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Crafting a Democratic Enclave on the Cyberspace: Case Studies of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore

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Abstract: As an antithesis of "authoritarian enclave" which has been well-established in the comparative politics literature, "democratic enclave" points to the institution of a state or the unambiguous regulatory space in society "where the authoritarian regime's writ is substantively limited and is replaced by an adherence to recognizably democratic norms and procedures" (Gilley 2010). In this sense, the Internet space, embodied by information and communication technologies, has great potential to play such a role, since its "inherited" properties of decentralization and anonymity would inevitably breach the authoritarian rules. However, a closer look at three Southeast Asian states, Malaysia, Singapore and the "New Order" Indonesia whose regimes were characterized by authoritarianism when Internet was initially developed, reveals different trajectories. In the "New Order" Indonesia and Malaysia, the governments consciously left the Internet space uncontrolled; the online media developed independently, vibrantly, and professionally, especially in the Malaysian case; and there were strong connections between online and offline contentious politics. These elements made the Internet space in Indonesia and Malaysia a successful case of democratic enclave. Based on these criteria, however, the Internet space in Singapore has not achieved similar status. This paper analyses the different outcomes of enclave creation on the cyberspace among these countries. It argues that elite conflict and the strength of civil society are the two major factors that shape the differences. In this sense, the political contexts are of great importance for the understanding of Internet's political impacts.

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The existence of meaningful democratic institutions creates arenas of contestation through which oppositions may legally – and legitimately – challenge incumbents (Levitsky and Way 2010: 20).

Introduction

Since the Internet popularization started in 1990s there has been a continuing debate over what kind of political effects the new technology would bring about. One the one hand, it is believed that the decentralizing and anonymous nature of the Internet system would eventually demolish authoritarian architecture and facilitate democratization. On this score, Ronald Reagan's early prophecy of "the Goliath of totalitarianism" (Kalathil and Boas 2003: 1) is echoed by Larry Diamond (2010: 70) in his recent remark that the Internet embodies "technologies of liberation". On the other hand, however, pessimists and skeptics hold opposite views which accentuate the vulnerability and limitation of cyber power. As Deibert and Rohozinski (2010: 48) argued,

[w]hereas it was once considered impossible for governments to control cyberspace, there are now a wide variety of technical and non-technical means at their disposal to shape and limit the online flow of information.

One way to rethink this ongoing debate is to explore why the Internet is politically controlled in some authoritarian regimes but left uncensored in others. Deliberately or not, some authoritarian leaders make few attempts to control the Internet space where open discussion is allowed, political dissent expressed, and opposition parties empowered. The existence of such democratic space contrasts unfavourably with the otherwise authoritarian nature and institutions of the political system, and ultimately undermines that system – not necessarily transforms it – as transparency and accountability increased and political participation widened. In such case, therefore, the Internet creates in authoritarian context an enclave where "the authoritarian regime's writ is substantively limited and is replaced by an adherence to recognizably democratic norms and procedures" (Gilley 2010: 390). However, despite its decentralizing and anonymous features, the Internet is not doomed to play the role of democratic enclave. As authoritarian governments adopt repressive actions and impose pervasive censorship on the Internet usage, the cyberspace would be subject to authoritarian norms – in forms of repression, fear, and self-censorship – as much as virtual institutions are. In these regimes, online dissidents are threatened by draconian laws previously governing the offline behaviours; online media has to adhere

strictly to the biased, pro-government line of traditional mainstream media; and the political apathy felt in the virtual society is also instilled in the online community. Then, why does the Internet space stand out against authoritarian context and evolve into a democratic enclave in some authoritarian regimes but not in others? What are the political consequences when such enclave is developed (or absent) in authoritarian regimes?

This paper explores the success and failure in forming Internet democratic enclave, in the hope that such investigation may enhance our understanding of the Internet's democratic effects. By doing so, it draws insights from previous discussion on "democratic enclave" (Gilley 2010) and attempts to deepen that discussion with in-depth case studies. Rather than looking at the role the Internet plays in a specific event or at a particular juncture, it traces historical developments of the Internet in selected non-democratic countries, underscoring the process in which a democratic enclave is constructed (or fails to be) on the cyberspace. It argues that the early decisions in 1990s made by authoritarian leaders to leave the Internet space open or to suppress it politically are of great importance, because these decisions embodied the initial governmental response toward the new technology and thus shaped the development of the new political space. Equally important is the strength of civil society which also determines the "democraticness" of Internet space.

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Singapore represent contrasting cases of how democratic enclave succeeded and failed respectively in the cyberspace. Both countries had, at least since late 1960s, established de facto single-party hegemony ruled by the Barisan Nasional (BN) in the former and the People's Action Party (PAP) in the latter. Electoral manipulation, tight media control, and coercive actions against civil society all served as means to effectively maintain their "electoral authoritarianism" (Shedler 2006; see also Case 1996). The development of Internet politics in the two countries, however, took quite different trajectories: when the Internet was introduced and commercialized in the mid-1990s, Singapore did not hesitate to extend its authoritarian practice into the cyberspace. The government's involvement in online monitoring had been reported as early as in 1994 when a scan of public Internet accounts was conducted without prior consent (Rodan 1998). In addition, the ruling party adopted a number of strategies to limit the political use of Internet, including libel suits, website registration, and prohibition on online campaign which was only relaxed recently. With their "suitably chilling effect" (Rodan 1998: 77), these strategies have created on the Singapore's Internet "a socially engineered and 'self-censorious' climate of fear" (Lee 2010: 106). On the contrary, the Internet space in Malaysia demonstrated much democratic feature as opposite to its authoritarian con-

text. The Mahathir-led government has pledged in 1996 in its "Bill of Guarantee" that it would not seek to censor the Internet. With only a few exceptions, its words were in general kept at least until the 2008 election that saw the ruling coalition "lost the Internet war" (*Malaysiakini* 2008). Moreover, Indonesia under the Suharto's regime also witnessed the formation of democratic enclave in the cyberspace, though only for a short period. While the "New Order" was arguably more authoritarian in nature than regimes in Singapore and Malaysia, it made little effort to control online information flows even when the Internet had been assisting in popular movements that eventually overthrew the dictatorship. The cases of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which had comparable political systems in 1990s but different political outcomes for the Internet space, will be explored in this study. Several field trips have been conducted in April and June 2011,[1] including a number of interviews with relevant Internet activists, government officials, politicians, as well as some scholars. Besides, reports from various media and non-governmental organizations also provide valuable information for assessing the "democraticness" of cyberspace.

Meanwhile, for two reasons other country cases in the region are not included in this study. First, some countries (Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines) had started the wave of democratization before the Internet became publicly available there. Under such circumstances, the formation of democratic Internet space arises less interests because it may well be the ramification of political transformations and reforms. Therefore, the expected struggle between a new democratic space and the authoritarian context would be marginal if present at all. Second, with regard to the failure of democratic enclave, we consider Singapore as a better example than those politically-closed regimes, such as Vietnam and Myanmar. The former is politically more competitive and supposedly has greater needs to compromise with societal forces. In contrast, politically-closed regimes have less constraints and greater capacity to slam down the open cyberspace. In this sense, the former case may offer a more comprehensive overview of what conditions a democratic enclave requires.

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1   These field works are conducted under a broad research project on Internet control in Southeast Asia.

Democratic Enclave: Assessment, Causes and Trajectories

Bruce Gilley's (2010) notion of "democratic enclave" in authoritarian context provides an insight useful to this study's conceptualization of the free and uncensored Internet space that stands out against its authoritarian surroundings. Successful examples of democratic enclave have been witnessed in different areas such as China's village elections which are regularly held (every three years) and generally free and competitive (O'Brien and Li 2000), Hungary's media under the "goulash communism" (Lánczi and O'Neil 1996), and Peru's ombudsman system under Alberto Fujimori's rule (Pegram 2008). In the latter case, as Thomas Pegram (2008: 52) pointed out, "the Defensoría (ombudsman) operated, practically, as the sole democratic agent of accountability within the state and was recognised as such by civil society and international observers".

Then how should we identify democratic enclaves? According to Gilley (2010: 390-392), there are several important requirements for democratic enclaves: first, they should be *politically* antagonistic to or incompatible with the dominant norms and procedures of an authoritarian system. This requirement disqualifies a number of social, communal and religious organizations that also operate on democratic platforms but impose no direct challenge to the state regulatory powers. In other words, democratic enclaves are associated with "social spaces that the state presumes to control" (Gilley 2010: 391). Second, democratic enclaves should be institutionalized to represent a structural and organizational force, instead of any individuals or loosely-bound groups. Based on these requirements, we argue that the following elements would be useful to determine whether the Internet space in a specific country qualifies as a democratic enclave: (1) the political regime of that country (within the period concerned) should be undemocratic in essence; (2) in contrast to its policies of suppressing other societal spaces, the political leadership has consciously left the Internet space uncensored, as the result of either explicit promise and legislation, or unsuccessful control attempts; (3) the online media and journalism are independent, vibrant, influential, and in direct opposition to the government-controlled traditional media; and (4) the Internet community embodies an organized force in contentious politics, in the sense that it evolves into large-scale offline movements and has strong connection with prominent opposition parties. When these four elements are present, the Internet space succeeds in serving as a democratic institution in the authoritarian context. Where the government strategically implements Internet censorship, online media being subject to various kinds of authoritarian restrictions, and online contentions being

fragmented and blocked from offline political activities, we argue that the Internet has failed to resist authoritarian surroundings.

The factors that bring about the formation of democratic enclaves seem to vary. In some cases, democratic enclaves stem from the ongoing process of democratic transition which provides structural openings and liberal discourse for the emergence of democratic institutions. In this sense, democratic enclaves play the pioneering role of, and indeed embody an integral part of, that transition process. These enclaves – or "transitional democratic enclaves" as Gilley (2010: 392) labelled them – are in fact the results of cleavages generated by the political transition. As national agenda for democratization gains momentum or intra-elite conflicts and social movements become unmanageable, the incumbent elites may have little capacity or enthusiasm to prevent democratic institutions from emerging. On this score, Fox (2000: 201-202) reviewed how some regions and groups during Mexico's transition from hegemonic party system "have carved out veritable democratic enclaves that experiment with alternative economic development, self-representation, and accountable governance". The Internet space in Indonesia prior to the collapse of "New Order" also represented a transitional enclave. As later part in this study shows, deteriorating economic crisis, mounting social grievances, and faltering elite relations had occupied Suharto's major concern and precipitated his fall. Under such circumstance the Internet space was embedded in the political change and had to some extent accelerated that change.

Meanwhile, where substantial political transition is absent, as in the cases of Malaysia and Singapore, the formation of democratic enclave results principally from the outcome of intra-elite struggles. Elite cohesion has been seen by many scholars as the key to resist democratic change and perpetuate authoritarian rule (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Case 2002). On this score, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) famously concluded that "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself". More specifically, it is believed that maintaining elite unity is crucial to the strength of party organizations and thus the state capacity to withstand internal and external pressures (Brownlee 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010; Slater 2010). Here we argue that elite disunity and the upshot of elite struggle are also crucial to the formation of democratic enclaves. First, competing elite groups always seek to promote specific political value and power structure. The dominant faction in such struggle is decisive in shaping the prevailing pattern of political discourse and institutional design. For instance, Michael Connors (2009: 357) observed how different regime framers in Thailand, namely the statist, liberal, and plutocratic, have alternately ascended in power, "advancing different

models of social order, economics and politics". In this sense, the outcome of elite politics would greatly affect the prospect of independent democratic institution. Second, serious fractures among top-level elites often lead to the weakening of state repressive capacity and end up with concessions that may bring about liberalizing effects. More importantly, elite defection and changing alignment provide political openings for the emergence of reform-oriented social movements (Tarrow 1998), which, though may not be sufficient to fulfill democratization, could facilitate the formation of democratic space as rebelling elites and mobilized social groups seek channels to develop their course. In this way, the split between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia witnessed the thriving *reformasi* movements and "a boom in online dissent" (George 2007: 900). By contrast, opportunities for politicizing social spaces are in scarcity in Singapore where elite interactions "have never been less than tightly cohesive" (Case 2002: 87).

While the elite perspective may explain the top-level decision on forming an autonomous space, what substantiate this space with democratic properties, thus making it a democratic enclave, are the political actors and their activities under this space. In the case of Internet space, these actors include netizen communities, civil society organizations, and the opposition forces. The role of mass public, or civil society, in effecting democratic transition has been acknowledged by a number of studies (e.g. Diamond 1999; Howard 2003). When political opportunities occur, it is the strength and willingness of civil society and opposition force that determine whether and how such opportunities are exploited. Therefore, the formation of democratic enclave should also be analysed through the oppositional, societal perspective. In fact, McChesney in 1998 (in Rodan 2003: 504) has pointed out that the democratic impact of new electronic media hinges on the existence of organized political force. This study, therefore, underlines both elite and society perspectives to interpret the success and failure of democratic enclave formation in the cyberspace. It in fact follows Brownlee's (2007: 202) argument that "opportunities […] to redistribute power and democratize a regime are not caused by mass protest alone, but rather by the intersection of elite defections and opposition activism".

Prior to our discussion on Southeast Asian cases, however, it is noteworthy that the success of democratic enclave formation per se may not necessarily lead to a process of democratization in the overall political regime. China's village-level elections, having been institutionalized for more than twenty years, hardly bear any fruit at the national level and remain even far from achieving grassroots democratization (O'Brien and Han 2009). Thus the success/ failure of democratic enclave should be distinguished from the democratic effect such enclave generates, though the two are not

unrelated. The final part of this paper analyses the diverging consequences of Internet politics in the selected cases.

Internet Space in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore

The criteria developed above are adopted here to assess whether the Internet space in the selected countries succeeded in forming itself a democratic enclave. Political regimes of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in the given periods had discernible traits of authoritarianism (see Thompson 1993). One of the major political features of "New Order" Indonesia was the enormous personal authority of Suharto who was granted the power to make all key political appointments including posts in the cabinet, senior ranks of the military as well as top levels of the judiciary (Rosser 2002). Meanwhile, he also had "ultimate power to override all official decisions and policy making" (Mackie and MacIntyre 1994: 19), thus centralizing the executive apparatus into personal hands. Social quiescence was achieved through corporatist strategies as well as coercive and repressive actions (Case 2002: 46). For instance, the mass media were restricted by a dual-permission scheme: the Permit to Publish from the Department of Information and the Permit to Print from the military security authority, which collectively ensured media's pro-government bias (Hill 2007). All these elements made the "New Order", at best, a "pseudo-democracy" (Case 2002), if not a personal dictatorship (Liddle 1985). Malaysia and Singapore, by contrast, had even more resilient authoritarianism featured by de facto single-party systems. While the ruling coalition in Malaysia "has proven invincible in the stilted contest of electoral politics" (Brownlee 2007: 5) at least until the 2008 national election, the PAP in Singapore has always held over 90 per cent of parliamentary seats since late-1960s. The neutrality of traditional media in both countries is crippled as these media are either operated directly by government agencies or owned by coalition parties and crony companies (Rodan 2004). Considering the authoritarian nature and the imbalanced state-society relations in these countries, therefore, it would be by no means surprising if governments in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore brought the new social space on the Internet under their strict control.

However, political strategies towards the Internet space in these countries showed divergent outcomes. The "New Order" leaders in Indonesia were not unaware of the political challenge posed by the Internet space, especially facing the mounting social unrest amid economic crisis. Implicitly referring to the new information technologies, President Suharto in a 1997 speech had warned that "the free flow of global information […] enables

people to receive foreign values that can erode their sense of nationalism" (*Chicago Tribune* 1997). But such warning was neither seriously nor successfully transferred into concrete actions. Despite a special Internet unit being built in 1995 by the armed force to investigate inaccurate information on the cyberspace, there was no report of Internet users or groups being harassed during the "New Order" (Hill and Sen 2005). The then Information Minister, Alwi Dahlan, also admitted that the ministry at that time was mainly focusing on the traditional media while it could not and did not contain online information flows.[2] If the Internet space's independency in the "New Order" was attributed to government's inability to control, similar outcome in Malaysia was derived from government's initiative to leave that space open. In 1996, one year after the commencement of Multimedia Super Corridor project, the Malaysian government declared a 10-point Bill of Guarantees which included the promise of no-censorship on the Internet. From that time to the historic elections in 2008, the ruling coalition had in general kept its words on Internet freedom. During this period Malaysian netizens and bloggers suffered little if any repressive action. Except for a rare incident in 2003 when police raided *Malaysiakini's* headquarter, the leading independent online media were seldom harassed by the government, thus successfully maintaining their critical and unbiased position.[3]

It is after 2008 – when the ruling coalition underwent an unprecedented electoral setback depriving it of its two-thirds parliamentary majority – that the government has broken its previous promise by adopting more coercive actions (Liu 2011). The first two cases that saw Malaysian netizens charged under the Sedition Act – in these cases Raja Petra and Syed Akbar Ali – were only filed in May 2008, almost two months after the general election.[4] Therefore, in Indonesia in a short period (roughly from 1994 to 1998) and in Malaysia in a much longer period (roughly from 1992 to 2008)[5] the Internet space remained free from political control and free from its authoritarian contexts. The story of Singapore is on the contrary, however. Since 1990s the Singaporean government has resorted to restrictive methods to bring the Internet space under control (Rodan 1998; Gomez 2002; Rodan 2004; Lee 2005; Lee and Kan 2009; Lee 2010). While online surveillance and selective website blocking are practiced and in fact pioneered ahead of any other Asian countries, the extension of legal framework governing offline

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2   Interview, Alwi Dahlan, 16 June 2011.
3   Interview, Steven Gan, 7 April 2011.
4   Interview, Syed Akbar Ali, 5 April 2011.
5   In 1994 REDNET became the first commercial Internet Service Provider in Indonesia, while in 1992 JARING offered Internet service in Malaysia. Thus 1994 and 1992 are seen as the start of Internet popularization in both these countries.

political contention to cover the online space has seen a number of netizens sentenced for their online posts (Lee and Kan 2009) and political websites (content providers) disciplined by registration schemes (Rodan 2004). According to Terence Lee (2010), these measures have created in the Singaporean online space a "culture of self-censorship". Although bans on online electioneering were substantially lifted ahead of the 2011 election, ostensibly as a strategic move to garner public support, the government control on the Internet space is continued. For instance, the government in early 2011 has "gazetted" one of the major socio-political blog sites, *The Online Citizen*, as a political association and brought it under rules that govern other political organizations such as political parties (*The Economist* 2011).

While the government approaches in controlling the Internet have greatly varied in Singapore, Malaysia, and the "New Order" Indonesia, two additional aspects further determined the success and failure of democratic enclave formation on the cyberspace. The first aspect refers to the role of online media and journalism. In the "New Order" Indonesia, new Internet technologies such as blog and social networking site were not available yet, but some email lists had performed as alternative information sources. For example, the *apakabar* email list, originally created in early 1990s for overseas Indonesian students, grew into one of the most significant sources of information for scholars and students both inside and outside Indonesia. It had become a site for extremely open and democratic debates on Indonesia, with readership involving more and more Indonesians in the homeland (Hill and Sen 2005). The information and news disseminated by such email groups – such as the list of assets of the Suharto and Habibie families and their cronies – were politically crucial since they had strengthened public conviction that it was time for Suharto's New Order to end (Tedjabayu 1999). In Malaysia the open Internet space provides Malaysian journalists and analysts an important opportunity to avoid state censorship and offer public alternative, unbiased news information. Probably the best example is the independent news website – *Malaysiakini* – created in 1999 by two veteran journalists. What distinguish it from mainstream media, in fact, are the stories it covers, the stories that traditional media "carelessly" or deliberately overlooks or even conceals. The political role of independent news sites, such as *Malaysiakini*, *The Malaysian Insider*, *Merdeka Review* and *The Nut Graph*, has been acknowledged by a number of studies (Chin 2003; George 2007; Azizuddin Sani 2009; Gomez and Chang 2010). But it should be noticed that two factors contribute to the independence and prominence of online media. One is the fact that prior to the 2008 elections the government made little attempt to manipulate or interfere with online journalism. This is best

shown in the *Malaysiakini*'s case, which experienced occasional police investigations but none of them turned to be serious and intimidating.[6]

Another factor lies in some online media's efforts to steer away from "quick, sensationalist reporting prone to inaccuracies" and to establish "a professional reputation for insightful, fair and accurate reporting" as *The Nut Graph* as well as *Malaysiakini* is aiming to (Steele 2009; Surin 2010: 207). These factors not only increased online media's independence, but also their reliability and accountability perceived by the public. During the 2008 election period, there were so many visitors on *Malaysiakini* that on polling day the site even broke down for overloaded (Azizuddin Sani 2009: 154). In Singapore over the past decade has also developed an array of independent news websites that clearly show anti-government stance. But their independence and importance are often weakened by various government restrictions included in, for example, the Class License scheme, the Parliamentary Elections Act and the Political Donations Act. Prior to the "gazetting" of *Online Citizen* mentioned above, *Sintercom*, a prominent site on online citizen journalism, had been forced to register as a political site, which eventually led to the voluntary closedown of that website in 2001 (Lee and Kan 2009). It is also noteworthy that unlike its Malaysian counterparts run by professional media practitioners, news website such as the *Online Citizen* is "self-style news portal that is run by voluntary editors and writers" (Gomez and Chang 2010). In addition, the political role of online media is further moderated as the government introduced a "cooling day" policy in which only mainstream media are allowed to broadcast election-related information on that day (Ortmann 2011). Indicating the still disadvantageous position of online media, a Black Box survey found that Singaporeans preferred traditional media (46 per cent) to the Internet (37 per cent) as the most reliable information source on election.

The second aspect highlights the connection between online contentions and offline politics. Both "New Order" Indonesia and Malaysia saw online contentions effectively translated or integrated into offline social movements. In the former case, the information-sharing on the cyberspace provided platform for mutual-trust and coordination among students, activists and politicians. As Peter Eng noted shortly before Suharto's resignation,

> with anti-government street protests rocking Indonesia, opposition parties, students, journalists, and non-governmental groups have been busy posting news and spreading their views on the most important Indonesia-related list, INDONESIA-L (*apakabar*) (Eng 1998).

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6   Interview, Steven Gan, 7 April 2011.

Malaysia witnessed even greater connection between online and offline contentious politics. Prominent independent online media, especially the *Malaysiakini*, had their origins deeply embedded in the *reformasi* movements starting in 1998 (Nain 2002; Chin 2003). Other websites that were clearly pro-Anwar and *reformasi*-based also proliferated shortly after Anwar was detained. Some estimated that the number of *reformasi* websites ranged from 40 to 50, which was considerable in quantity given the relatively low Internet penetration rate at that time (Gomez and Chang 2010). As Brown argued (2005: 46), "in the aftermath of Anwar's sacking, the Internet as a political medium and as the medium of *reformasi* became virtually synonymous". In the lead-up to the 2008 elections, several mass demonstrations, including the "walk of justice" by Malaysian lawyers, the HINDRAF rally advocating minority rights, and the Bersih movement calling for clean and free election, were "to a large extent organized via and amplified by new media such as YouTube, Malaysiakini; blogs, […] and the independent news portal" (Ufen 2009: 616). Moreover, online popularity was even translated into offline electoral gains, as at least five opposition coalition bloggers were elected as parliamentary members (Azizuddin Sani 2009; Liu 2011). By contrast, connections between online and offline contentious politics have not been fully developed in Singapore. A study by Cherian George (2005) found that contentious websites in Singapore were less developed, organized and impactful than those in Malaysia. Even though in a strategic move to garner electoral support the PAP has loosened many restrictions on online political campaign ahead of the 2011 election (Ortmann 2011), massive social movements comparable to those in Malaysia remain unseen and unlikely. Meanwhile, the Singaporean government is introducing new measures to limit the linkage between cyberspace and real-life social space. Besides the "gazetting" of *Online Citizen*, the government passed the Public Order Act in 2009 which granted the government authority to disperse protests even if only an individual is involved (Ortmann 2011).

Based on assessment above, it is reasonable to argue that while Internet space in Malaysia and "New Order" Indonesia has been generally free and uncensored, thus forming a democratic enclave in the authoritarian contexts, it has not been successfully developed in Singapore. The online space in the latter is still subject to authoritarian controls and various kinds of restriction, although recent developments may have created a more assertive online community. The next section analyses main factors underlying the differences in three country-cases.

Explaining the Success and Failure of Democratic Enclave

To some extent, the creation of democratic enclave is firstly derived from strategic decisions made by top-level elites. "If an authoritarian regime does not tacitly accept or even back the existence of a democratic enclave", as Gilley (2010: 399) argued, "then it will almost certainly fail". Elite relations and struggles are therefore important in the sense that public policies always result from the values, interests, and preferences of governing elites (Dye 2001). In Malaysia, although the BN had successfully retained its parliamentary hegemony since 1969, maintaining elite unity had become more difficult since 1980s as economic recession reduced the patronage that BN had at its disposal (Crouch 1996). Consequently, Malaysian politics in the late 1980s witnessed the intra-UMNO division between "Team A" and "Team B" and the formation of Semangat' 46 led by the defection (Hwang 2002). This grievous elite split, leading to the incumbent's poor electoral performance in 1990, provided opportunities for democratic space in two ways. Firstly, if "strong social roots that gave them (UMNO) solid bases of electoral support" (Crouch 1996: 240) were workable in previous decades, the ruling coalition in 1990s was compelled to provide more material, substantial benefits for the voting masses. Perhaps the most effective way to re-consolidate ballots and re-unify elites was a new grand economic strategy, replacing the expiring NEP (ended in 1990), that could provide stimuli for both economic rebounds and increased patronage. The resulting macro program, dubbed *Vision 2020* by Dr. Mahathir, encompassed a series of major infrastructural projects, such as the construction of Penang Bridge and a Formula One circuit.

The largest and most significant among these was the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), based on the model of Silicon Valley and envisaged to "leapfrog available information infrastructure" for Malaysians and to present a "gift to the world" (Khoo 2003: 31-33). Ostensibly the MSC, together with the "Bill of Guarantee" that promised no-censorship, was formulated to attract foreign investment, but the motivation of such grandiose project was deeply embedded in the political crisis of elite disunity. Moreover, the upshot of elite struggle determined the interests and preferences of Malaysian government in 1990s. On this score, Crouch (1993: 154) recounted that "Razaleigh's Semangat' 46 represented those, especially small and medium Malay business, who wanted to continue the state-centered policies of the NEP, while Mahathir's UMNO, supported by bigger business interests, was more inclined toward privatization, deregulation and internationalization". This also explained the rationale underlying the "Bill of Guarantee" which

contained, in addition to Internet freedom, other provisions featuring liberalization and deregulation. Meanwhile, another severe elite split in 1998, between Mahathir and Anwar, was equally significant not for the creation of an autonomous space, but for filling that space with democratic forces. The strength of civil society that exploited the democratic online space will be discussed later. In comparison, the structural opportunities from elite disunity in Malaysia are, to a large extent, absent in Singapore. Since late 1960s the PAP has never suffered any serious elite split as its Malaysian counterpart did (Case 2002). The absence of elite split, however, is not tantamount to the absence of internal elite struggle, but such struggle within the PAP has produced outcome different from that within the BN. Most importantly, such struggle in Singapore was not fought between different economic and political interests, but between different approaches to buttress the PAP hegemony.

In mid-1980s several programs of political reform, such as the establishment of Feedback Unit and introduction of Town Councils, were implemented, led by Lee Kuan Yew's apparent successor, Goh Chok Tong, with the perception that by opening up politics and involving wider public participation the PAP would win greater support from the middle class (Rodan 1993). However, as the national election in 1991 saw continuous decline in PAP's vote-share and an increase in opposition's parliamentary seats (Shee 1992), conservative power within the ruling party, represented by deputy Prime Ministers Lee Hsien Loong and Ong Teng Cheong, began to question the effectiveness of the "soft" approach. The outcome of such contention was that after the 1991 election Goh's government returned to a "hardening" approach, seen in the modified film censorship and suspension of some critical publication, "seemingly in an attempt to demonstrate that the PAP has not 'gone soft'" (Rodan 1993: 99). As a result, while elite split in Malaysia offered some liberalizing opportunities in 1990s, the struggle in Singapore witnessed a reversed wind.

On the other hand, while elite struggles shaped the conditions for an autonomous space, the democraticness of this space has to be determined by political actors who actively utilize such space. In this sense, the strength of civil society agents would affect the contentiousness of online politics since these agents not only create the volume of online contention, but also connect online activities with offline ones. As George (2005: 912) observed, "Malaysia has an appreciably broader political society and thicker civil society than Singapore". The *reformasi* movements in Malaysia have attracted and nurtured an unprecedented range of political actors including political parties, NGOs, trade unions, students, women, and other activists (Weiss 2006). More importantly, the coalition capital has been greatly increased, making

Malaysian civil society more coordinated and networked. The best example is the fusion of the movements into Parti Keadilan (Justice Party) which ultimately brokered the formation of Barisan Alternatif (BA) (Weiss 2006), the opposition coalition that broke BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2008. Meanwhile, civil society in Singapore is far less contentious. A survey in 2000 found that civil society in Singapore tended to collaborate with and support, rather than to oppose, the government. When asked to describe their relationship with the government, 55.9 per cent and 40.2 per cent of respondents (people in civil society organizations) chose the descriptions of "collaborate with government" and "support direction of government" respectively, while only 1 per cent described the relationship as "oppose government" (in Koh and Ooi 2004: 177). The different strength of civil society agents in Malaysia and Singapore has impacted the connection between online and offline politics, as discussed in previous section. Many prominent contentious websites in Malaysia have strong offline political entities or networks. For example, the website *Harakah Daily* is run by one of the largest opposition parties, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and is established on the offline print media, the tabloid *Harakah*, while *Aliran* is derived from the synonymous movement advocating human rights since 1970s and also associated with an offline media, the *Aliran Monthly*[7] (George 2005: 912-913). In contrast, independent news sites in Singapore lack such offline connections. This may further weaken the credibility of online media. In fact, *Media Monitors* (2010) found in a recent survey that Malaysian respondents were in general more positive in the watchdog role of social media than Singaporeans were.

As previously discussed, the Internet space in "New Order" Indonesia, unlike that in Malaysia and Singapore, was embedded in the process of democratic transition. Under such circumstance, the emergence of democratic enclave on the cyberspace was less surprising as the authoritarian context was to undergo dramatic change. In such case of transitional enclave, it is difficult to calculate the extent to which elite struggles and civil society strength have independently contributed to the formation of democratic enclave, since these variables were also essential for promoting democratization in the overarching political system. But in one aspect elite disunity may have contributed to the opening up of Internet space. William Case (2002: 40) has pointed out the factional conflicts existing in the "New Order" bureaucracy. On the one hand, the Ministry of Information was in charge of monitoring the content on the Internet and it was always vigilant about

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7   The *Aliran* organization labelled *Aliran Monthly* as "Malaysia's leading independent English-language news magazine", see <http://aliran.com/about-us>.

digital threats. On the other hand, however, the Minister of Research and Technology was Habibie, who was far more powerful and influential. As an unapologetic technophile, he passionately promoted the development of information technologies in the belief that these could rapidly transform Indonesia into a modernized economy (Hill and Sen 2005: 34). The ambiguous responsibility over the Internet inevitably weakened each department's capacity to control the cyberspace.

What Did Democratic Enclave Bring about?

This paper analyses the creation and failure of democratic enclave on the cyberspace in "New Order" Indonesia (transitional enclave), Malaysia (consolidated enclave), and Singapore (an unsuccessful case). It argues that elite conflict and the strength of offline civil society are the major factors that determine the democraticness of Internet space. But after all, what political impact did the success and failure of democratic enclave bring about? As mentioned earlier, the success of democratic enclave creation per se may not necessarily trigger a process of democratization in the overall political regime. However, in each of the three country-cases, certain political impact could still be observed.

In Indonesia, the political impact of Internet space was mixed. On the one hand, the independent and uncontrolled cyberspace had enabled free information flows which circumvented government monopoly on information and facilitated mobilization of intellectuals, students, and activists. In an often-cited case, the Internet also helped the Democratic People's Party (Partai Rakyat Demokratik, PRD), a primarily student-based party, to sustain communication and persist in challenging the Suharto regime, notwithstanding government crackdown on PRD and continuing detention of its leadership (Lim 2002; Hill 2003). Although it might be overestimated to claim that the "Indonesia revolt was Net driven" (Marcus 1998), the political role of Internet in precipitating the fall of "New Order" should not be underestimated either. On the other hand, when political transition was procedurally fulfilled with the 1999 election, the role of Internet space in consolidating the new democracy became ambiguous. As oligarchic elites reorganized power under the new democratic format (Robison and Hadiz 2004), they have been successfully preventing "mass politics from gaining an organizational foothold on power" (Boudreau 2009: 237). The networking between online and offline politics witnessed in the final days of "New Order" has been weakened after the transition period. For example, two of the most prominent events involving online contentious politics in post-Suharto period are the Prita case and the Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi

Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) case.[8] Both cases caused massive protests online and demonstrations offline. The latter case even saw a Facebook group created to support the KPK mobilizing one million supporters online (Kimura 2011). However, both cases were organized spontaneously by ordinary citizens and netizens without any involvement of political parties and well-known NGOs, thus lacking institutional strength and long-term impact.[9] Moreover, Internet freedom in Indonesia has been declining in recent years, with restrictive laws promulgated and website blocking implemented. The 2011 report of "Freedom on the Net" (Freedom House 2011) scored Indonesia 46, a status of only "partly free". Therefore, the transitional enclave in Indonesia played little role of promoting further democratic consolidation. One of the major reasons is that traditional elites have successfully re-claimed political power and insulated them from public participation, thus weakening the connection between online and offline politics.

By contrast, the Internet space as a democratic enclave in Malaysia has been more consolidated. Independent online media have gained reputation, while the networking among online communities, offline organizations, and political parties has been well developed. The 2008 general election in which the ruling coalition lost its two-thirds majority in parliament was often interpreted as the outcome of effective Internet campaign (Azizuddin Sani 2009; Case 2009; Weiss 2009). Although a substantial political change has not yet occurred, which would mean the turnover of incumbent government and more institutionalized democratic rule, political uncertainty and the status of opposition vis-à-vis the ruling coalition have indeed increased. Such developments, as Levitsky and Way (2010) suggested, may transform Malaysia from "competitive authoritarianism" to higher categories of democracy. Meanwhile, due to the consolidated status of online democratic enclave, it would be difficult for Malaysian government to clamp down on Internet freedom. Despite increasing cases of bloggers being prosecuted – for example the editor of *Malaysia Today*, Raja Petra – systemic efforts to regulate the cyberspace always backfired because of the strong, coordinated resistance from online and offline communities. For instance, it was reported in 2009 that the Malaysian government was looking into the feasibility of installing an Internet filter to block "undesirable websites" – a plan resembling the "Green Dam" project in China. However, this reported move received fierce criticism from both civil rights groups and opposition parties which

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8   The former case saw a woman, Prita Mulyasari, losing civil defamation suit for her online complaint about the Omni International Hospital; the latter case involved conflict between KPK and the National Police, popularly known as the battle of the "gecko versus the crocodile".
9   Interview, Rapin Mudiardjo, 10 June 2011; interview, Juni Soehardjo, 14 June 2011.

accused the government of breaching its 1996 guarantees on Internet free-
dom. Shortly after that, Prime Minister Najib had to quench the fire and
stated that the government would not censor the Internet (Chandranayagam
2009).

The unsuccessful case in Singapore showed a reversed trajectory. The
PAP strategically lifted some restrictions on Internet campaign prior to the
2011 elections. This move may have led to the better performance of oppo-
sition parties, which now won six seats in the 87-member parliament, in-
cluding winning a Group Representation Constituency (GRC) (Ortmann
2011). But given the fact that the PAP still holds 93 per cent of total seats
and around 60 per cent of popular votes, the level of political uncertainty
remains low. Meanwhile, the political impact of Internet space in Singapore
is further constrained by a number of factors: independent online media
have not fully developed; effective coalition building between online and
offline organizations remains under-constructed; and the government does
by no means intend to leave the Internet space uncontrolled, as the "gazat-
ting" of *Online Citizen* indicated. In fact, all these factors are linked to, or
reflecting, the failure of enclave creation on the cyberspace. Such failure
gives the government larger space for manipulation. While the Malaysian
government found its Internet-control plans difficult to materialize, its Sin-
gaporean counterpart has put into force the Public Order Act and "cooling
day" policy with relatively less obstacles.

In conclusion, the perspective on democratic enclave enables us to bet-
ter understand the divergent political effects that the Internet space has
brought about in different countries, although the existence of such enclave
does not necessarily give rise to democratic change in political regime. Tran-
sitional enclave is closely associated with the process of political transition;
therefore its role on generating political change is often highlighted. But in
such case the democratic space on the Internet may not be consolidated,
thus its further democratic impacts seriously diminished. What happened in
Arab countries – where the new information technologies facilitated the
massive democratic movements but further political transformation stagnat-
ed – may also follow this trajectory. Once a democratic enclave is consoli-
dated, as the Internet space in Malaysia shows, the government would be
difficult to take it back. Even if it has not been able to generate a nation-
wide transition, it has greatly increased the political uncertainty and in-
creased the odds of democratization.

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