

Internet Politics:

Internet as a Political Tool in Thailand

POLITIQUE INTERNET:

INTERNET COMME UN OUTIL POLITIQUE EN THAÏLANDE

Poowin Bunyavejchewin¹

Abstract: This article explores the internet as a political tool in order to achieve political goals. In Thailand, for example, the internet has significant roles in the contemporary Thai political context. It demonstrates that the internet is a tool that can be used for political mobilizing, promoting and protecting the mainstream ideology of the state. This paper also argues that it has many possible uses for censorship and surveillance by the government. In conclusion, the internet can be considered political.

Keywords: Internet; Thai Political Conflicts; Censorship and Surveillance

Résumé: Cet article étudie l'Internet comme un outil pour atteindre des objectifs politiques. En Thaïlande, par exemple, l'Internet joue un rôle important dans le contexte politique thaïlandais contemporaine. Il démontre que l'Internet est un outil qui peut être utilisé pour mobiliser la volonté politique, la promotion et la protection de l'idéologie de courant dominant de l'Etat. Ce document affirme qu'il existe de nombreuses utilisations possibles de la censure et de la surveillance par le gouvernement. En conclusion, l'Internet peut être considéré comme politique.

Mots-clés: Internet; conflits politiques thaïlandais; censure et surveillance

INTRODUCTION

New technologies and innovations always change our socio-political world in dramatic and unexpected ways. The internet has considerably altered our social and political life faster than any other technological innovation in the twentieth century. Participation in politics has been transformed because of the internet, especially major active social networking websites and political blogs.

¹Poowin Bunyavejchewin obtained his B.A. in Political Science (International Affairs) from Thammasat University in 2010. Now he is an M.A. candidate in the Department of Politics and International Studies at The University of Hull. His research interests include contemporary Thai politics and regional integration in Southeast Asia. He is the author of *Integration of ASEAN Community: Obstacles and Challenges* (in Thai). E-mail: bpoowin@hotmail.com.

* Received on March 15, 2010; accepted on May 20, 2010

Recently, Internet consumption has increased significantly. At the beginning, the internet seemed to be a privilege for a very small group of people due to its expensive cost; however, it has become accessible for almost everyone, especially the middle-class.

This change has affected information control, which was centralized by a government in the past because the internet offers people an unlimited source of information and a place to speak out. In other words, information dissemination is democratized by the internet. In many developing states, the internet is perhaps a threat to the government because most developing states are still in the nation-building process and have many sensitive issues, such as national security. There are many discussions about sensitive issues in the internet sphere, despite the states' attempt to restrict online collaboration about the issues. Many states have responded to these challenges by imposing strict censorship and surveillance on the internet.

Like other developing states, the internet has now become common in Thailand, and the flow of information and discussions about political opposition and sensitive issues are increasingly in the internet sphere. As a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime, Thailand has many delicate issues and political conflicts. The Thai government has often censored and monitored political blogs, alternative news websites, and social networking websites like Facebook. At the same time, the Thai government has also used the internet as a political tool for promoting and protecting the mainstream political ideology, Royal Nationalism.

This article will address the role of the internet in Thai political conflicts, and explain theories on censorship and surveillance as well as the function of the Thai government in censorship and surveillance.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY THAI POLITICS

Democracies comes in many forms, but their common basis is an election. Without an electoral process, it cannot be claimed that there is democracy because democracy is the rule of the majority. That is the reason why I argue that a political regime in Thailand is bureaucratic-authoritarian regime since it had both *de jure* and *de facto* coup d'état in recent years.

Bureaucratic-authoritarianism is an approach for explaining political phenomenon and regimes in Africa, Asia and Latin America in the late 1960s (Wiarda, 2000, p. 87-89). In my opinion, it would be easier to understand bureaucratic-authoritarianism if we call it "military in politics" because it indicates that the military carries out a coup d'état and has a significant leadership role in politics. However, the military cannot mount a successful coup d'état without support from civilians. The reason which the military and the ally, civilian elites, claim for their legitimacy to intervene in politics is always the corruption of politicians. Still, only cooperation with civilian elites and nothing else is not enough to overthrow a democratic government in the context of contemporary Thailand. A signal from the palace is also a necessary element. The Thai bureaucratic-authoritarian regime demands the control of the lower classes in order to maintain its power.

The political regime of Thailand has returned to a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime since the coup on 19 September 2006, led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. The coup was also strongly supported by the Bangkok-based middle class, royalists and network monarchy which General Prem Tinsulanonda, the head of the Privy Council, is the major symbol of. Despite the fact that there were two democratic governments which came from elections, both could not bring the military under control. On the contrary, it was the military that had more influence on the governments. The 19 September 2006 coup is a *de jure* coup d'état; however, there was a *de facto* coup d'état after that.

I argue that the main reason that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra from his office in 2006 is neither corruption nor capital cronyism, but breaking the *de facto* rule of Royal Nationalism, the mainstream political ideology in Thailand. His behavior and policies challenged the traditional manners of Thai politicians; for example, Thaksin's populist policies were suspect because it was thought that that they

might replace royal projects in rural areas which have been under royal patronage.

In my point of view, two democratic governments led by Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat could not govern the country, so both had to leave their office for the same reason, but for different reasons. Both Samak and Somchai were perceived as Thaksin's nominees. Hence, their governments were also a threat to Royal Nationalism.

The de facto coup d'état occurred late in 2008 after the dissolution of the People's Power Party. The de facto coup was led by General Anupong Paochinda, the Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army. He invited politicians to have a meeting with him about a political situation. The aftermath was a change in political factions in the House of Representatives, and Abhisit Vejjajiva became the prime minister of Thailand. There is no doubt that the government led by Abhisit is backed by the military, royalists and network monarchy; however, it has stirred up animosity and sparked a massive protest by the pro-Thaksin camp, which consists of rural residents and anti-coup protesters. This camp has been called the Red-Shirts; however the official name is the National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD).

Apart from the Red-Shirts, there are the Yellow-Shirts or the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). It consists of Bangkok-based middle class, royalists and network monarchists that have supported the coup by the military for protecting the mainstream ideology and the palace. The Yellow-Shirts made massive protests in 2005-2008. Yet, besides the Red and the Yellow, there is a group of the Multi-Color Shirts, which are really not different from the Yellow.

The massive protests have been out of control since 2009. The Red started the heavy protests in Bangkok, and it has started to resort to escalating violence. The casualties were caused from the political violence by both protesters and government. Some academics stated that the situation, especially in April and May 2010, is not just a riot but a civil war.

The interesting feature of the current political conflicts is the role of the internet, which is used as a political tool by all camps and the government. The internet is an important factor and tool in the protests. And it is also a powerful political tool of the government both in promoting and protecting Royal Nationalism and the palace and handling the protesters.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN CONTEMPORARY THAI POLITICAL CONFLICTS

Internet users are actively involved in expressing public sentiment about political situations. The speed at which the users are able to respond to current events offers content creation which provides different information from what we could see and hear in traditional media that was strictly controlled by the government. The users alter political mobilization efforts and in some instances minimize and eliminate limitations of communication caused by geographical boundaries and the space of miles. Now politics is no longer bounded by geography in the way it once was.

Online mobilization efforts consist of raising awareness through posts, circulating e-petitions, and sometimes soliciting monetary contributions. These efforts are often translated from online efforts to traditional offline forms of political participation (Pole, 2010, p. 16).

The internet unites the users by forming loose networks. In this context, network refers to associations or affiliation of groups of individuals who have common interests and political perspectives. According to Pole (2010), we can classify these networks into three types: individual and group identity, topical interests, and ideology.

In this section, I will focus on the political ideology's internet networks in the way it has roles in contemporary Thai political conflicts. First, I will examine the networks of the major camps, the Red and the Yellow. Next I will explore major active social networking websites and political blogs as far as their role in the conflicts.

Both the Red and the Yellow have their own internet websites which are the main instrument for stimulating and mobilizing their supporters. For the Red, the main website is www.uddthailand.com, and it has many networks such as www.rakdang.com. For the Yellow, the major website is www.manager.co.th and www.managerradio.com, which are owned by Manager Group. The enterprises have been founded by Sondhi Limthongkul, who is the prominent leader of the Yellow. Both have a live video for broadcasting their protest activities. Therefore, it looks like a reality show so that the supporters of both sides feel no need to participate the protest at the real place; they can be a visual protester. Conversely, they can participate in the protest quickly if their leaders ask, because they can acknowledge the situation all the time via the internet.

However, the main internet networks of the both camps are always blocked by the government, especially the Red due to information related to sensitive issues, and its opposition to the government. The internet users who can't access their favorite political websites have to use an alternative means such as major active social networking websites and political blogs.

I argue that a major active social networking website in Thailand currently is Facebook. Anyone who confirms themselves to be over the age of 13 with a valid e-mail address can become a Facebook user. Facebook offer a network for individuals who share similar ideological perspectives. And Facebook users can always post their comments and update about the political situation. They also promote their networking users to participate in online mobilization and sometimes offline mobilization. For example, when Anuthee Dejthevaporn, the Secretary-General of the Student Federation of Thailand (SFT), and his colleagues who supported the Red's protest were summonsed by the Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), there were many posts on Facebook to call for offline mobilization to support them.

Political blogs have also prevailed in Thailand recently. Bloggers are able to write about political issues in a meaningful way that is perhaps different from what we have known. Many websites provide blogging services such as the Nation and Prachatai.

Although social networking websites and political blogs are alternative internet networks, both also may be censored and monitored due to the many comments that are within the scope of sensitive issues. Some Facebook users and bloggers were accused of insulting the King and members of royal family.

In the next section I will illustrate theoretical approaches about censorship and surveillance.

CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE THEORIES

The Censorship and Surveillance Theories I will illustrate here are Deibert's internet content filtering theory and Foucault's panopticism. In my perspective, both can explain the role of the Thai government in the internet sphere.

According to Deibert (2009), we can classify the internet content filtering into 3 approaches: Inclusion filtering, Exclusion filtering, and Content analysis.

First, Inclusion filtering is the approach where users are allowed to access a short list of approved sites, know as a white list only. All other content is blocked. Second, Exclusion filtering is the approach that restricts user access by blocking sites listed on a black list. All other content is allowed. Third, Content analysis is the approach that restricts user access by dynamically analyzing the content of a site and blocking sites that contain forbidden keywords, graphics or other specific criteria (Deibert, 2009, p. 325).

I would like to detail the Content Analysis approach; it refers to techniques used to control access to information based on its content, such as the inclusion of specific keywords on a website or the address of a URL (Deibert, 2009, p. 325).

Deibert also indicates that many countries justify their censorship practices as a way to block access to pornography or other culturally sensitive material, but his research has documented a large and growing swathe of content beyond pornography that is targeted for filtering. At least 14 countries, including Thailand, blocked access to content that spans the major categories of political, social, conflict-related,

and security content (Deibert, 2009, p. 327).

Apart from Deibert's internet content filtering theory, Foucault's panopticism is also a useful concept for explaining surveillance.

The term panopticon means all-seeing place. It stems from political philosopher Jeremy Bentham's famous architectural design for a highly efficient prison which maximizes the controlling of prisoners with a minimal staff (Chadwick, 2006, p. 260-261; Gutting, 2005, p. 82-84).

Panopticism is based upon principles of scientific measurement and control through empirical observation rather than brute force. Therefore, panopticism alerts us to five critical features of electronic surveillance: efficiency through automation, impersonality, ubiquity, preemption, and social discipline (Chadwick, 2006, p. 262). An achievement of panopticism is creating docile bodies which are produced through a strict regimen of disciplinary acts.

Next I will apply the theories to investigate the role of the Thai government in censoring and monitoring the internet sphere.

CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE IN THAILAND

As I already mentioned, Thailand has many sensitive issues, especially the issue related to the King and the members of royal family; in that area the government has a strict role in censorship and surveillance.

According to Deibert (2009), Thailand has started an effort to block pornography, but it has been gradually broadened to include politically sensitive websites as well, since the 19 September 2006 coup. In addition, Thailand always blocks websites that satirize the palace.

I argue that the censorship and surveillance in Thailand mainly stems from Royal Nationalism, the mainstream political ideology. Websites that contain contents which tend to resist the tradition are always closely monitored and censored. Therefore the major type of internet filtering used in Thailand is the Content Analysis approach.

Take the Samesky website case for example; it was accused of insulting the King and the members of the royal family. The Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) has implicated it in a plot to overthrow the monarchy. Apart from the Samesky website, then Prachatai website case is also interesting. Prachatai is the alternative news website that always criticizes the government and supports the Red. The Red was connected to the former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been accused of not being loyal to the Royalty. Any websites that are related to the Red are observed closely and blocked. Prachatai is one of those websites. It has been blocked multiple times.

Besides the websites that have already been mentioned, social networking websites and political blogs are also heavily surveilled at this time. Recently, a Facebook user was alleged to have posted comments which insulted the King.

Thailand has the *lèse-majesté* law for protecting the palace and, of course, maintaining Royal Nationalism. Any Thais can sue other Thais because of this allegation. Many internet users have been charged. The latest one is the Facebook user I already mentioned. Therefore, Thai internet users are no different from prisoners in the panopticon prison; in other words, they are becoming docile bodies.

Ordinary users in the internet sphere also become like a Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) because they observe each other. There are also social sanctions to many users whose comments do not conform to the mainstream political ideology. The social sanctions come in many forms such as stigmatization via forwarded e-mails and Facebook posts.

Finally, I would like to state that we come to police ourselves because of the fear that we are constantly being monitored. We often have no way of knowing when we can act with real freedom.

CONCLUSION

The internet has changed our life in many ways, including our socio-political lives. Many people suppose the internet sphere is free from any politics and the government; however, in reality, the internet is a tool for political mobilization as this article already demonstrated. This article has also exemplified the role of the internet in the contemporary Thai political conflicts.

This article also showed that the internet is a political tool for the government to promote and protect the mainstream political ideology of the state. The internet sphere is not without government censorship and surveillance, especially in Thailand.

The article concludes that the internet can be a political tool in many ways; therefore, it cannot be neglected as one factor for understanding politics, particularly Thai politics.

REFERENCES

- Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet Politics: States, Citizen, and New Communication Technologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deibert, R. J. (2009). The geopolitics of internet control: Censorship, sovereignty, and cyberspace. In A. Chadwick & P. N. Howard (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (p. 323-336). New York: Routledge.
- Gutting, G. (2005). *FOUCAULT: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pole, A. (2010). *Bloggng the Political: Politics and Participation in a Networked Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Wiarda, H. J. (2000). *Introduction to Comparative Politics: Concepts and Processes*. Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers.