsequent decade due to high subscription costs. Strict government censoring drove Internet users in Myanmar to become skilful in using proxy servers. Through such means, Myanmar democracy activists shared news and pictures of the 2007 Saffron Revolution demonstrations to the world. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military regime had to shut down Internet to stop sharing of and access to news and images about Myanmar.

Myanmar's present digital sphere is barely ten years old as the civilianised but military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) started to relax Internet restrictions and censorship only in 2011. This was a heady development for a people long inured to 'living in silence'. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government then initiated moves for political and economic reforms and national reconciliation, which created a wider space for information and expression.

The Internet has since played a pivotal role in informing and influencing Myanmar's political climate. The end of media censorship and the Internet explosion following telecoms reforms in 2013 decentralised the way people access and process information. Myanmar now has four telecoms operators and over 140 licensed Internet service providers. As of January 2020, there are 22 million Internet users and 68 million mobile connections in Myanmar, with the Internet penetration rate being over 40%. Internet and social media are practically equal, and social media equals Facebook in Myanmar. Many access the Internet via their smartphones, as buying a SIM card comes with a linked Facebook account.

This speed and range of digital connectivity now available to Myanmar have affected political participation and mobilisation. Many social media platforms, most of which are Facebook groups, have become the "meeting place" for movements to voice critical comments and dissenting views. Examples include youth activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi's public Facebook page, the attempts to raise awareness about Myanmar students' protests over the National Education Law in 2015, and the recent "No Vote" movement which provoked a "Go Vote" response (and probably made the No Vote campaign more prominent) prior to the 2020 elections. Myanmar netizens responded vociferously to the international criticisms over the Rohingya issue, on Facebook and Twitter.

Analysts observe that Myanmar Facebook users are now more resilient to fake news and hate speech. Netizens seek other media sources – digital or otherwise – to verify news, even as they continue to use Facebook as their main information and communication medium. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook became an important platform for State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to connect directly with the people, discuss their concerns and provide updates and advisories. The 2020 election campaign also saw a proliferation of Facebook pages by politicians and political parties.

Myanmar's ICT legal framework still lags behind the digital reality. Article 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law is the most used legislation in defamation cases with over 200 cases having been filed since 2015. A woman was recently sentenced under this article for sharing on Facebook that she would vote for the incumbent despite being "told" to vote for the military-aligned opposition. Article 34(d) of the Electronic Transactions Law (amended in 2014) also presents obstacles to freedom of expression. Likewise, there are calls to amend the 2017 Citizens' Privacy and Security Protection Law and the 1996 Computer Science Development Law. Internet shutdown in parts of Rakhine and Chin States remains in place since June 2019.

The Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications has operated a Social Media Monitoring Team since 2018, and has consulted stakeholders in drafting past ICT strategies. In 2019, the Union Election Commission met with Facebook representatives to discuss ways to remove hate speech and fake news before and during the 2020 elections. Facebook's Myanmar team reportedly works closely with civil society and non-governmental organisations in Myanmar on the hate speech/fake news front. Myanmar's policymakers should build on this momentum to engage in meaningful consultations with key stakeholders in updating its ICT policy and legal framework. Ultimately, such policy frameworks need to have the trust of both users and service providers, and balance the security needs of the government with privacy needs of the users.

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ASEAN Youth Digital Mobilisation: A Path to Reform

Qiu Jiahui and **Melinda Martinus** analyse trends of digital activism mobilised by ASEAN youths.

From anti-colonial college unions in 1930s Malaya to student protests against the Philippines' involvement in the Vietnam War, youth activism has a longstanding history in ASEAN countries. The 1998 student movement in Indonesia that contributed to the toppling of President Suharto's decades-long ruling demonstrated how youths can build momentum for change. As the region faces old and new challenges in political instability, social inequality and climate change, social campaigns continue to feature young voices, but one major difference lies in the innovative platforms they use.

53.4% of the ASEAN population are Internet subscribers today, compared to 7.8% in 2015. The rapid growth of Internet penetration sets the stage for new forms of civic engagement, and youths are the most prominent demographic to populate this space. Almost half of ASEAN's nearly 670 million people are aged 30 or under. Secondary education enrolment increased in 2006-2017, with a 30% growth in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Consequently, today's youths have better access to information and infrastructure for mobilisation, and their medium for activism has transformed dramatically.

People now can easily and instantly connect to each other via social media – and unlike traditional media, digital platforms are free. These decentralising and democratising effects have allowed far-reaching messages and influential leadership to come from anywhere and just about anyone with a smart device and an Internet connection. What are the characteristics of ASEAN youth activism today?

Tools and Strategies

First, youths are taking full advantage of visuals. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are designed for photo-sharing. Meant for *selfies*, this feature is now used to disseminate posters and infographics containing bite-sized information. Activists use stylish graphic design to grab attention and quick summaries of pertinent issues to bring their audience up to speed, before presenting their own perspectives and calls to action. Users who may not read a lengthy news article can be simultaneously informed and influenced before their attention span runs out.

Second, they make their own online spaces for expression. As it becomes easier to create and run websites, activists have turned to alternative media for inclusive perspectives. *Magdalene* is a website for discussing progressive issues

often considered taboo in Indonesia, such as women's rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights and abortion. Mobilised by Indonesian youths, it receives about 150,000 views monthly, carving out a progressive-controlled space on the Internet.

Third, digital platforms are used for calls to action, including humanitarian fundraisers. In the aftermath of four devastating typhoons in November 2020, Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (YACA) organised a relief drive in collaboration with other groups. Various digital payment tools allowed their audience to conveniently provide aid, such as Gcash, PayMaya, PayPal and bank transfers. The results were shared under the hashtag *#ReliefPH*, including photos of breakfast delivered to affected communities, showing accountability and transparency of humanitarian movements.

Other calls to action include online petitions, social media storms and email storms. Under the hashtag *#JunkTerrorBill*, internet users protested against the Philippines' Anti-Terrorism Act, accompanied by a change.org petition campaigned by student group Defend
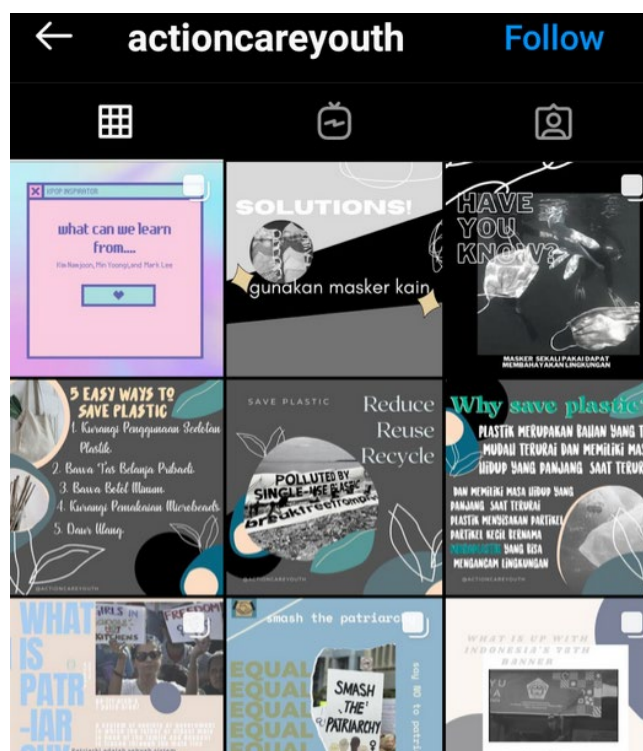
Instagram pages of two Indonesia-based youth groups

UPLB with over 900,000 signatures by November. Youth groups created email templates urging for the bill's rejection, to be filled in and sent to President Duterte and congress members, aiming to flood the inboxes of influential politicians. The same was done with tweets to Philippine senators who voted for the bill. As powerful governments, corporations, international organisations and mainstream media hop on the Internet bandwagon, small civil society groups are able to engage them with relative ease and greater public attention.

Fourth, online platforms facilitate physical activities. The pro-democracy protests in Thailand are led by youth groups with overwhelming online influence: Free Youth's Facebook page has over a million followers, while the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration has over 300,000. Organisers used social media polls to determine protest timings before announcing them online. Both groups conduct on-the-ground live streams of demonstrations. In addition, the "Shop" tab on Facebook enables sophisticated fundraising: Free Youth advertises its merchandise with links and QR codes that take the user to a LINE group chat, where an e-commerce function called MyShop facilitates the transaction.

Fifth, youth activists organise capacity-building events online for long-term impact. A good example is Klima Action Malaysia (KAMY) which organises webinars with panels of prominent activists or experts to discuss various climate-related topics, such as how climate change impacts mental health and food and water security. Leading up to the 2020 Asian Climate Rally, YACA organised a series of "Educational Discussions" on varying topics like green finance and international cooperation. These discussions help build a deeper understanding of specific topics in their audience, keeping strike-focused groups active and relevant during the pandemic.

Common Themes

Youth movements' messaging and behaviour also have common themes which are facilitated by digital platforms. Especially prominent is their dedication to intersectionality. Keenly aware of how their issues of focus intertwine with others, youth activists amplify or collaborate with other movements. In July, the Singapore Climate Rally hosted an "Instagram takeover", allowing other civil society groups to post Instagram stories on their account discussing issues like environmental racism, indigenous sovereignty and ecofeminism. Before a planned march, the Women for Freedom and Democracy group announced safe points for female and LGBTQ participants to gather and avoid harassment. In the 2020 Asia Climate Rally's online press conference, activists identified indigenous peoples' rights and press freedom as vital to climate action.

These youths are also overtly political in identifying the Omnibus Law and Anti-Terrorism Act as threats to the environment and environmental activists. During Singapore's 2020 general election, the Singapore Climate Rally released online scorecards which assessed each party's climate policies. Over Facebook, KAMY joined other civil society organisations in rejecting the emergency proclamation by the Malaysian government, stating that it would worsen inequalities brought about by the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than focus on one issue, youth activists joined forces with other movements while encouraging political engagement in their audience.

The Internet also allows youth activism to transcend boundaries. Delegates from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Myanmar participated in a global youth Mock COP26 to produce a treaty calling for decisive climate action. By joining forces globally, they are directly engaging with international politics for change. The Milk Tea Alliance was born out of Thai netizens' criticism of Chinese nationalism in support of Hong Kong and Taiwan's struggle against Beijing's authority. Later, Taiwan and Hong Kong netizens showed support for pro-democracy protests in Thailand under the hashtag *#MilkTeaAlliance*, sharing advice on how to stay protected in clashes with police. The three movements were united by anti-Beijing sentiment, culminating in a regional solidarity symbolised by their common practice of drinking tea with milk.

Conclusion

Digital platforms have enabled youth activism in ASEAN to gain growing influence. Proficiency with digital tools allows them to do more than spread messages; they can organise with sophistication at large scales, such that even a devastating pandemic has hardly slowed them down. Governments and corporations ignore this at their peril, especially given the region's youthfulness. For example, Cambodians aged 18-30 habitually share political content online and made up one third of eligible voters in their 2013 general election. Digital youth activism is also a much-needed weapon against media censorship and authoritarian crackdowns on dissent. At the same time, this domain brings new challenges such as cyber-attacks. In the wake of student protests against the Philippines' Anti-Terrorism Act, young activists and their fellow students at schools such as the University of Philippines found fake Facebook accounts made in their names, messaging them with threats of violence. While youth activists have many tools at their disposal to further their agenda, so too do their opponents.

Youth activism is currently at the frontier of political and social development in Southeast Asia, and digital platforms are central to its growth momentum. The potential impact of such collective endeavours, and their reliance on Internet, calls for a contemplation on whether ASEAN youth – with all their social media savviness – has the digital literacy and defences needed to face down the challenges of this new era.

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Facilitating ASEAN SMEs' Participation in Digital Trade

Javier Lopez Gonzalez recommends government actions at both domestic and international levels to help SMEs engage in digital trade.

In today's globalised and digitalised world, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have new opportunities to reach more customers across the globe at lower trade costs. They can more easily outsource IT activities and scale up production through the use of new digital inputs such as cloud computing and software which offer lower production costs. In theory, digitalisation has the potential to empower SMEs to become more competitive. However, the benefits of digitalisation for SMEs are not automatic. They require SMEs to invest in adopting digital technologies and acquiring new skills to leverage data-driven innovation. At the same time, they also require that governments provide a supportive domestic and international operating environment.

Getting digital trade right has become all the more important in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has underscored the importance of digital technologies in enabling people and firms to stay connected, including across borders, to markets, jobs and each other. As more and more activities shift online, governments will need to further enable digital trade to mitigate the economic slowdown and speed up recovery. Particular attention to the needs of SMEs is required to ensure a more inclusive recovery.

SMEs and the Digital Transformation

Evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries shows that SMEs lag in the adoption of digital technologies. In most countries, there is a narrow divide between SMEs and large firms in areas such as connectivity and web presence, but the gap broadens in terms of participation in e-commerce and more sophisticated applications. For instance, across OECD countries, enterprise resource planning (ERP) software applications to manage business information flows are popular among large firms (more than 75% adoption rate in 2014) but less used by SMEs (less than 20%).

In ASEAN, similar patterns emerge. While more and more firms are using simple digital tools such as websites to reach customers, there is a wide variation amongst firms across different sizes, sectors and countries. In Cambodia, 41% of firms in the hospitality and tourism sector have a webpage, compared to only 13% of manufacturing firms. In Indonesia, 15% of firms in the food sector have a webpage, just four percentage points less than those operating in the retail sector.

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SMEs' Ability to Engage in International Trade

Digitalisation can help SMEs reduce trade costs by connecting supply and demand, reducing the need for intermediaries and relaxing informational constraints related to trading in different markets. This is important because international exposure, whether through imports or exports, is associated with more productive firms paying higher wages and generating more jobs. But it is well known that engaging in international markets is expensive with only the most productive firms being able to do so. Lacking economies of scale, trading costs tend to represent a higher share of SMEs' exports, which is why these firms tend to have lower propensities to export (and import) in the first place.

Indeed, econometric analysis using the World Bank Enterprise Survey shows that on aggregate, ASEAN SMEs with websites have a higher propensity to export. Evidence also suggests that these firms are better able to import, reflecting an important role for information sharing when importing. However, the analysis reveals that individual country experience is mixed. For example, the data shows a non-significant relationship between having a website and exporting in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV), suggesting that there might be additional barriers to utilising digital tools for exporting. CLMV countries showed the lowest degree of internet penetration which might, in turn, reflect less preparedness to engage in digital trade. This, in turn, suggests that digital adoption is likely to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition to engage in digital trade.

The Need for Governments to Provide an Enabling Environment

In today's digitised world, a single transaction, for instance the cross-border purchase of an App from a digital platform, rests on a series of factors which support or enable the transaction. For example, the ability to order the App will depend on the cost and reliability of access to digital networks which can be affected by the degree of competition in the telecommunications services market. The ability to pay for the App will depend on the presence of interoperable cross-border e-payment methods and its cost on the degree of openness and competition in the digital platform. Moreover, the overall demand for the App will also depend on the cost of the devices that are being used to download and consume the App which, in turn, will be conditioned by issues related to goods such as tariffs, trade facilitation or other technical regulations.

This example helps illustrate some of the building blocks that matter for digital trade. It also highlights the complexity of the issues that underpin even a relatively simple digital trade transaction. Some relate to accessing and using digital networks; others are old trade issues which have new consequences (tariffs); and some are new measures which raise new trade issues (interoperability of e-payment systems). Where possible, governments need to make sure that they create an enabling domestic and international environment for SMEs to thrive in this new digital economy.

Promoting Market Openness Multilaterally and Regionally

At the multilateral level, existing rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which are technologically neutral, apply to digital trade. International commitments made under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and its annexes will remain of primary importance to ASEAN SMEs, including those selling Apps, for enabling services that underpin the digital economy such as telecoms and digitally deliverable services. At the same time, where digitally enabled trade in goods is concerned, commitments under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) will affect the ability of ASEAN SMEs to sell and ship goods ordered through digital platforms across borders.

Plurilateral agreements such as the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) will also be important for ASEAN SMEs since they eliminate tariff barriers for certain information and communications technology (ICT) products which enable digital trade, including computers and mobile phones. However, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos are not signatories to the ITA, which will affect the ability of their SMEs to access competitively priced ICT goods and services to compete in digital trade markets.

More broadly, since January 2019, under the Joint Statement Initiative on E-Commerce, a group of now 86 WTO Members have been discussing issues related to digital trade. These include facilitation of electronic transactions (e-contracts, e-signatures and e-payments); cross-border transfers of information; consumer protection; privacy; business trust and other cross-cutting issues. ASEAN SMEs stand to gain from an e-commerce agreement which would provide greater transparency, certainty and interoperability on issues related to digital trade. However, to date, not all ASEAN countries are engaged in these talks. It is important that Cambodia and Vietnam should participate in these discussions to help shape future rules on digital trade.

Regulation of digital trade issues is increasingly addressed in Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs). In this respect the ASEAN Work Programme on Electronic Commerce 2017-22 and discussions on promoting greater interoperability of standards and shared understandings on issues such as data flows are likely to be important. Continued progress in this area, coupled with greater emphasis on helping SMEs adopt new technologies, will help ASEAN SMEs take advantage of the opportunities that digitalisation has to offer and enable countries to undertake a more inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

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Improving Digital Connectivity for E-Commerce in ASEAN

Lurong Chen emphasises the need to build digital connectivity in both physical and virtual parts to promote regional e-commerce.

E-commerce is a low-hanging fruit of digital economy. The global e-commerce revenue reached USD1.6 trillion in 2018 and is expected to grow to USD2.7 trillion by 2023. ASEAN is among the world's fastest-growing online markets, with an Internet user base of over 350 million users and Gross Mechandise Value (GMV) of USD72 billion in 2018. The e-commerce market in ASEAN has maintained 2-digit growth since 2015, and will very likely grow at compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 20% in the next five years. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent containment efforts, including social distancing and lockdown measures, gave further momentum to e-commerce growth. By projection, the year-on-year (YoY) increase of e-commerce revenue in ASEAN between 2019 and 2020 will reach USD17 billion, compared to USD11 billion between 2018 and 2019.

To realise the potential of fast e-commerce growth, it is imperative to build a digital-friendly ecosystem that facilitates digital transformation in the region. Above all, improving digital connectivity to support e-commerce is a priority.

Digital Connectivity

First, the development of e-commerce needs good data connectivity. This element is made up of two parts: physical infrastructure and data governance.

As for the network architecture, the overall quality of Internet infrastructure in ASEAN looks satisfactory compared with that of the world average. However,

GoPay, a popular e-wallet app in Indonesia

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there are gaps in ICT infrastructure development across ASEAN countries as well as between rural and urban areas. These include:

• Coverage: The 3G/4G networks have already covered the majority of the region's population. However, development of 4G networks and access to electricity are still lagging in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (CLM).

• Speed: The overall Internet speed in ASEAN has reached the level that allows the use of new ICT tools, such as cloud computing. But the speed of network connection varies significanlty across countries. For instance, the speed of using the same phone to download information from the Internet in Singapore is 10 times faster than in Cambodia.

• Affordability: The cost of accessing to the Internet, measured by the price of purchasing a new smartphone and mobile data use, has been signficantly driven down. But poorer people are spending much larger percentages of their income on data use.

• Online content and services: According to the survey conducted by Economist Intelligent Unit in 2019, Singapore and Malaysia have relative satisfactory online content, whilst other ASEAN countries still need to improve the accessible e-commerce content and online public services.

• Security and reliability: The development in cybersecurity is uneven, which hinders data flows region-wide and increases the cost and risk of doing business online.

Regarding data governance, the policy regime is underdeveloped and fragmented across ASEAN countries. A fundamental problem is that the logic underlying the economic justification of policies is not well established yet. ASEAN countries have not yet reached consensus on how to regulate cross-border data flows.

Second, e-commerce needs logistics to deliver the traded goods or services. Logistics for e-commerce is not only about trade cost but also about safety, security, reliability, transparency, flexibility and efficiency. E-commerce has higher demands on speed and transparency, posting additional challenge to storage, parcel delivery and express postal services. It is increasingly important for ASEAN to improve trade-supporting services, such as (i) competence and quality of logistics services, (ii) efficiency of customs
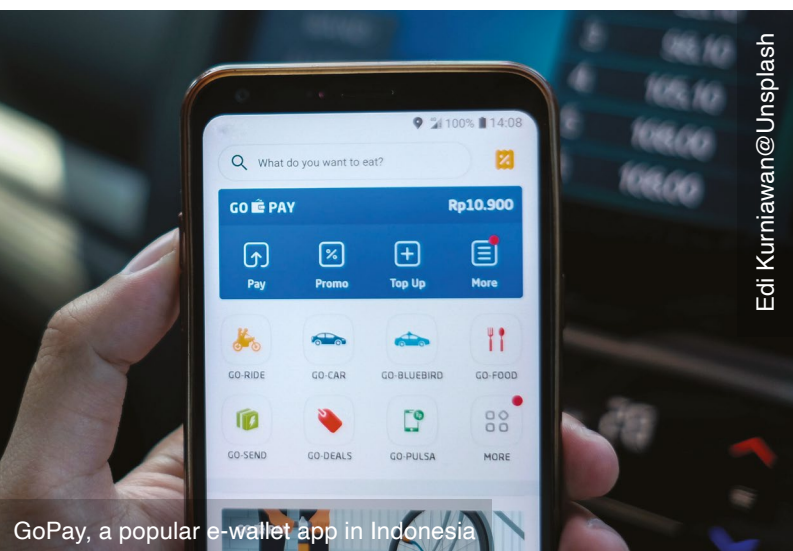
clearance process, and (iii) quality of trade and transport-related infrastructure.

Third, payment is the link that can bridge the cyber and the physical parts of e-commerce. Digital payment systems that can support the high efficiency and convenience of e-commerce is the main trend in the long-term. In 2018, the total transaction value of digital payments in ASEAN reached USD73 billion. The size is expected to double by 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of adopting digital payment solutions. However, further development of e-commerce may face obstacles due to the existence of wide dispersion in e-payment readiness, especially in the pillar of regulatory and policy environment and of innovative products and services, as well as the lack of interoperationality of different payment platforms.

Fourth, extra effort is needed to streamline connections between networks of different countries and coordinate the interactions among the three functioning networks (information, logistics and cash flows) cited earlier. Seamless links between the virtual and physical parts are vital to the functioning of the whole digital ecosystem of economy. The establishment of international rules and regulations will enhance the market drivers and strengthen such connectivity.

Policy Recommendations

Improving digital connectivity to support e-commerce development needs multiple efforts. Most importantly, ASEAN and East Asian countries are recommended to (i) increase the supply of public goods to improve connectivity infrastructure in both the physical world and cyberspace, (ii) establish rules and regulations to ensure dynamics and competition of online marketplace, (iii) improve connectivity-derived services to generate more value-add, (iv) prioritise smartphone economy and Internet financial innovation, and (v) collaborate in regional rule-setting for digital connectivity.

First, better connectivity will increase the supply of public goods in both quantity and quality, and reduce the likelihood of a digital divide. For ASEAN and East Asia, the improvement of infrastructure and connectivity to support growth and development has been widely discussed. Broadly, all related policy instruments will apply to strengthen physical connectivity. A particular issue to highlight is capacity. As for digital infrastructure, obstacles may come from capacity and resource limits, either capital or technology or both. To provide a solution, the public sector may still need to take the lead to initiate and drive the increase of the supply of public goods, in terms of both quantity and quality, whilst the private sector's involvement will be equally important to make the development sustainable.

Second, in addition to physical infrastructure, the online marketplace needs rules and regulations to ensure the free movement and accuracy of information, equitable access to information, the protection of consumers and producers, the security of payment, free trade, and investment, and thus market dynamics and fair competition. The related

Speakers at the "Embracing Disruption: ASEAN's Digital Future" session at the World Economic Forum on ASEAN 2018 in Hanoi, Vietnam.

regulations will cover traditional trade issues (i.e. tariffs and non-tariff measures, trade facilitation, consumer protection and intellectual property rights, etc.) as well as new issues (i.e. cross-border information flow, privacy protection, data localisation and source codes disclosure, among others).

The most critical step is to realise free flow of data with trust. Since restrictions on data flows could harm international trade in a similar way that trade protectionism does, ASEAN should eliminate this potential threat to free trade and collaborate in promoting digital adoption to sustain regional development. In principle, building trust among countries to allow data to flow freely across borders will need support from a series of backup policies to (i) promote trade liberalisation and facilitation, (ii) cope with the market distortion, (iii) reconcile values and social concerns with economic efficiency, (iv) synchronise the process of implementing international agreements and domestic reform, and (v) justify the adoption of strategic trade and investment policies.

Third, increasing the quality of connectivity, in terms of speed, accuracy, transparency, reliability and security is as important as building physical infrastructure. Extensively, connectivity-derived service can generate extra value-add and therefore, have deep impacts on regional development. In this regard, advancing service sector liberalisation and supporting micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) digital inclusion should be the policy focus.

Fourth, institutional effort should prioritise the adoption of new technologies to improve regional connectivity. One example is the so-called 'M-commerce'. Doing e-commerce using apps installed on smartphone and related mobile devices provides a very practical solution for many ASEAN users, as it has turned out to be cheaper, more convenient, more user-friendly and global in scope for the digital economy. Another example is the flourishing of e-payments and internet financial innovations. Countries should on the one hand think about how to adopt new technologies and create opportunities for leapfrogging development; and on the other hand, design policy to better incorporate new digital services in the existing regulatory system.

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Southeast Asia and the Politics of Artificial Intelligence

Kobi Leins and **Lesley Seebeck** highlight the need for adequate AI governance that embeds not only economic but also political and societal values.

When we talk about artificial intelligence (AI) in this article, we are talking about software and hardware, both structured and unstructured; machine learning, both supervised and unsupervised; the sensors that provide input and the actuators that effect output, as well as all the data (always historical) that fuels the computing power, whatever form it takes. Artificial intelligence includes data, algorithms, deep learning, and hardware and software. Together, these pieces create a form of power.

Every technology has a history and a context. A prominent example from Winner's book, *The Whale and the Reactor*, involves traffic overpasses in and around New York designed by Robert Moses. Many of the overpasses were deliberately built to prevent access by public buses, hence excluding low-income people. This design disproportionately impacted racial minorities, who depended entirely on public transportation. Winner argues that politics is built into everything we make, and that historical moral questions asked throughout history – including by Plato and Hannah Arendt – are questions relevant to technology: our experience of being free or unfree, the social arrangements that either foster equality or inequality, the kinds of institutions that hold and use power and authority.

The capabilities of AI, and the way that it is being used by corporations and by governments, raise these questions with renewed vigour. Current systems using facial recognition or policing tools that reinforce prejudice are examples of technology that builds on politics. The difference is that, in digital systems, politics may not be as obvious as a physical overpass. Nevertheless, they may be similarly challenging to rectify after they have been built, and equally, create outcomes that generate power and control over certain constituents. They also operate at speeds and scales that have enormous impacts in short periods of time.

But AI, we would argue, also represents something more than the possibility to bake in certain values. From a very particular historical moment, with a very narrow band of players, the technology itself embeds a certain set of political and economic values. The very size of the companies producing the soft and hardware, and the need to collect and manage training and operational data sets, often make it difficult to compete. While increasing efforts to digitalise economies and societies are perceived

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as a fast track to success in developing economies, there remains concern over the power structures embedded in the systems powering that change. For example, much of the data collection resides with US companies such as Facebook or Google, or Chinese companies such as Alibaba or TenCent. Algorithms are typically 'black-boxed': their training regimens and biases opaque to users. Hardware is suspect: it may have back doors or access points. Singapore, and Taiwan, even Estonia are held up as successes to be followed. China, too, is often viewed as exemplar, though as much for government control over unruly publics, as for economic prosperity.

The reality is more complex. Firstly, digitalisation is truly disruptive. Governments and companies seeking to harness digital technologies have a tiger by the tail. It is more likely, if not inevitable, that digitalisation will distort, break or potentially, optimistically transform political and business models, often in unforeseen or even unpredictable ways. The ability of other states to intervene or disrupt social media, for example, remains a real and current risk. Digital economies often replace other economic behaviour patterns – for better or for worse.

Second, with digitalisation comes cyber – the dark side of online engagement. The use of digital infrastructures increases risk and vulnerabilities. Some are built in. Some are simply the product of the fact that 'everything is broken' – a feature and a bug – a recognition that the Internet was not built with security in mind. Other risks include, but are not limited to, the hardware that supports the infrastructure, such as the often-overlooked cables.

Third, Southeast Asian countries are essentially 'customers' rather than providers of technology. Even

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Singapore, which hosts many advanced companies, is more of a 'customer'. That means taking on the built-in assumptions and cultural norms of others, including the leakage of data. And those assumptions include a world view and set of norms about privacy (or the lack thereof), human rights and other values will be built into the technological systems acquired, rather than reflecting the geographic and human values of where they will be used.

Fourth, the relationship between governments and the corporations providing the technology will be key. As corporations are often larger in scope and economic power than many governments, the power play between the two has become increasingly complex. At times their interests may intersect, but at other times they may deeply diverge. At times, governments will outsource to platforms and then be deeply challenged because platforms, through speed and capability, usurp government roles – a challenge particularly for democracies – and pressure the social contract. Being aware of how this interplay may work, and ensuring that states' individual interests, as well as regional interests, are protected, will remain key.

Last, Southeast Asia spreads across a technological fracture between the West and China, and to some extent, India. Talking about a single future of the Internet makes little sense in Asia more broadly, as it hosts at least two spheres of Internet and consequently different visions of the future. Decisions here can mean much more than consumer choice of platform or be limited by different externally generated factors. That is because technologies exert both hard power, including through cyber, and soft power, such as through the culture increasingly embedded in technology. Choices around technology adoption, whether hardware or software, also infer choices around the value system underpinning the technology. That is inherently problematic in societies that potentially span both value systems.

Given that in many societies, even connectivity remains an issue, technology choices by the more powerful, whether companies or governments – or even 'influencers'

on social media – is likely to drive even greater inequalities in society. Connectivity is a necessary condition for democracy but is not of itself a sufficient condition – and that is even more fraught in a world in which connectivity itself may be captured through the technologies of others.

But there are many positives to offset the challenges. Europe and other countries are seeking new and interesting allegiances as allies in the digital world. This is an opportunity for ASEAN nations to find their own voice in the debates, and to position themselves, not just economically, but also politically, in the AI debates. As with the overpass example above, often too easily assumptions about AI – and even the assumptions embedded in automation – are overlooked as they are invisible, too deeply embedded in the tech stack. New relationships and alliances can form new political imaginaries and possibilities and be more robust than monocultures of digital acceptance.

We can expect inequalities to be solidified, if not exacerbated. That will generate political tensions, leading government – often unaware of the implications of the use of technology – to succumb to the temptation of using technologies for control, and so the vicious cycle continues. Regulation can provide part of the answer: currently societies such as the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and others are scrambling to provide adequate governance, and regulation will almost certainly follow. But regulation can only go so far. Ultimately these are political, societal and economic decisions, reflecting civic values that lie at the heart of individual states and regions and their future.

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Upholding Human Rights and Privacy in the Digital Age

Andrew Lowenthal underlines the need for government policy change and civil society advocacy to protect digital privacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically deepened our relationship with technology as the outside world has shrunk and the online world grown. The Internet has been an incredible resource, allowing people to keep connected and working. But its injection deeper into our lives, especially in contexts where digital rights are limited, heightens already serious threats to privacy, human rights and democracy.

State of Play

On the surface, these digital tools have been empowering. But in the background, companies and governments are amassing data that is often not well secured, leaving its owners vulnerable to rights violations. Protection of digital rights in Southeast Asia is limited, and advocacy for these rights has been prioritised by only a small section of civil society.

COVID-19 contact tracing apps are a case in point. For the most part, they have seen little uptake in the region – even in Singapore where the government is now seeking to make its use mandatory, compliance has only reached 45% as of October 2020. The low uptake of contact tracing apps might suggest a broader culture of concern about personal privacy, but on the whole, the region lags when compared to Europe and North America. Of course, approaches and cultures differ across each country. While most countries in the region do have some data protection laws, they are often weak or poorly enforced, raising concerns about the security of the data and how else it might be used. Given the crisis, many are willing to trade privacy for security, but we have to wonder if the tracking and tracing will end

once the pandemic is over. Contact tracing apps aside, "COVID-normal" is accelerating the already day-to-day surveillance.

In that sense, Southeast Asia's challenges are not unique. Fundamentally, the Internet has a problem, perhaps captured with the greatest clarity in recent times by Shoshana Zuboff in her book on *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. As Zuboff argues, surveillance is the business model – it is built into the design as a fundamental part of most platforms. Collecting as much user data as possible is how platforms make their money – the data is employed to better target advertising, to sell to marketeers, to build better algorithms and much more. Attention is the highest priced commodity – this is why you constantly ping pong around the Internet, as psycho-social tricks are pulled to keep you jacked in. We are frogs in increasingly hot water.

As the Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated, it is possible to weaponise that data to great effect – it can give whoever can pay for it unprecedented power and influence. Privacy is integral to democracy and dissent, partly as the more someone knows about you, the easier it is to influence you. But it is also because privacy provides space to develop ideas, which may start off as unpopular, but may later turn out to be right. Would the Marcos dictatorship have fallen if it had the surveillance power most governments do now?

Geopolitical Tectonic Plates

Southeast Asia is growing as a theatre of conflict between the US and China. Technology will play an increasingly significant role in this tension, as American and Chinese companies compete for contracts, data, and influence – particularly in emerging and large-scale fields, where local companies find it much harder to compete. In choosing a technology provider – be it for 5G or AI – a government is making a political choice, one that underpins critical public and private infrastructure. Technology is a form of both soft and hard power.

There are very few Southeast Asian companies that have platforms with comparable user bases to American and Chinese companies. As a result, most citizens are sharing their data with platforms their governments have very limited control over. The software and hardware build multiple layers of sovereignty over and under that of the traditional state.

EngageMedia

Camp Chindwin, which brought together 33 video activists, filmmakers and citizen journalists in Myanmar in 2015

Given the existing weak protections for data and user rights, there is nothing to suggest that locally owned companies will do a better job at privacy protection. In fact, some civil society actors feel it may be worse. In addition, both the US and China also have sophisticated internet surveillance systems. China's is spoken about much more these days. But the US system, as revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013, likely casts a wider net – though in a contradictory sense, may also be freer.

With this in mind, we should expect dominance games to play out across the online space, with privacy and other digital rights as likely casualties.

Responses

Despite positive developments like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), momentum overwhelmingly pushes in the direction of increased surveillance and the erosion of privacy. While the pandemic has accelerated this trend, one silver lining has been to bootstrap analogue civil society organisations into the digital era.

Many organisations in Southeast Asia were under-prepared for such a shift. The pandemic forced people to pay more attention to their online environment, their security and the related powers and politics. Change is not always elegant, but this rapid reckoning may bring longer-term gains. The new normal may bolster the modest attention paid to digital rights and privacy by civil society. However, there are a number of broader cultural shifts that still lay in wait.

Civil society, who should be the biggest allies of using open and secure technology, are often just as hooked on mainstream corporate platforms as everyone else. While this is an indication of just how much these platforms have locked in even their critics, it may also point to the lack of technical literacy, capacity and innovation, or a failure on the part of the alternative platforms. There are, for example, interesting and more ethical social media platforms, such as Mastodon and others. If behaviours and expectations are to change, citizens and civil society must take the lead.

Of course, civil society itself must be strengthened so that it can more effectively address digital rights issues. To achieve such changes, civil society's understanding of digital rights needs to be bolstered in a major way. There is significant scope for Southeast Asian universities to offer more subjects and degrees that focus on digital rights. There has been much growth in the past 10 years, but much remains to be done across a whole range of disciplines, from business, to engineering, to law. For example, it is quite common for the basics of digital security to not even be taught as part of a journalism degree.

Grants and other funding sources are increasingly supporting civil society, but it is a drop in the ocean, considering the challenge at hand. It will take tens

Participants at the 2019 AICHR Consultation on Freedom of Opinion and Expression in ASEAN

ASEAN Secretariat

of millions to even make a dent. And while there are networks like the APrIGF and Coconet, initiated by EngageMedia and a range of partners, networking in the region is scant when compared to other parts of the world. Regional coordination is critical to build the shared knowledge, cross-regional understanding, resources, shared experiences, networks and collaboration that contribute to a diverse and vibrant civil society.

On some level, it may be unfair to demand these changes on an individual and civil society basis, given that escaping the major platforms can be a form of social suicide.

Government policy, of course, plays a key role, though we must also be careful how critique can be weaponised. For example, in September President Duterte took on the platforms when Facebook removed a range of fake accounts that were highly critical of his opponents. Threats to ban and regulate platforms may also impact free expression and assembly, and many sides, both progressive and conservative, are calling for tighter regulation. Sustaining a functional public sphere and freedom of expression is increasingly fraught with various risks.

Getting the policy settings right is, therefore, incredibly important. It is unlikely that companies that benefit from surveillance capitalism will give up their very profitable business model until citizens compel their governments towards regulation. At the same time, civil society must stay on guard for overreach and also be proactive in creating alternatives, such as setting up independent platforms that prioritise privacy over profit.

Ultimately, the solution will be found in a combination of civil society driving cultural and individual change, government policy change, and a change in the business model itself, away from surveillance as its foundation. That challenge is enormous, but the alternative of a world without privacy is worse. ▧

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Getting 'Digital Ready' for Inclusive Prosperity in ASEAN

Cyn-Young Park emphasises that building digital infrastructure, digital skills, and social and labour protections create pathways to open, inclusive and accountable digital economies.

The digital economy is a major driving force for future economic growth. Global digital sales revenues reached USD3.8 trillion in 2019, equivalent to 4.4% of global GDP, based on Statista data covering the e-commerce, digital media, e-service, online travel, transportation and advertising technology sectors. Asia accounted for about 48%, or USD1.8 trillion, of the total – equivalent to 6% of regional GDP. It is also the region with the fastest digital revenue growth, at 16.1%, which exceeds the 12.7% global growth rate. ASEAN claims 4.9% of the region's digital sales revenues, compared to East Asia's 84.2%, including China's lion's share at 68.2%.

However, internet penetration among ASEAN countries varies widely, presenting a potential obstacle to the digital economy's growth. Internet users in Asia (including on social media apps like Facebook and Google) now number 1.9 billion, or almost half of global users. Individuals' access to the internet in ASEAN, at 58.6%, is higher than the global rate of 50%, but disparity across its member countries is stark, with the lowest access in Laos at 25.5% and the highest in Brunei Darussalam at 94.9%.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technology in many ASEAN countries, it also highlighted barriers to technology and digital divides across and within borders. Country experiences underscore the importance of using digital tools and technologies to contain the health and economic outcomes of COVID-19. With increasing use of video conferencing, social media, online food delivery and e-commerce for schools, workplaces and across different sectors, the post-COVID-19 world will likely rely more on digital solutions than before. But the digital gap between the haves and the have nots can have lasting impact on inequality among individuals, social groupings and countries.

The pandemic has pushed many economies to record downturns, causing massive job losses, with uneven impacts across industries. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that the COVID-19 outbreak and extended lockdowns have hit wholesale and retail trade, accommodation, food services and transportation severely – these sectors accounting for 14% of employment (1.9 billion workers) in Asia and the Pacific. Manufacturing (16% of the region's employment) – such as automobiles and the textiles, clothing, leather and footwear sector – has also suffered severe value chain disruptions. Displaced workers are likely to fall into lower-paying or part-time jobs, which widens wage gaps further. Informal workers are at particular risk of losing jobs and having little access to social protection. More than 7 in 10 jobs in Southeast Asia are informal, with a large share in industries hit hardest by COVID-19.

As digital transformation accelerates, job polarisation and displacement of middle-skilled workers are also raising concerns that income polarisation, inequality and inadequate social protection will deepen poverty. Rapid technological changes and increasing automation are putting manual and routine jobs at higher risk of displacement in advanced economies. Developing countries are also losing middle-skilled occupations (intensive in routine cognitive and manual tasks), although

Singapore Minister for Communications and Information S. Iswaran and Senior Minister of State Sim Ann observing a digital onboarding session for seniors

IMDA

census data on average indicate no evidence of job polarisation yet. However, many experts argue that the effect would be deeper in developing countries with higher routinisation of tasks and greater participation in global value chains.

Adding to this trend, digital transformation is changing the way people work and the nature of employment. Although digital transformation creates new economic opportunities, changing forms of work and patterns of employment – as seen in the rise of digital platform workers – present significant challenges for job seekers and policymakers. Digital and non-cognitive skills (often dubbed as socio-emotional skills, like communication and teamwork) will become increasingly essential for future job opportunities. Significant re-allocation of jobs towards these skills is likely in coming years, while old skills become obsolete faster, worsening job and income inequality. Without substantial investment in reskilling and upskilling and appropriate labor policies, impacts on workers – particularly low-skilled and in routine jobs – will intensify.

Digital transformation is now a major strategic consideration in coping with COVID-19 and driving economic recovery, reconfiguration and resilience when the pandemic ends. Digital readiness is crucial in any successful transition to the digital economy. Yet, a recent study by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) notes significant gaps in readiness. These gaps range from information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure to online platforms, mobile payment solutions, skills, and legal and regulatory frameworks, and are often more pronounced among poor and most vulnerable communities.

Governments should take strong leadership in bridging the digital divide and guiding technology towards open, inclusive, yet accountable digital economies. This should include focusing on enabling digital infrastructure, building digital skills and literacy, and strengthening labor and social protections.

Invest in Digital Infrastructure

The case for public investment in ICT and digital infrastructure is clear, as affordability and availability remain significant barriers to computer and internet use. Governments in developing countries should ensure adequate public investment in high-speed broadband and fiber optic networks and design regulatory regimes with proper incentive structures and governance. They should invest in rural and remote areas and connect socially excluded groups, where high costs and low returns discourage private investment. Digital and ICT networks should be also properly regulated given the risks to data privacy, cybersecurity and public safety.

Build Digital Skills and Literacy

Access to technology is not enough for digital readiness. Even where most people have access, digital literacy and skills needed to capture economic gains often vary across segments of society. Despite noticeable improvement in digital skills education, the pandemic has revealed key constraints, including lack of digital curricula, teaching tools and materials. Education reforms related to digital education are needed to integrate ICT into teaching methods, to give teachers ICT skills and help them become facilitators of knowledge, to nurture digital capability and competency among students, and to promote creative and innovative ideas in class. .

Lifelong learning should also help future workers embrace technological changes. For education and labor market reform, authorities should take steps to achieve the right of all to access literacy, numeracy and digital skills, through formal and non-formal lifelong learning opportunities. This will stop the complex and disruptive changes of digital transformation from triggering high social costs and allow society to maximise its positive economic effects.

Strengthen Social Protection for the Unemployed and Vulnerable

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed serious gaps in social protection in many developing economies. Public policy responses should help limit the impact of unemployment by providing temporary income support (i.e., unemployment insurance systems, redundancy payments and social assistance) and implement active labor market policies such as labor exchanges or mobility assistance, education and training, and business support or subsidised employment.

Various studies suggest that public policies help shape how technological change will affect the future of jobs. Given mixed evidence of technology impacts on employment, three broad strategies should be prioritised to ensure technology benefits are not totally offset by adverse effects, namely: (1) labor policies promoting employment and labor market flexibility but protecting the unemployed; (2) strong social protection systems and tax policies that fund social protection and counter widening income inequality; and (3) steering new technology on a path that benefits people and safeguards their rights.

Dr. Cyn-Young Park is Director of Regional Cooperation and Integration, Economics Research and Regional Cooperation Department, Asian Development Bank (ADB). This article draws upon an earlier paper published as ADB Brief No.147 "COVID-19, Technology, and Polarising Jobs." The views expressed here are solely of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the ADB and any of its constituent members.

ASEAN in Figures

# Digital Connectivity in Southeast Asia

Internet Penetration [1]
(* 2017 data; ** 2018 data)

Country	Fixed telephone subscriptions (per 100 people)		Individuals using the Internet (% of population)		Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)	
	2010	*2019*	*2010*	*2019*	*2010*	*2019*
Brunei Darussalam	20.6	20.0	53	**95**	112	128.6
Cambodia	2.5	**0.3**	1.26	40.5 **	56.9	129.9
Indonesia	16.9	3.5	10.92	47.7	87.4	127.5
Laos	1.6	20.8	7	25.5 *	64.1	**60.8**
Malaysia	16.3	20.3	56.3	84.2	120	139.6
Myanmar	**1**	1 **	**0.25**	**23.6 ***	**1.2**	113.8 **
Philippines	3.5	3.9	25	43.0	88.5	154.8
Singapore	**38.9**	**32.8**	**71**	88.9	**143.9**	156.4
Thailand	10.2	3.8	22.4	66.7	106.7	**186.2**
Vietnam	16.3	3.8	30.65	68.7	126.8	141.2

40 million
The number of people in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand going online for the first time in 2020 [5]
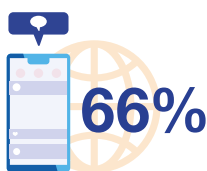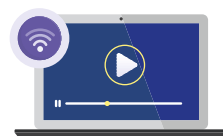
66%
Total population in Southeast Asia are Internet users as of January 2020. [4]

Social media penetration [4]

41%
94%

■ Lowest - Myanmar
■ Highest - Brunei
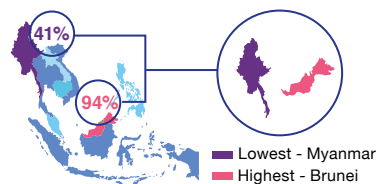
63%
of total population in Southeast Asia are active social media users

Device Ownership – % of Internet users owning Internet-access devices [4]

Smart phone — 94% / 97% / 93% / 95% / 94% / 93%

Laptop, Desktop — 66% / 72% / 67% / 78% / 50% / 65%

Tablet Device — 23% / 32% / 40% / 47% / 33% / 32%

Games Console — 16% / 16% / 12% / 21% / 12% / 6.9%

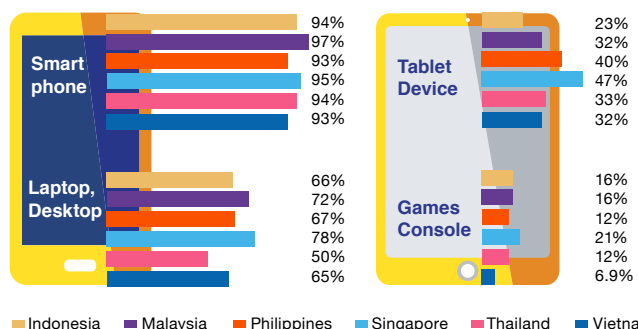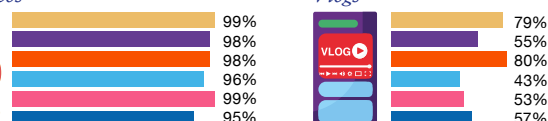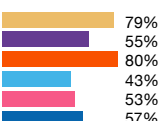■ Indonesia ■ Malaysia ■ Philippines ■ Singapore ■ Thailand ■ Vietnam

Average number of online hours per day [4]

Philippines	5h 11m	4h 34m
Thailand	4h 57m	4h 4m
Indonesia	4h 46m	3h 13m
Malaysia	4h 3m	3h 54m
Singapore	3h 5m	3h 43m
Vietnam	3h 8m	3h 22m

Monthly online content activities [4]

Online Videos — 99% / 98% / 98% / 96% / 99% / 95%

Vlogs — 79% / 55% / 80% / 43% / 53% / 57%

Music & Streaming Services — 84% / 70% / 84% / 59% / 68% / 73%

Online Radio Station — 58% / 56% / 55% / 46% / 52% / 46%

Podcasts — 43% / 35% / 43% / 30% / 44% / 33%

■ Indonesia ■ Malaysia ■ Philippines ■ Singapore ■ Thailand ■ Vietnam
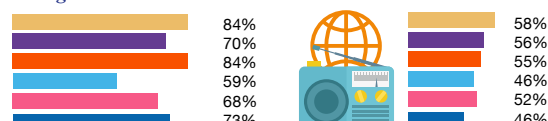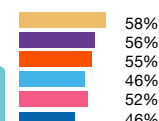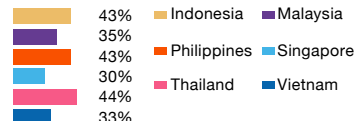
Digital Readiness [8]

Overall digital readiness score

Singapore: Highest in the world at **20.26** (max score: 25)
Myanmar: Lowest in ASEAN at **8.08**

Digital readiness in terms of human capital and start-up environment in Southeast Asia[8]

Country	Human Capital (max. score at 4)	Start-up Environment (max. score at 3)
Brunei	n.a.	n.a.
Cambodia	2.54	0.27
Indonesia	2.45	0.42
Laos	2.22	0.30
Malaysia	2.74	0.64
Myanmar	1.92	0.11
Philippines	2.39	0.27
Singapore	3.43	1.66
Thailand	2.60	0.42
Vietnam	3.06	0.40

Digital Economy

7% of ASEAN GDP
Share of digital economy in ASEAN's total GDP, compared to US' 35%, Europe's 27% and China's 16% [3]

Almost 70%
of Southeast Asian consumers will go digital by end-2020. [6]

60 Million
Increase in the number of Southeast Asian digital consumers from 2018 to 2020. [6]

USD1 Trillion
Estimated contribution of digital integration to ASEAN's GDP by 2025 [3]

Estimated gross merchandise value of Southeast Asia's Internet sectors [5]

USD100 billion (2020)
USD300 billion (2025)

Top 5 online activities of Southeast Asians [6]

Social media
Messaging
Video streaming
Gaming
E-commerce

Emerging trends for sectors going digital [6]

Digital health (Telemedicine)
Online gaming
Gaming live-streaming
Digital education

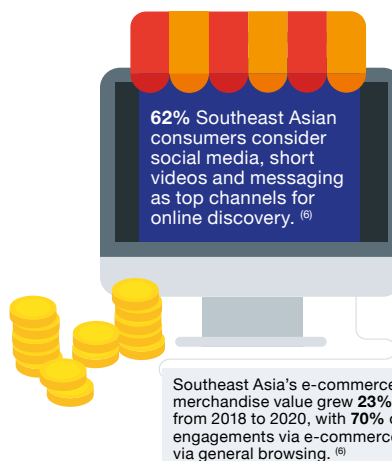*Digitalisation of Southeast Asian SMEs* [3]

16% are truly digitalised

75% see digital integration as an opportunity

40% do not have the necessary digital skills

25% view lack of payment options as the key hurdle to online sales

40% find digital regulations challenging to navigate

E-commerce

The annual growth rate of e-commerce revenue in Southeast Asia is four times higher than its GDP growth from 2018 to 2023.[2]

E-commerce growth projection[5]
2020: **USD62 billion**
2025: **USD172 billion**

62% Southeast Asian consumers consider social media, short videos and messaging as top channels for online discovery. [6]

1.4X: Southeast Asia's online retail penetration increase in every category from 2019 to 2020. [6]

Share of online retail in Southeast Asia's total retail in 2020 at **5%**, compared to India's **4%** and China's **31%**. [6]

Indonesia's digital consumer population in 2020 [6]
Highest growth rate in ASEAN: **15%**
Total number: **137 million**

Southeast Asia's e-commerce gross merchandise value grew **23%** annually from 2018 to 2020, with **70%** of intentional engagements via e-commerce, and 30% via general browsing. [6]

## Digital Payment

Preferred payment methods in Southeast Asia [6]

	2019	2020
E-wallet	14%	22%
Credit/Debit card	23%	22.7%
Bank transfer	20%	19%
Cash	40%	34%

Percentage of Internet users using mobile banking or financial services apps: [4]

Thailand	65%
Malaysia	49%
Singapore	46%
Philippines	37%
Vietnam	36%
Indonesia	33%

Projected digital payment Gross Transaction Value in Southeast Asia in USD Billion [5]

2019	2020	2025
600	620	1200
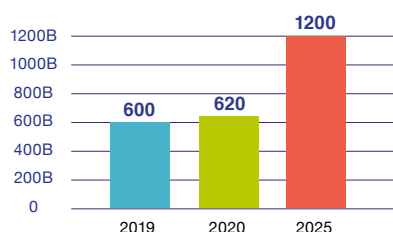
Share of population making credit card online purchases [4]

Country	Have credit card	Make online purchase and/or pay bills online
Cambodia	0.6%	3.8%
Indonesia	2.4%	11%
Malaysia	21%	39%
Myanmar	0.06%	3.6%
Philippines	1.9%	9.9%
Singapore	49%	57%
Thailand	9.8%	19%
Vietnam	4.1%	21%

Sources:

(1) World Development Indicators, World Bank (2) ERIA's Policy Brief, no.2000-07, July 2020 (3) Advancing Towards ASEAN Digital Integration, Bain & Company, 2018 (4) Digital 2020, We are Social and Hootsuite (5) e-Conomy SEA 2020; Google, Temasek Holdings and Bain & Company, 2020 (6) Digital Consumers of Tomorrow, Here Today; Facebook and Bain & Company, 2020. (7) Improving Digital Connectivity For E-commerce: A Policy Framework and Empirical Note for ASEAN, ERIA Discussion Paper Series, no. 327 (8) CISCO Global Digital Readiness Index 2019

Realising a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN

H.E. Pham Binh Minh, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam, shares with *ASEANFocus* how Viet Nam steered ASEAN through this unprecedented year of crises and challenges.

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs Phạm Bình Minh, member of the Politburo of the 12th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, has been working in the Foreign Service for nearly 40 years. He has held various important positions in his career and built up a wide range of experience and in-depth expertise in both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

AF: What are the biggest challenges confronting Viet Nam as the ASEAN Chair this year?

PHAM: 2020 was indeed an extraordinary year for the whole world and Viet Nam. We assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship amid a multitude of profound challenges around the globe, the most acute of which was the COVID-19 pandemic and its extensive repercussions. Besides, major power rivalry was escalating, multilateralism was in distress, and international law was not observed in parts of the world.

Southeast Asia was among the first regions hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. It also underwent significant pressure from major power rivalry and other geo-strategic challenges. Against this backdrop, it was imperative to bolster cooperation within ASEAN, and between ASEAN and its partners. Viet Nam, as the ASEAN Chair, was charged with consolidating the Community's unity and centrality to effectively address the challenges, particularly the pandemic's negative impacts.

AF: Despite the disruptions of COVID-19, what are the key deliverables that ASEAN has managed to achieve this year?

PHAM: Guided by the spirit of a "Cohesive and Responsive" Community, ASEAN member states have risen to the challenges by concerted efforts, and together achieved significant results. ASEAN has managed to strengthen its unity, enhance its role and status, and push forward its priorities for regional cooperation with the following key deliverables:

•   ASEAN has sustained the community-building momentum by fully realising most of its targets and plans for 2020. These include completing the mid-term reviews of the three ASEAN Community Blueprints in the Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural pillars, providing guidance on the development of a Post-2025 Vision for ASEAN, scoping the review of the ASEAN Charter, and aligning sub-regional development and narrowing of the development gap with the overall development programs of ASEAN.

•   ASEAN has fostered close regional coordination in COVID-19 response and economic recovery, through the operationalisation of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, launching of the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies, completion of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and its Implementation Plan, and establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases.

•   ASEAN centrality continued to be enhanced as the Community has played an increasingly active role in promoting peace and preserving stability in the region. ASEAN has consistently persevered with its common position on issues related to regional peace, stability and security, and played an active role in addressing regional and international hot spots such as the South China Sea, the Rakhine State of Myanmar, the Korean Peninsula, and the Middle East peace process. ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ASEAN Plus One, ASEAN Plus Three, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), have grown in importance and substance.

•   ASEAN's external relations have deepened and expanded. In 2020, Cuba, South Africa and Columbia were admitted to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) as High Contracting Parties. ASEAN also conferred the Development Partner status on France and Italy, and upgraded the ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations to Strategic Partnership.

• ASEAN has contributed to the regional economic integration and multilateral trade liberalisation with the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement on the sidelines of the 37th ASEAN Summit after eight years of tough negotiations. The RCEP conclusion was a testament to ASEAN's strong commitment to an open, transparent and fair multilateral trading system.

AF: Are there any targeted deliverables for 2020 that have been deferred due to COVID-19?

PHAM: Just like other regional organisations, ASEAN cooperation agenda in 2020 has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of meetings had to be cancelled or postponed whereas some negotiations, including on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), have not progressed as expected. In the defence sector, several high-profile events such as the Viet Nam International Defence Expo 2020 and the International Fleet Review 2020 could not proceed as planned. However, in general, ASEAN has managed to achieve all the key targets set out for 2020.

AF: Almost all ASEAN meetings have gone virtual in 2020. What are the difficulties that the Chair has had to overcome to enable productive online meetings?

PHAM: Most preparations for ASEAN meetings this year, in terms of agenda, programme, logistical-technical arrangements and media coverage, have been adjusted to the virtual format. Several conditions had to be met to enable productive online meetings, i.e. (i) adequate ICT infrastructure with high-speed and stable Internet connections; (ii) cyber-security and confidentiality; (iii) suitable timing and agenda to accommodate the different time zones. With strong determination and thanks to

the effective support and collaboration of fellow member states and external partners, Viet Nam has managed to overcome all these technical and technological contraints, and successfully convened all ASEAN high-level meetings through videoconferencing while ensuring proper protocol, substantive agenda and cyber-security.

AF: Going forward, do you think "going online" would be the future format of most ASEAN meetings?

PHAM: Direct and virtual meetings have their own pros and cons. They are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing. Whether a meeting should be conducted in direct, virtual or hybrid format depends on various factors such as the urgency of the situation at hand, the importance of the subject matter, and technical and technological availability. Due to COVID-19, most of the ASEAN meetings this year were held online. Thanks to the support and collaboration from fellow ASEAN member states and partners, those meetings were successful, which provided us with many useful lessons to further improve ASEAN's *modus operandi* going forward. At the same time, we will continue to leverage direct meetings, including interactions between and among the leaders, to maximise the cooperation within ASEAN as well as between ASEAN and its external partners.

AF: Viet Nam's success in containing the COVID-19 outbreak is a rare bright spot in the region. Are there any good practices and lessons learned that Viet Nam would like to share on the ASEAN health cooperation agenda?

PHAM: Viet Nam's success in bringing the COVID-19 under control has been recognised by the international community. The achievement is attributed to the following important factors: (i) The holistic whole-of-society approach that focuses on "proactive prevention, early

Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19

ASEAN Secretariat

Staff conducting temperature checks and hygiene practices at a preschool in Viet Nam

detection, timely quarantine, rapid isolation, resolute containment, and effective treatment"; (ii) The Vietnamese government's rapid and thorough guidance with the strong support of our people; (iii) Timely and transparent communication of the pandemic-related information and the government's pandemic response strategy through many channels; and (iv) Pandemic response in parallel with sustaining business and production activities, social welfare protection, and community mutual support so that no one is sidelined and left behind. Viet Nam has also proactively participated in regional and international efforts in pandemic response and rendered support and assistance to other countries within its capacity. I would like to take this opportunity to express sincere gratitude to fellow ASEAN member states and the international community for their meaningful assistance to Viet Nam in handling the pandemic.

AF: The theme "A Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN" for Viet Nam's Chairmanship is so pertinent given the challenges faced. How has this theme been translated into action this year?

PHAM: ASEAN has fully lived up to the "Cohesive and Responsive" spirit in 2020, which has manifested the strength of its unity, resilience, courage and adaptability to cope with unprecedented adversities.

ASEAN's cohesiveness has shone through the solidarity and close cooperation among the member states in the development and implementation of various practical initiatives, programmes and plans of action to build a strong and prosperous ASEAN Community, and especially to contain COVID-19 and enable post-pandemic recovery.

All the deliverables adopted at the ASEAN Summits and sectoral ministerial meetings this year are imbued with the "Cohesive and Responsive" spirit. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement on the Importance of Maintaining Peace and Stability in Southeast Asia, which was issued on the 53rd anniversary of ASEAN, reiterates ASEAN's common position in preserving independence and neutrality amid complicated developments in the regional and global landscape.

AF: Viet Nam has led the charge in building a principled ASEAN position on the South China Sea anchored in international law, especially the 1982 UNCLOS. How can ASEAN sustain the momentum that it has achieved this year?

PHAM: Maintaining the regional peace, security and stability, including in the South China Sea, is the common aspiration and shared interest of the regional and international community, particularly of ASEAN. ASEAN and its member states, including Viet Nam, have therefore exerted tremendous efforts in this regard, from promoting dialogue and cooperation to developing mechanisms and norms of conduct in the South China Sea.

In 2020, ASEAN reaffirmed the importance of observing international law in resolving the disputes in the South China Sea, and of upholding the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the overarching legal framework governing all activities at sea. Countries also expressed expectations that an effective and substantive COC in line with international law, including UNCLOS, would soon be concluded.

In that spirit, going forward, ASEAN needs to maintain its principled position on the South China Sea. The South China Sea issue should remain a key agenda item of ASEAN in pursuit of the shared goals of peace, stability and cooperation in the region and the world at large.

AF: Do you think that ASEAN centrality is under duress due to the unfolding major power dynamics, especially the US-China strategic rivalry? What can ASEAN do about it?

PHAM: ASEAN centrality has been a product of ASEAN's evolution. The role of ASEAN has been recognised by its partners, including the major powers, for its significant contributions to the regional peace, development and cooperation. ASEAN has initiated and played a leading role in the ARF, EAS, ADMM and ADMM-Plus. The Association also actively took part in addressing the regional affairs.

The ongoing dynamics in the global landscape, including major power rivalry, have exerted multifold impacts on ASEAN, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Whether ASEAN centrality can be maintained and enhanced largely depends on ASEAN itself. A united, cohesive and prosperous ASEAN would be able to overcome all challenges and prove its relevance.

It is encouraging that all major powers continue to attach importance to ASEAN and the ASEAN-led mechanisms, seeing them as useful platforms to discuss regional affairs. Going forward, ASEAN needs to further consolidate its cohesiveness and responsiveness by putting forward more initiatives relevant to the regional and global interests, thereby sustaining and promoting ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture.

AF: Viet Nam also commemorates the 25th anniversary of its admission into ASEAN this year, which was hailed as a historic milestone in Viet Nam's contemporary international relations. Why is that so?

PHAM: Joining ASEAN in 1995 was the first critical step in Viet Nam's regional integration. ASEAN was also the first "playing field" for Viet Nam to gradually expand and deepen its international integration. The accomplishments in socio-economic development of Viet Nam over the past three decades and the fruits from its ASEAN membership have proven that it was the right decision.

ASEAN membership has provided a peaceful regional environment conducive to Viet Nam's economic development. ASEAN also offers a conduit for the country to strengthen relations with the major powers and its key partners and enhance its international standing. To date, Viet Nam has established strategic and/or comprehensive partnerships with 30 countries, including the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and all fellow ASEAN member states.

The admission of Viet Nam into ASEAN 25 years ago also opened a new and brighter chapter in the Association's evolution. Mutual distrust gradually gave way to collective efforts among the regional countries to respond effectively and in a timely manner to all dynamics in the region. It also heralded the beginning of an ASEAN-10 with all ten Southeast Asian states determined to contribute responsibly and actively to peace, stability and prosperity in the region and the world.

ASEAN has always been a priority of Viet Nam's foreign policy throughout the past 25 years. Going forward, ASEAN will remain a top priority in Viet Nam's foreign policy in pursuit of independence, self-reliance, diversification and multilateralisation. As an active member of ASEAN, Viet Nam will do its utmost, together with fellow member states, to build a stronger and more prosperous ASEAN Community that earns a higher standing in the international arena.

LỄ TRAO HỖ TRỢ
CỦA CHÍNH PHỦ VÀ NHÂN DÂN VIỆT NAM ỦNG HỘ
CHÍNH PHỦ VÀ NHÂN DÂN MYANMAR
PHÒNG, CHỐNG COVID-19
HAND-OVER CEREMONY
ASSISTANCE FROM VIET NAM TO MYANMAR
RESPONSE TO COVID-19

baoquocte.vn

USD 50.000

Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Quoc Dzung handed over Viet Nam's COVID-19 assistance to Myanmar.

"Happy Waters" in Southeast Asia

Neo Guo Wei Kevin explores how traditional liquors are made and ingrained in the Southeast Asian ways of life.

Liquors in Southeast Asian are as diverse and rich as the region's cultural tapestry and natural endowments. The region's liquor-making traditions have also benefited from its unique geography, nestled between the Chinese civilisation where the first historical evidences of man-made alcoholic beverages were found and the Indian sub-continent where distillation, a key process in modern alcohol production, was invented. Making liquor is therefore a time-honoured craft in many parts of Southeast Asia.

Rice terraces cut into the steep mountain slopes populate the hilly landscape of northern Vietnam. Other than its role as the staple food source, rice (or glutinous rice) is the key ingredient for the local wine commonly enjoyed by the hill minorities. Yeast is first mixed into cooked rice and the mixture is then transferred into clay jars where it is left to ferment for about two weeks before being distilled into rice wine, or *rượu gạo*. Every family has a unique recipe that is passed down through generations, and the homemade concoction is heartily served to one's friends, family and neighbours. It keeps them warm and cozy in the chilly mountain winter. Locals also believe in the medicinal properties of rice wine to cure ailments and improve virility. Rice wine for this purpose is usually infused with various indigenous herbs and medicinal plants, as well as animals such as snakes and scorpions.

A great social lubricant, rice wine is called "happy water" by many Vietnamese. After a few rounds of rice wine, amidst increasingly louder choruses of "*Một, Hai, Ba, Dzô!*" or "One, Two, Three, Cheers!", everyone quickly becomes brothers and sisters. Rice wine is a must-have at major celebrations and festivals. Grooms traditionally present eight to ten jars of rice wine to the bride's family during their engagement. On the wedding day, both families consume rice wine from a common vessel to symbolise the union. During Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, copious amounts of rice wine are consumed by the locals as they ring in the new year. It is also a cultural offering in the Vietnamese society with teacups filled with rice wine placed on ancestral worship altars. At major life events such as moving into new homes, the first serving of rice wine is traditionally splashed on the ground as an offering to the Earth God.

As rice is cultivated across Southeast Asia, rice wine is also very popular in Thailand where it is called *laokhao* which means "white spirits" in Thai. It is often enjoyed with ice and soda to relieve the alcoholic potency, and can be mixed with local herbs for medicinal purpose. Meanwhile, the taste of Sabah in Malaysia would not be complete without a sip of its famous spirit *lihing* or *tapai* which is made from fermented glutinous rice or cassava and often consumed

through a bamboo straw. From the reputed Banaue rice terraces of the Philippines hails *tapuy* – the sweet rice wine specially served for important occasions.

Other than rice, palm is commonly used to ferment alcoholic beverages in Southeast Asia, including in the arid landscape of upper Myanmar where it is called "toddy". To produce palm wine, locals climb to the top of palm trees via a bamboo ladder where they make an incision at the stem of the palm flower. An earthen pot is placed below the cut stem to collect the sweet sap overnight. In the morning, the filled pot of palm sap is retrieved and the fermentation process has already begun with naturally present yeast particles. By noon, the sap will have transformed into a slightly carbonated but sweet and tangy alcoholic brew, known as *htan yae*, or simply "sky beer", among the locals.

Htan yae likely drew its influence from the toddy wine found across the neighboring Indian sub-continent. Across Myanmar, shops serving *htan yae* stand alongside small rural roads connecting villages. Known as "toddy shops", they are essentially bamboo huts located below clusters of palm trees that provide some shade in the sparse landscape. Toddy shops provide a steady source of income to their owners in rural Myanmar, and a popular place for locals to gather and relax over *htan yae* after a day of hard

A distillery worker readies a jar of rice wine in Vietnam

Travel Aficionado@Flickr

A vendor dispensing *htan yae* in Myanmar

work. *Htan yae* is also used by the locals as a home remedy for common ailments such as constipation and blurry eyes. Just like rice wine, palm wine is not unique to Myanmar. It can be found in Philippines as *arack*, in Indonesia as *tuack*, and in Vietnam as *rượu dừa*.

Sugarcane, which is native to the region, is also commonly used to produce alcoholic beverages in Southeast Asia. *Basi* – the name of sugarcane liquor in the Philippines – was so ingrained in the local way of life that it sparked the Basi Revolt in 1803 when the Spanish rulers tried to ban private production of *basi*. Sugarcane is also the main feedstock for Thai whiskey. Of particular historical significance is the Mekhong Whiskey, which was developed in 1940 by the then Siamese government. The name "Mekhong" was a patriotic nod to the Franco-Thai war, which saw Thailand take control of the territory to the east of the Mekong River, in today's Cambodia.

Locally brewed sticky rice wine in Vietnam

Making rice wine yeast in Mari Mari Cultural Village, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia

A toddy palm climber in Myanmar scales a tree to tap its sap

A distillery worker prepares rice wine in Phôngsali, Laos

The region's "happy waters" are also produced with many other local produces that include mango wine, coffee wine, coconut wine, calamansi wine, pineapple wine, and the list goes on. Of course, not all is ripe and rosy with alcoholic drinks in Southeast Asia. Drink driving is a major cause for road accidents in Thailand and Vietnam, especially during the major festive periods. Consumption of homemade alcohol also increases the risk of methanol poisoning, which led to a ban on home brews such as *rượu gạo* and *htan yae* in Vietnam and Myanmar. These unfortunate events in more recent times have unfortunately overshadowed the cultural, historical and social significance that traditional liquors hold in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, it is heart-warming to see countries in the region share many commonalities in their craft distilling, drawing upon the abundance of their local tropical produces. As the saying goes, "Liquor is the ties that bind". Do utilise the table below as we jointly raise a glass and ring in 2021 wherever we are in Southeast Asia or anywhere in the world!

Indonesia	**Santi!**
Malaysia	**Sihat Selalu!**
Philippine	**Tagay!**
Thailand	**Chai Yo!**
Cambodia	**Jul Muoy!**
Laos	**Joo Siab!**
Myanmar	**Aung myin par say!**
Singapore	**Yum Seng!**
Vietnam	**Một, Hai, Ba, Dzô!**

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Banaue rice terraces in the Philippines, where *tapuy* originates

Unveiling the Hijab's Evolution

Nur Syafiqah Binte Mohd Taufek and **Siti Syazwani Binte Zainal Abidin** trace the genesis of modest fashion and its evolving meaning in Southeast Asia.

Young girls donning the hijab

Endho@Pixabay

The clothes we wear – and how we choose to wear them – have long been seen as a reflection or concealment of ourselves. From power dressing to uniforms and formal wear to everyday attire, the practice of dressing, decorating and (un)covering our bodies with different clothing styles is often not only indicative of profession and occasion, but also widely considered as a form of self-expression and even art. It is no wonder that anthropologist Terence Turner referred to fashion as the "social skin", a marker of both individuality as well as the socio-cultural contexts in which we live.

For many people of faith, clothing is an expression of religious identity. In Muslim-majority parts of Southeast Asia, this can commonly be seen in the donning of the hijab. Originally meaning "barrier" in Arabic, the hijab is now widely understood as a veil worn by Muslim women that covers the head and drapes across the chest. In the minds of many Muslims today, the hijab is seen as a compulsory religious dress code for Muslim women, a symbol of modesty and an expression of piety. Muslim women who decide to wear the hijab are celebrated for taking the step forward to becoming more religious.

Contrary to popular belief, the hijab is a recent phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Just 50 years ago, the sight of Muslim women bearing the hijab was rare as veiling was practised but not strictly observed in the Malay-Indonesian world. A loose headgear known as the *selendang* was worn during religious ceremonies and by those who had gone to Mecca to fulfil their pilgrimage, representing modesty among Southeast Asian Muslim women at the time despite its looser silhouette. Following the Islamic resurgence movement in the 1980s, which called for a return to a puritanist idea of Islam and promoted an 'Islamic dress code', the hijab came to embody the redefined idea of modesty where the *selendang* was thought to be insufficiently modest.

Even though more women adopted the hijab in the late twentieth century, the rise of hijab for fashion only really took off following the surge of Muslim celebrities who underwent *hijrah*, the transition to become more religiously observant most often marked by one's change in dressing.

A selection of dUck scarves based on traditional batik designs

dUck

One of the scarves from The Malaysia dUck collection, which features some of Malaysia's iconic landmarks

dUCk

Along with the popularisation of the hijab, female celebrities who went through the phase also introduced various labels of modest wear for Muslim women. Where clothing choices were once limited to more nondescript pieces, such as oversized t-shirts, loose garments such as *abaya* and plain *tudungs*, the emergence of these local brands gave rise to more stylish and elegant designs that allow Muslim women to appear both fashionable and professional, while not deviating from the Islamic teachings of modesty.

Today, trendsetting hijabi celebrities continue to transform the ways in which Muslim women view and dress themselves. The catapulting of hijab-donning pop sensations Yuna and Shila Amzah onto the global stage

acquainted modest wear with even more ostentatious and eye-catching styles, further fusing modernity and religion as well as effectively changing the perception that the hijab is only worn by middle-aged women. Savvy entrepreneurs around Southeast Asia have tapped into this growing industry by kickstarting their own modest fashion lines, bringing fresh and contemporary takes on the hijab to fashion-forward Muslim women. For instance, Malaysian brands such as dUck, Naelofar, Alya Sarah, and Nashata each offer a range of unique designs crafted from premium materials to suit different tastes and uses. While Naelofar and Nashata cater to the active Muslimah with collections featuring dri-fit hijabs, dUck's scarves have garnered huge regional success for its premium styles, eccentric designs, and sophisticated embellishments such as Swarovski crystals and paintings of Southeast Asia.

The continued rise of the hijab movement driven by celebrities, influencers, and so-called hijabsters has also shifted the hijab's meaning from one strictly associated with modesty to that of empowerment, convenience and the assertion of identity. The headscarf has increasingly become a means of resistance against conventional standards of feminine beauty that demand more exposure, lessening incidents of harassment on the street and work as well as signaling pride in one's identity. The changing face of modest fashion also allows Muslim women to reshape the public narrative about themselves in the face of Islamophobia. For many hijab-donning women, what was once deemed as an oppressive tool by the West now fulfils the dual function of connecting them with Islam while allowing them to express their individuality through their fashion choices.

While regional brands pioneered the infusion of modest fashion with modernity, mainstream brands have increasingly realised the potential market that they can leverage on, culminating in the global recognition of hijabi

Malaysian singer-songwriter Yuna performing in 2016

kodsfreak_ @Wikimedia Commons

A modest fashion show in Jakarta, Indonesia

Roirike Mardiana Bewinda@Shutterstock

women. Major labels such as Uniqlo, Nike, and Under Armour have created their own hijab lines, while designers from both high-street and luxury brands have adapted to the more modest needs of the young and growing Muslim fashion market. With H&M hiring a hijabi model, Dolce & Gabbana releasing a collection of hijabs and *abayas*, and a host of labels including DKNY and Tommy Hilfilger producing special Ramadan clothing collections, these business-savvy fusions have not only caught the attention of practicing Muslims but non-Muslims wishing to don the headscarf as well. Both regional and international brands have sought to eliminate prejudice against hijabis by promoting the hijab as a conduit through which young women can project their creativity and agency and lending a voice to those once cloaked in patriarchal stereotypes originating from ancient practices of veiling.

Today, the hijab has become part of a multi-billion dollar Islamic modest fashion industry. It is estimated that the global revenue generated by the industry will reach USD368 billion by 2021. In Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia lead the market, with consumers in Indonesia alone spending over USD13.3 billion on modest clothing and exports reaching USD4.57 billion in 2015. Coupled with the enduring popularity of trendy hijabi influencers sharing their beauty and style tips as well as embracing their faith online, the market shows considerable growth potentials going forward.

The evolution of the hijab and the burgeoning modest fashion trend has garnered mixed responses among members of the Muslim community. While some have responded positively and welcomed the new meanings attached to the hijab and modest fashion, others view the trend as a misrepresentation of the idea of modesty. New and unconventional ways of donning the hijab and other modest fashion pieces such as the turban as well as the sale of hijabs at high prices have stirred some discomfort, leading some to lament that the hijab has deviated from its initial purpose – an expression of piety and modesty – and reduced to a mere fashion trend, especially if celebrities who might not be committed to Islam's teachings only sport the veil to boost their own popularity.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the evolution of modest fashion has provided an avenue for Muslim women to participate in the activities of the contemporary world and assert their identity as empowering, successful and modern individuals who remain devout to their religion. The modest fashion revolution has also sparked a step forward for the diverse and positive representation of Muslims globally, carving out a much-needed space for the hijabi community in the public eye.

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Year In Review

JANUARY

Vietnam assumes the ASEAN Chairmanship under the theme "Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN".

The 23rd ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting is held in Bandar Seri Begawan.

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat in Nha Trang, Vietnam, discusses ASEAN's priorities for the year 2020.

FEBRUARY

The ASEAN Plus Three Senior Officials' Meeting on Health Development (SOMHD) hold a special video conference on COVID-19.

The ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communications Team (ATCCT) releases a Joint Media Statement to share travel alerts and hotline/call centres regarding travel to the region amid COVID-19.

Vietnam issues the Chairman's Statement on ASEAN Collective Response to the Outbreak of COVID-19.

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Retreat in Hanoi issues the Joint Statement on Defence Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks.

The ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) and the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers hold special meetings in Vientiane to discuss regional cooperation in dealing with COVID-19.

MARCH

The ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) Retreat in Da Nang, Vietnam, agree to take collective action to mitigate COVID-19's economic impact and keep the ASEAN market open.

The ministerial-level ASEAN-EU video conference discusses international cooperation and coordination in response to COVID-19.

APRIL

The ASEAN Health Ministers hold a special video conference to enhance regional cooperation on COVID-19 response.

A Special ASEAN Summit is held virtually to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and agree in principle to establish the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund.

A Special ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit on COVID-19 is held virtually to strengthen mutual support and cooperation in handling the pandemic.

The ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) issue a statement reaffirming commitment to ensure food security in the region during the pandemic.

ASEAN-Japan Economic Ministers release a joint statement on economic initiatives to respond to COVID-19, especially in building resilient supply chains.

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers and the US Secretary of State hold a special video conference on COVID-19.

The ASEAN Tourism Ministers convene a special video conference to strengthen regional coordination in revitalising ASEAN tourism.

ASEAN and US Health Ministers convene a special video conference on cooperation in COVID-19 response.

MAY

At their special video conference, the ASEAN Labour Ministers agree to provide appropriate assistance to ASEAN migrant workers affected by the pandemic.

ASEAN-China Economic Ministers release a joint statement on combating COVID-19 and enhancing ASEAN-China trade relations.

JUNE

The virtual Special AEM Plus Three Consultation commits to restore economic growth.

The ASEAN Ministers for Social Welfare and Development video conference discusses ways to mitigate COVID-19's impacts on vulnerable groups.

ASEAN-Russia Foreign Ministers' video conference discusses cooperation in countering COVID-19 and other areas of mutual concern.

The virtual Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Inter-Sessional Ministerial Meeting reaffirms commitment to sign RCEP in 2020.

The 36th ASEAN Summit adopts the Hanoi POA on Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation and Supply Chain Connectivity in Response to COVID-19, and holds a Special Session on Women's Empowerment in the Digital Age.

ASEAN-Australia Foreign Ministers' video conference discusses cooperation in COVID-19 response and post-pandemic recovery.

JULY

ASEAN-China Transport Ministers convene a special video conference on COVID-19 to ensure smooth transport and logistics and reactivate economies.

AUGUST

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers issue their Statement on the Importance of Maintaining Peace and Stability in Southeast Asia, reaffirming commitment to international law, multilateralism and ASEAN unity and centrality amid geopolitical uncertainties.

The ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication meet virtually to discuss measures to address COVID-19's impacts on vulnerable people.

The ASEAN Online Sale Day is launched to promote region-wide online shopping.

The 52nd AEM and AEM Consultations with Dialogue Partners are held virtually. The AEM agree to refrain from taking measures that affect the flow of essential goods such as food and medical supplies.

SEPTEMBER

The 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) and Related Meetings with Dialogue Partners, including the 27th ASEAN Regional Forum, are held virtually.

Germany and Bahrain accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC).

The First Protocol to amend the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement enters into force, allowing e-signature/seal and operationalisation of the ASEAN-wide Self-Certification (AWSC) scheme.

France and Italy become Development Partners of ASEAN.

OCTOBER

The ASEAN Ministers of Education convene a video conference on digital transformation of education systems, agree to foster digital literacy and bridge the skills gap to prepare young people for the future of work.

At their virtual 42nd meeting, AMAF endorsed, among others, the new ASEAN Integrated Food Security (AIFS) Framework and the Strategic Plan of Action on ASEAN Food Security (2021-2025).

The ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Culture and Arts (AMCA) convene their 9th annual meeting and consultations with Dialogue Partners with the theme "Impact of COVID-19 & Way Forward for the Culture and Arts Sector".

ASEAN launches Baseline Report 2020 and Online Database for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Indicators to track SDGs implementation.

NOVEMBER

The launch of the ASEAN Customs Transit System (ACTS) enables smoother cross-border transit movement of goods within the region.

The ASEAN Youth Ministers meet virtually to enhance cooperation in fostering a future-ready ASEAN Youth generation.

At the 37th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits, the Leaders adopt, among others, the Declaration on an ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework, ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework, Narrative of ASEAN Identity and Hanoi Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision. The Leaders also note the reports on mid-term reviews of the three ASEAN Community pillars.

ASEAN countries sign a Memorandum of Understanding that commits to roll back non-tariff measures on essential goods not in line with WTO rules.

ASEAN countries and Australia, China, Japan, ROK and New Zealand sign the RCEP Agreement.

First ASEAN Women Leaders' Summit is held virtually.

Colombia, Cuba and South Africa accede to the TAC.

DECEMBER

The virtual 23rd ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting upgrades ASEAN-EU relations to Strategic Partnership.

The 7th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) is held via video conference.

Kyaiktiyo Pagoda

Myanmar

The Kyaiktiyo (also known as Golden Rock) Pagoda is a prominent temple and pilgrimage site located in Kyaikto township of Mon State, Myanmar. The pagoda is composed of a 7.3-metre-tall stupa sitting atop a gilded 7.6-metre-tall boulder, which is itself perched on the edge of a mountain cliff. As legend has it, the 11th-century reigning King Tissa was presented with a strand of the Buddha's hair by a Buddhist hermit, who received the gift from the Buddha himself. The pagoda was built on top of a boulder shaped like the hermit's head to enshrine the hair for all eternity. Every year, the pagoda sees up to two million visitors, with numbers peaking during pilgrimage season from November to March. *(Source: Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, Myanmar; Lonely Planet; Myanmar Times)*