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Manipulating Civic Space: Cyber Trolling in Thailand and the Philippines

In Thailand and the Philippines cyber bullies targeting internationally supported civil society groups contribute to the global trend of shrinking civic space by manipulating social media content to mobilise public disapproval of dissent. One effective tactic is to label internationally endorsed civic groups as Western agents and thereby traitors.

- Thailand's incumbent military regime has systematically devised methods to suppress dissent, while the Philippines' illiberally inclined government has diminished civic space. Social media is a crucial tool for both governments to quell critics.

- "Cyber troops" are organised by the Thai state and even private traditionalist citizens. In the Philippines, "keyboard armies" tend to be President Duterte's supporters and are in some cases allegedly paid.

- These actors promulgate pro-government messages, surveil and report civic defiance to the authorities, bully and threaten critics online, and orchestrate offline harassment campaigns.

- Cyber troops effectively use "patriotic trolling" to highlight the international funding of civil society groups, which they claim is proof of their serving the interests of the "West" and their treason. The nationalist undertone often sparks national outrage, justifying the government to curb advocacy for democracy and rights.

- Cyber bullying is a symptom of increasingly polarised societies and should be situated in a broader political context. The Thai and Philippine governments manipulate cyber space to consolidate their power while exacerbating social divide.

Policy Implications

To tackle the global trend of shrinking civic space, European policymakers, aid agencies, and political foundations must take two measures. First, to combat attempts to label civil society as an exogenous threat to national integrity, efforts should be made to vernacularise policy discourses on democracy and human rights so as to generate local legitimacy of civil society. Second, because cyber bullying is also carried out by ordinary citizens against those deemed adversaries, international organisations should play a discrete role in facilitating local initiatives to overcome social divides.

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Cyber Trolling and "Shrinking Civic Space"

While cyber advocacy for democracy and human rights has grown in recent years, many authoritarian governments have responded by suppressing Internet freedom. This trend has contributed to what is currently described as "closing" or "shrinking" civic space (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; CIVICUS 2017). More recently, however, new forms of cyber manipulation have increasingly been applied alongside more well-known forms of cyber repression. Cyber troops have started to disseminate official discourses on social media and to distort and neutralise contentious issues by sharing comments designed to divert public attention. In contrast, cyber trolls verbally abuse and harass social media users who openly disagree with the government, which has prompted offline assaults of critics. Online and offline threats can generate "chilling effects" and self-censorship that stifle checks and balances (Bradshaw and Howard 2017). Cyber troops and trolls can be humans or "bots" (i.e. fake social media accounts made of bits of code and designed to interact with and mimic human users). Although cyber activism does enjoy government support, cyber trolling is also a citizen initiative carried out by authentic, decentralized critics. It thus renders the domestic and international backlash against repressive policies less effective.

In Thailand and the Philippines "patriotic trolling" has been used to portray government critics – who may receive international funding or endorse agendas perceived as Western and liberal – as "traitors" and thereby undermined their legitimacy. In Thailand patriotic trolling emerged during the red–yellow shirt conflict and was later used by the incumbent junta to monitor dissidents. In the Philippines the Duterte's Die Hard Supporters group has also used social media sites to harass government critics. The individual political contexts of these two countries shape the intensity of cyber trolling. Thailand is an authoritarian setting where dissent is criminalised and Internet surveillance is entrenched, whereas the Philippines remains an electoral democracy; though, Duterte's strongman rhetoric reflects an illiberal shift from the post-1986 political order in the latter. Therefore, cyber bullying in these countries is not merely a matter of violated freedom of expression but rather a vehicle for expressing clashing political visions and deeper crises. Countering cyber trolling requires that domestic and international actors engage in "cyber dialogue" across the aisle.

This contribution examines the nexus of cyber bullying and shrinking civic space. First, it outlines the characteristics of the political regimes in Thailand and the Philippines and analyses how they shape cyber manipulation. Second, it elucidates the composition of cyber troops and their tactics in these countries. Third, it examines patriotic trolling and its impact on undermining civil society credibility. Fourth, it discusses the political contexts that serve as preconditions for the proliferation of cyber bullying. Fifth, it concludes with policy recommendations. This study is based on social media content analysis and personal conversations with bullied activists and journalists in Thailand.

Regime Background

Thailand's incumbent military regime tactically combines cyber repression and social media manipulation. The political establishment (i.e. the "yellow shirts," which comprises the palace, army, bureaucrats, allied business, and Bangkok middle class) and new political forces (i.e., the "red shirts," which comprises pro-poor but potentially autocratic politicians, their rural constituents, and pro-democracy civic groups) have been involved in a decade-long political conflict offline and online. The red shirts have relied on online platforms to express their anti-establishment sentiments, which have alarmed traditional elites (Liu 2014). The elites responded with cyber repression which occurred in two waves. First, they drafted and passed the Computer Crime Act after the 2006 coup, which authorised state agencies to block Internet content deemed a threat to national security and public order. Netizens were also encouraged to monitor transgressive comments online and report them to the authorities. Second, the army blocked and began to monitor several websites after it re-seized power subsequent to the yellow shirts' disruptive protests in 2013–2014. At the same time, lèse majesté (insulting a monarch) charges against critics, dissidents, and ordinary citizens skyrocketed. In 2016 the regime amended the 2007 Computer Crime Act, which led to an increase in sentences for loosely defined cyber offences, the intensification of content censorship, and the consolidation of state monitoring bodies (Sombatpoonsiri 2017). The junta has also been systematically recruiting patriotic Thais to report and punish those considered to be "disloyal" to the monarchy.

The Philippines has been an electoral democracy since 1986, but land-based elites have continued to capture political and economic powers, turning the country into an "oligarchic democracy" (Anderson 1988). These traditional elites tended to accommodate values such as good governance, political liberty, and human rights as long as questions of redistribution and land reform are marginalised (Thompson 2016). Given the elites' normative stance, any explicit government suppression of Internet freedom would have seemingly contradicted the liberal narrative. Thus, despite the implementation of the Cybercrime Prevention Act in 2012, the Philippines witnessed a near absence of Internet censorship (Freedom House 2017). However, the 2016 rise of president Duterte reflected popular disillusionment with the liberal status quo, which had been incapable of improving the livelihoods of the populace. Duterte's tough talk, head-on dismissal of liberal norms, seeming subversion of the US's role as the Philippine's imperial patron, and his hawkish approach to law and order indicate an illiberal turn (Plagemann and Ufen 2017) and have resonated with millions of constituents seeking change and strong leadership. Both Duterte's media experts and many of his supporters actively engaged in social media campaigns that supported him not only during his candidacy but even after the election (Sinpeng 2016). Cyber troops have showered the president with unreserved compliments and attacked his critics, especially those who oppose his notorious anti-drug war, which has produced more than 10,000 extrajudicial killings of drug suspects.

Composition of Cyber Troops and Tactics

In Thailand and the Philippines security forces units, party machinery, and civic groups have manipulated online content and trolled critics. Common tactics range from surveillance and the report of legal breaches to the authorities, to online and offline bullying, to the use of fake accounts to generate public opinions. Thailand's police force and the Ministry of Communication and Technology (now known as the Ministry of Digital Economy) developed the Cyber Scout Programme in 2010 to indoctrinate the younger generation in royalist values and to create a youth-based network of online surveillance of lèse majesté activities. Training workshops have been offered to high school and university students across Thailand. As of 2016, there were 112 schools committed to the programme. More than 120,000 students have been recruited as cyber scouts so far, with that number expected to double in the near future. Scouts are tasked with befriending suspects on Facebook, initiating conversations with them about sensitive issues, and then reporting any alleged lèse majesté violations to the authorities (Sombatpoonsiri 2018).

Other groups are initiated by citizens (although aided by individual security elements) who seek to defend the monarchy from offline and online offences. Between 2010 and 2013, the Social Sanction group monitored lèse majesté postings on various social media platforms, especially Facebook, and typically exposed the personal profiles of transgressors on the Social Sanction Facebook and YouTube pages for public bullying. Targets sometimes faced serious consequences such as losing their jobs or being denied places at education institutions. The Rubbish Collection Organisation (RCO) was founded in 2013 during the yellow shirt protests and sought to rid Thailand of "social rubbish" and to "eradicate lèse majesté offenders completely" within two years. The RCO focuses on social media activities, and its Facebook page has attracted more than 300,000 likes. The RCO's modus operandi consists of exposing lèse majesté infractions and notifying the police. If no legal action is taken, the group discloses an offender's private address and encourages mobs to harass them at home. In April 2014 the parents of an exiled offender were pressured into filing a case of lèse majesté against their own daughter (Sombatpoonsiri 2018).

There are also similarly minded – though less visible – Facebook pages, such as the Network of Volunteer Citizens to Protect the Monarchy on Facebook and the Anti-Ignorance Association, which also monitor and report online lèse majesté cases to the police. The efforts have led to charges being pressed against red shirt activists. Since the 2014 coup, the number of royalist Facebook pages has multiplied. They usually share doctored images, which sometimes contain obscene and sexist captions that demonise dissidents. They also misquote activists' interviews or speeches in order to highlight their political partisanship with red shirts and disloyalty towards the palace. Right-wing and anti-liberal online media, including the Thai-language *T-News*, *Chaopraya News*, and *Deeps News* and the English-language *The New Atlas*, *Alt Thai News Network* (ATNN), and *New Eastern Outlook* (NEO) tend to align their rhetoric with these cyber troops and the junta.

In the Philippines pro-government cyber troops comprise party campaigners, volunteers, and paid trolls. Duterte's viral social media campaign trails set the stage for post-election cyber activism. Alongside Duterte's aides – who are savvy in new media communication and political marketing – around 400–500 volun-

teers, mostly from Duterte's footholds and overseas worker communities, were recruited for campaign trails. Dubbed "influencers" (trend setters on social media), these volunteers increased their presence by connecting with their own social media networks to amplify the messages. Some of their networks can draw up to 800,000 members. "Hashtagging" and reposting were instrumental to popularising short and catchy presidential campaign messages. These volunteers tended to retaliate against those deemed disrespectful to Duterte with online bullying, such as issuing threats of rape (against female critics) and physical assault. Duterte's key campaigner admitted that, at times, the reactions were out of control. This pattern of cyber activism continues today because it helps sustain the public perception that the government is widely supported (Gavilan 2016).

Online content manipulation persists despite the government's denial of its involvement. Cyber trolling can be a lone wolf act or organised. Duterte has a strong support base, as his popularity among Filipinos remains high across class and demographic backgrounds. His supporters are ready to defend him against what they see as the liberal elites' plot to overthrow him. Individuals' social media postings echo Duterte's rhetoric, justifying the war on drugs, condemning human rights organisations, and denouncing government criticisms as "fake news." They also accuse critics of being, inter alia, "shameless liberal organisations," "presstitutes" (an insult for allegedly "sell-out" journalists), "criminal sympathisers," and "immoral evil." Groups such as Duterte's Die Hard Supporters and the Overseas Filipino Workers Global Movement carry out organised trolling both online and offline. They fact-check and falsify NGO reports that criticise the government. In May 2017, in New Zealand, a group of members physically disrupted an NGO panel discussing the human cost of the war on drugs (Stanfield 2017: 55–58).

Approximately 300 to 500 "keyboard warriors" have reportedly been paid between PHP 1,000 (USD 19) and PHP 10,000 (USD 190) a month. They repost and circulate distorted news and online information about adversaries, pick fights online and negatively label dissidents, and create fake social media accounts (i.e. bots) that circulate automated key campaign messages to influence public perception of what is true and untrue. These bots work in tandem with human trolls and genuine supporters to maintain the perceived popularity of Duterte and discredit the opposition (Ong and Cabanes 2018).

Patriotic Trolling

An effective repression tactic is to exploit nationalist sentiment to mobilise public antagonism of dissidents. Domestic advocacy groups that receive international funding or solidarity support are particularly vulnerable to this type of patriotic trolling. In Thailand efforts to bully internationally supported NGOs are less organised than that levelled at Thai and international journalists at the zenith of the 2013 royalist-led protests and after the 2014 coup. With the international community, particularly the US and the European Union, pressuring the junta to reinstall democracy, news stories framing the pressure as part of a CIA scheme for regime change started to pop up on the Internet. This narrative typically links pro-democracy activists, academics, journalists (especially the online media *Prachatai*), and human rights organisations, with the red shirt political leadership, whom the US

government allegedly endorses. Thus, the international funding of their activism is depicted as an effort to topple the junta, restore a red shirt–led government, and reinforce Western hegemony in South East Asia.

An English-language article propagating this theory initially appeared in the ATNN in mid-2014. Since 2015, the website has repeatedly published dozens of articles spreading the same plot and sources of evidence. Related news outlets such as *New Atlas* and NEO have shared these articles on their websites. Although not entirely false, the information was tweaked to reinforce the notion that the groups involved are Western instruments for regime change. In August 2016 *The Nation* – a mainstream, English-language newspaper – published the "Soros Leaks." Citing the *New Atlas* article, it claimed that the Fund for Open Society and the National Endowment for Democracy had sponsored a number of dissidents in Thailand. In early 2018 this alleged scandal resurged on the prominent *Thansetthakit* news website, reaffirming the narrative of Western intervention in Thailand's domestic affairs. Among the organisations now being attacked are the United Nations and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. The alleged scandal sparked debates on social media. Many social media influencers with tens thousands of followers actively reposted it and expressed their agreement with the story. In the comments section linked to the news article, Thai organisations receiving international support have been disparaged as "foreign lackeys," "parasites," and "traitors." Some comments are extremely hostile, wishing the "wipe out" of the "families of these traitors." In 2017 a columnist for *Thairath*, a national tabloid, proposed that the junta should enact a law that circumvents the international funding of NGOs – as happened in India, Russia, and Hungary.

Links between state agencies and patriotic trolls in Thailand have been difficult to establish. But online attacks reinforce official rhetoric and Thai political culture, which tend to downplay grass-roots movements' genuine efforts for democratisation. In the worst case, the cocktail of allegations of corrupt, anti-monarchy, and unpatriotic NGOs legitimates state repression of civic groups. For example, *Prachatai* saw it headquarters raided time and again, its web content sometimes banned, and its journalists charged. Since the alleged scandal, they have struggled to apply for domestic grants, which account for the large share of *Prachatai*'s annual budget.

In the Philippines the narrative against international advocacy stems from the country's colonial experience and is drawn upon by Duterte. His anti-drug campaign is portrayed as a patriotic commitment to "cleaning up" the country, and his aggressive responses to international condemnation of alleged human rights violations symbolise his underdog struggle against the liberal elites backed by imperial power (Teehankee 2016). The offensive tone of online bullies mimics Duterte's and his aides' sexist and vulgar verbal attacks on critics, which include the United Nations and the European Union. In 2017 he encouraged the police to shoot members of the human rights community if they were "obstructing justice." One of his aides even accused human rights groups of being used by drug lords (Pazzibugan 2018).

Patriotic trolling of human rights groups revolves around discourses that sometimes portray critical journalists and human rights defenders as foreign collaborators. Journalists for the anti-government news outlet *Rappler*, which has covered the war on drugs extensively, have received rape threats online, and the editor-in-chief was asked to leave the country because of her unpatriotic behaviour. Some of

these comments were reportedly posted and shared by allegedly fake accounts that follow one another and tend to post the same content, which also appears on news sites such as *Global Friends of Rody Duterte* and *Pinoy Viral News* (Etter 2017). Such sites are designed to attract genuine Duterte supporters. Unorganised trolling on the Facebook pages of human rights groups (such as the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) also accuses these groups of being anti-Filipino and tarnishing the image of the Philippines internationally. An online columnist points to Western funding of rights groups as an effort to undermine the nation (Pedrosa 2016). Patriotic trolls use this argument and the claim that rights activists protect criminals at the expense of victims to undermine rights-based arguments.

Even though there have been no cases of physical assault by cyber vigilantes or state suppression of Philippine rights activists, online comments suggesting that they deserve be "slaughtered," "raped," or "shot dead" generates fear among them (Stanfield 2017: 57). In the absence of state violence against civil society, cyber troops can hinder human rights advocacy through issuing threats at the grass-roots level.

Social Divide and Cyber Trolling

Online bullies are instrumentalised by both the state and government supporters to silence dissent. The former reflects the autocratic backlash against civil society; the latter, a deeper crisis of social polarisation. The cases of Thailand and the Philippine reveal the interwoven relationship between these two aspects: autocratic and illiberal regimes can exploit existing social divides to consolidate power.

Thailand's political struggle was fought between those wishing to preserve the traditional political order and those aspiring to change it. In cyber space constituents of the two sides tend to insult one another. For instance, the Anti-Social Sanction group emerged to counter the Social Sanction group by similarly exposing group members' personal data for online bullies. A number of red shirt websites have also reportedly engaged in generating "misinformation." Nonetheless, in Thailand the traditional political order and its supporters have the upper hand: it permeates the state structure, security establishment, and bureaucracy, which guarantees the surveillance and state-sanctioned punishment of challengers. The junta's use of cyber repression and manipulation has shed light on this pattern. Meanwhile, political discourses popularising the dominant order influence the public to legitimate and defend it when questioned. Citizens' cyber bullying of dissidents labelled as "un-Thai" epitomises this. The effects of this state–society nexus on shrinking civic space are twofold. First, the junta can rely on patriotic citizens to monitor others, report dissidents, and impose popular compliance with its political order. Second, this conduct breeds mistrust and exacerbates existing polarisation, thus hindering effective mass mobilisation to contest the incumbent regime.

The Philippines shows signs of social bifurcation. Duterte secured a landslide electoral victory because his rhetoric symbolised a diversion from the post-1986 political order. A general perception is that this order has perpetuated the domination of land-based liberal elites, who had failed to deliver policies that improved the livelihoods of Filipinos. Nonetheless, there remains a liberal segment of society which struggles to understand how their fellow citizens elected Duterte. Expressing their frustration on social media, they often refer to Duterte supporters as "Du-

tertards" (derogatory shorthand for "Duterte retards"). In response, Duterte supporters refer to them as "Yellowtards" (yellow being the colour associated with the past government). "Yellow armies" reportedly troll on social media to tarnish the president's image domestically and internationally. Despite this, Duterte has managed to hold on to power due to the continuing endorsement of the middle class and the poor and his co-optation of the security forces. In this power equation pro-government trolls have the advantage of aligning themselves with the government apparatus to fan propaganda and discredit civil society critics. As evidenced by the ongoing lawsuits against *Rappler*, the government may choose to crack down on critical media while tolerating regime-supportive online bullies. The impact cyber trolling in the Philippine has on damaging the social fabric is similar to that in Thailand. It also reflects an emerging global trend: the shrinking of civic space occurs not only in autocracies but also in illiberal democracies where governments employ cyber manipulation to camouflage repression.

Overcoming Social Divide and Engaging with Society

The growing role of cyber trolling in the global trend of shrinking civic space has not attracted sufficient international attention. In cases where it has, the focus has normally been on how cyber trolling constitutes a new autocratic tactic to silence dissent. The question as to the fragmentation of civil society tends to be missing. State apparatuses may sanction cyber bullying, but segments of civil society whose political aspirations are in line with the ruling power may willingly defend the regime by cyber trolling its critics. Internationally supported civic actors disparaged as traitors have become a target of passionate masses whose verbal and physical threats against them are justified as a patriotic duty. The nature of social media as an echo chamber potentially intensifies hate campaigns against critics. Defaming messages get likes, are shared, and are responded to by those who do not question the biases underpinning the messages. Although opposition trolling also transpires, pro-government trolling is officially welcome and even sanctioned by the ruling power, which reaps the benefit of social divide.

European development agencies, political foundations, and EU policymakers should tackle this worrying trend in two ways. First, they should take steps to enhance local ownership of human rights and democracy advocacy. The rhetoric that civil society promotes "Western" interests partly originates in domestic civic groups' failure to vernacularise concepts such as human rights and democracy. Rather than merely financing activism or applying pressure on the regime, international actors should engage with local activists to reinterpret national histories, norms, and religious beliefs. This reframing strategy can situate norms perceived as foreign in a local context so as to invalidate government accusations that advocates of these norms are traitors. In addition, European agencies can play a role in encouraging the building of alliances among regional activists. Alliances function as solidarity networks that facilitate independent fundraising (e.g. crowdfunding) and campaign lobbying. This would help generate a perception that progressive activism is homegrown and "non-Western."

Second, it is essential to address social divides that serve as fertile ground for cyber trolling. One option is to create online spaces for dialogue across political

camps. Increased support should be offered to activists who create online platforms for constructive discussions aimed at bridging the perception gaps between constituents of different political camps. These platforms can counterbalance online sites or social media pages designed to generate hatred and worsen social divides. Other initiatives might include recruiting volunteers to document and publicise the pattern of cyber trolling and introducing campaigns for media literacy. Social media users should be informed to take caution when coming across hateful comments or baseless allegations that are constitutive of organised trolling. Collective advocacy for diversifying sources of online information can also mitigate the echo chamber effect of social media. While international actors have a crucial role in these proposals for "cyber dialogue," this role should be limited to encouraging, facilitating, and building capacity for local actors. Social divides that enable government crackdowns on civil society can only be tackled if domestic civic groups take the lead.

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Related GIGA Research

Civil society has been facing increasing pressure around the world in recent years. The spaces for citizens and NGOs to assemble and campaign for rights and their interests have been shrinking globally, not only affecting actors in authoritarian regimes but also facilitating the emergence of authoritarian practices in formally democratic contexts. Against this background, the decisive question is "*What shapes and maintains the global increase of civil society restrictions*?" In this thematic GIGA Focus edition authors employing different perspectives explore the dynamics of shrinking civic space and shed light on this worrying trend. At the GIGA, research on this phenomenon and related topics is carried out within Research Programme 1 "Accountability and Participation" and within the International Diffusion and Cooperation of Authoritarian Regimes (IDCAR) research network (https:// idcar.giga-hamburg.de/).

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