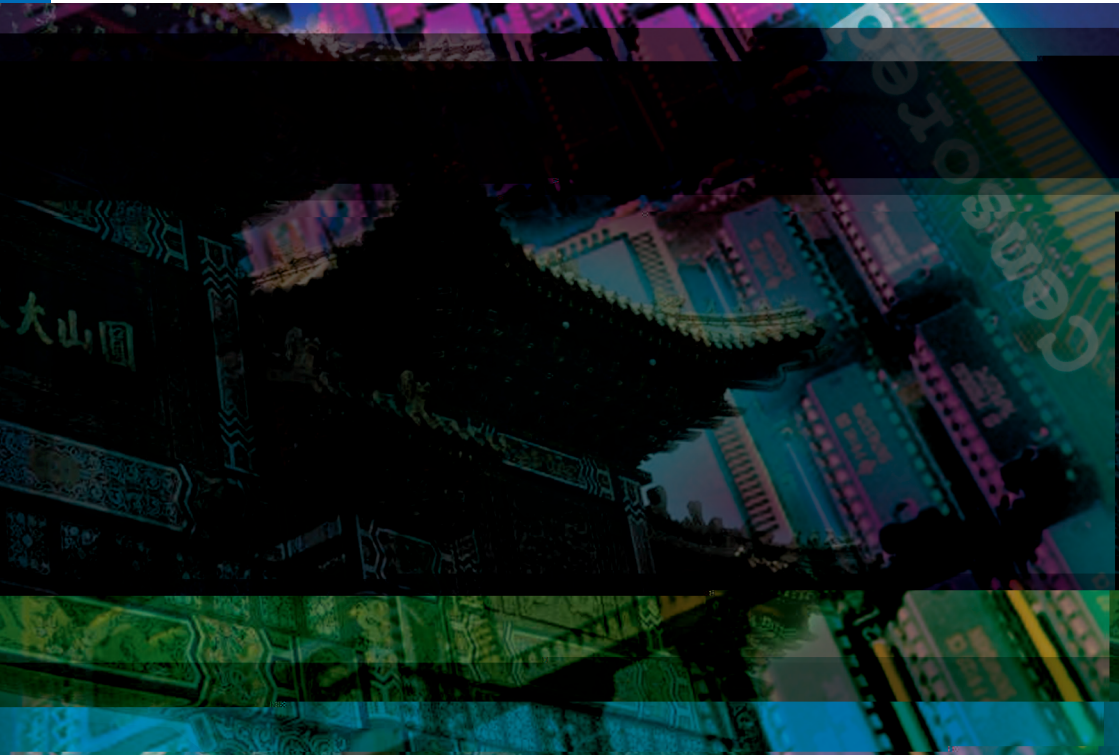


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## Liberales Institut

James Gomez

# Between Freedom and Censorship. Asian Political Parties in Cyberspace



*Occasional Paper* 10

Imprint:

Published by  
The Liberal Institute of the  
Friedrich Naumann Foundation  
Truman-Haus  
Karl-Marx-Str. 2  
D-14482 Potsdam

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[www.libinst.de](http://www.libinst.de)

Production  
COMDOK GmbH  
Office Berlin  
Reinhardtstr. 16  
D-10117 Berlin

Printed by  
ESM Satz und Grafik GmbH  
Wilhelminenhofstr. 83-85  
D-12459 Berlin

Second Edition 2005

# Between Freedom and Censorship: Asian Political Parties in Cyberspace

James Gomez

This paper was presented at the Liberal Institute's „The Fate of Liberty – Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the Age of Global Crime and Terror“ conference in Potsdam, Germany, 7-19 September 2004. Earlier drafts were presented at the 13th AMIC Annual Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, 1-3 July 2004, and the International Conference on Asian Media Research in Singapore, 9-10 September 2004.

*Abstract:*

*The use of the internet by Asian political parties to interact with and inform the public, to generate alternative news, and as tools during election campaigns are shaping the nature of political party communication in the region. Before the arrival of the internet, political parties, especially those in opposition and in countries that do not have a free media environment relied on house to house visits, party publications, public forums and rallies to get the word out. The internet now provides political parties an additional medium in the range of tools used for party communications. This paper undertakes a preliminary review of the diverse internet and political party landscape in Asia. Given the differences in the level of freedom for political expression and political culture in the region, the paper argues that at present times the communication arena where most parties tread lies between full freedom of expression and strict censorship.*

## **Introduction**

In 1995, a small number of Japanese parliamentary candidates set up websites to promote their platforms for the Upper House elections. Although the then-Ministry of Home Affairs was successful in getting the candidates to remove them because they were concerned about election campaigning on individual politicians' websites, the issue resurfaced in 1996. The October 1996 Lower House election saw about 40 candidates construct websites for their election campaign, and by this time all the major political parties had established websites as well. By the time of the 1998 Upper House election, the Ministry had made clear what features on websites constituted campaign activities, so parties placed things like candidate lists on their sites only during the official campaign period. Although opposition parties and their candidates took a positive view of the use of the internet for political campaigns, the POEL strictures still constrained them from actively campaigning throughout the official campaign activities period (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003a, pp166-168). The growing online activity in 2001 led the government to appoint a council in 2002 to review e-campaign laws (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003b, p.118).

In Singapore, the first conflict between the People's Action Party (PAP) government and opposition parties over the use of the internet took place when two opposition parties during the 1997 general elections had to take down information and pictures of their candidates from these sites because they were told by government authorities that electioneering on the internet was prohibited (Rodan,

1998, p.26). The National Solidarity Party (NSP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) started with web-based discussion boards and mail list discussion groups even before the presence of rules governing politics and elections on the internet. In the case of the SDP, its announcements were published via the Singaporeans For Democracy website ([www.sdfonline.org](http://www.sdfonline.org)). Such practices were eventually declared legal in 2001, albeit with specific conditions. When opposition parties began to go online during election times, the internet in Singapore came under regulation via the Parliamentary [Election Advertising] Act (Singapore Statutes Online, 2004).

In Indonesia, the party of former president Megawati Sukarno, PDI Perjuangan, set up a homepage in 1996 ([www.megaforpresident.org/default\\_a.html](http://www.megaforpresident.org/default_a.html), website accessed 1 December 2004) about her and her party to raise public awareness and sympathy, in opposition to the then-ruling Golkar party (Wirantaprawira 1998, quoted in Lim, 2003, p.123). The Indonesian Communist Party also appeared on the internet and no government official could restrict it, in spite of the party itself being banned from public life for the last thirty years (Lim, 2003, pp122-123). Political parties in Indonesia, like many others in Asia, were gradually discovering the communication capacities of the internet and its uses, and were taking opportunities to capitalize on its potential. Even when not all opportunities could be grasped, the mere fact of simply posting on the internet could not be stopped, as in the case of the small Democratic People's Party in Indonesia. That party's actions of maintaining their high profile on the Net and openly challenging the government helped in some ways to contribute to the downfall of the Suharto regime (Lim, 2003, p.123).

In countries where there is a controlled press, the internet offers political parties, especially those in opposition, an opportunity to use their website to put out alternative news. Most often political parties not in power and suffering a disadvantage at the hands of mainstream media try to maximise outreach opportunities both during elections and non-election times. In Asia when political parties began to go online between the mid to late 1990s, many did so in the absence of specific legislation or inability for some states to police online communications. But as more and more political parties went online and began to communicate using the internet, it prompted the introduction of laws related to online electioneering (see also Gomez, 2004). The cases of Singapore and Japan, show how ruling parties in power reacted to opposition or competing parties taking onto the internet. Such reaction took place in countries where there is a dominant ruling force and strict censorship over alternative political reportage in the mainstream media. The situation is different in other countries. In the case of Indonesia, the inability of the Suharto regime to police the Net eventually contributed to the fall of the regime.

The use of the internet by Asian political parties to interact with and inform the public, to act as sources of alternative news, and as tools during election campaigns are shaping the nature of political party communication in the region. Before the arrival of the internet, political parties, especially those in the opposition and in countries that do not have a free media environment relied on house to house visits, party publications, public forums and rallies to get the word out. The internet now provides all political parties in the region an additional medium for communication which has been adopted as part of the plethora of communication tools political parties now use. Given that the region is a diverse one, how political parties use the internet has also been equally varied depending on the level of freedoms for political expression in a said country. Political party communication is also affected by how governments formulate rules for online campaigning, use the internet to put out elections results online and introduce computerised or electronic voting. Additionally a certain measure of political culture also impacts how the internet is deployed by political parties.

This paper undertakes a preliminary review of the internet and political party landscape in Asia. Given the differences in the level of freedom for political expression and political culture in the region, the paper argues that at present times the communication arena where most parties tread lies between full freedom of expression and strict censorship.

## Uploading party information online

Often the main reason why political parties go online is to overcome restriction of access to mainstream media controlled by the ruling party or to supplement existing modes of outreach. Often the political party websites provide basic information about the party: its history, manifestos, and information on its officials.

For instance, the website of the Liberal Party of the Philippines contains photos and profiles of most members in its top leadership, by way of its National Political Council and National Standing Commissions ([www.liberalparty.ph/partystructure.htm](http://www.liberalparty.ph/partystructure.htm), website accessed 1 December 2004). India's Bharatiya Janata Party website has extensive pages on its party's history and founder, and stands out with its use of multi-colored fonts and photos of major figures in party history ([www.bjp.org/history/history.html](http://www.bjp.org/history/history.html), website accessed 1 December 2004). The Singapore's Workers' Party has versions of its site in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. It reflects the country's policy of four official languages, though the English-language version is the most well-developed ([www.wp.org.sg](http://www.wp.org.sg), website accessed 1 December 2004).

In Malaysia, the opposition party Democratic Action Party (DAP) has a members' area where visitors to the website can sign in and can check their email when they are traveling ([www.dapmalaysia.org/english](http://www.dapmalaysia.org/english), website accessed 7 December 2004). Members' areas within political party websites are increasingly a growing feature on more advanced sites. The website of Indonesia's Partai Rakyat Demokratik (People's Democratic Party) has an interesting feature – not only is it one of the few Indonesian party sites with an English version, its manifesto is available in four languages: English, Bahasa, Dutch and Spanish ([www.xs4all.nl/~peace/pubeng/mov/mov.html](http://www.xs4all.nl/~peace/pubeng/mov/mov.html), website accessed 1 December 2004). In Cambodia, the website of the Sam Rainsy Party showcases a range of information, including party activities, the history of its founder Sam Rainsy, and commune development as well as promoting the status of women. It also contains publications like the *Light of the Khmer Nations Bulletin* and the party's *Bulletin of Information* which is only obtainable online, and is regularly updated (Men, 2004, p.613; [www.samrainsyparty.org](http://www.samrainsyparty.org), website accessed 1 December 2004).

Even in countries like China, Vietnam and Laos which are in reality still Communist-party states, the ruling Communist parties have also gone online. The Chinese Communist Party website is fully in Chinese, so it may deter non-Chinese readers. Nevertheless, it contains a whole plethora of information, ranging from basic party information and national news, to an online forum and movie reviews. It is notable that the forum, which is given a prominent space on the home/index page, has non-political posts. One, for example, is from a man writing about how he searched for and found a special song to dedicate to his wife on their 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary ([www.ccponline.net](http://www.ccponline.net), website accessed 13 December 2004). Such non-political posts are not unusual, given that critical political postings are discouraged through the Chinese government's tight controls on other internet chat rooms and bulletin boards, and the renewed campaign to shut down unauthorized internet cafés (Associated Press, 27 June 2004).

The English-language version of the Communist Party of Vietnam provides national and party-related news, press releases, interviews, and information on Communist ideology and key figures in Communism's history. Some news items are sourced from other party organs. There are news item on talks of Vietnam joining the World Trade Organisation, a visit to the United States by government officials to promote US-Vietnam relations, and the opening of the first direct air route from the US to Vietnam. The news content on this site express an overarching aim of telling the world, that the country under the Communist regime is progressing well. Among other features, it also has sections on Vietnamese culture, overseas Vietna-

mese, social affairs and economic issues, all notable for being done in the manner of news reports ([www.cpv.org.vn](http://www.cpv.org.vn), website accessed 1 December 2004).

In Laos, the governing Communist party has no principle website, but has a series of government websites geared towards projecting a certain positive image of the regime. They represent various government and government-related ministries, like the „Lao PDR Embassy to the USA“, „Lao Embassy in Bangkok“, and the Ministry of Commerce websites. The sites contain lists of key members of the government and National Assembly, general information about Laos, and also provides links to the online version of an English-language newspaper, the Vientiane Times ([www.laoembassy.com](http://www.laoembassy.com), website accessed 14 December 2004).

Similar to the Laos situation, North Korea and Myanmar (Burma), both military dictatorships, have government websites that project propaganda to the outside world. The North Korean government website is a meandering journey through pages of self-glorification, though it also provides brief and factual information about the country's geography and information for tourists ([www.korea-dpr.com](http://www.korea-dpr.com), website accessed 8 December 2004). Although the Workers' Party of North Korea is the de facto political force, a separate website does not exist like in the case of China and Vietnam. Instead – in the case of Laos and North Korea – because the ruling parties have become synonymous with the state and government, the government website is the one that the party uses to have an online presence. In the Myanmar case, the current regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) uses the Union of Myanmar website ([www.myanmar.com](http://www.myanmar.com)) to counter accusations against it. For example, through emails to reporters, the government attempted to portray a heated exchange between it and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as a peaceful dialogue. It is thus a means by which the regime can misinform the public (Hachigian, 2002, pp 46–47).

Alternatives to the Myanmar government website exist, most notably in the form of that of the opposition government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). It maintains a site which contains press releases and news from a variety of sources about the situation in the country and issues surrounding the Burmese diaspora. Its activities include using the website to reach out to fellow parliamentarians all over the world to call for the convening of parliament in Burma. This „Global Parliamentary Solidarity Campaign“ received over 2,000 signatures from parliamentarians all over the world, with support from representative bodies like the International Parliamentary Union, in their call for elected MPs and for democratic changes in Burma (Zaw, 2004, pp534, 545–546). The NCGUB is comprised of elected Members of Parliament from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and three other parties. These parties have pooled their online

resources and information into this single website, which acts as a mouthpiece for the exiled government ([www.ncgub.net](http://www.ncgub.net), website accessed 8 December 2004).

The internet has opened up an opportunity for political parties to put out information cheaply and have a longer reach. Unlike the print or broadcast media, the internet can be accessed by anyone in any part of the world. This makes it even more important as many people from Asian countries reside as diasporas mainly in the West and elsewhere. But as we can see from the above survey, even single-party states and dictatorial regimes have taken onto the internet.

## Political party sites as alternative news sites

However, a dominant feature of political party websites in Asia is that they act as alternative news sites. This is especially so in countries where opposition parties do not get access to government-controlled mainstream media. Political parties leverage on their website to put out alternative news reports of political events in the country or highlight news activities about themselves that are often omitted by the mainstream media.

For instance, in Malaysia, the website [HarakahDaily.net](http://HarakahDaily.net) of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), was launched a week before nomination day during the 1999 general elections. The website was launched to put out online information contained in its print publication, *Harakah Daily*. The party did this because they realised that the government-controlled mainstream media would outpace them as they published only in the traditional newspaper format. In addition, they did not have a permit to produce a daily print edition. Hence the internet was an answer. Among the items the site carries includes a regular online poll, which usually draws votes from at least 2,000 readers and sometimes more than 15,000, depending on the topic. One poll question which asked in Malay, „Why do you support PAS?“ had around 85 percent of the more than 2,100 respondents chose the option „Its commitment to the Islamic state and Islamic law“ (George, 2003). In 2003, the party began producing a daily two-page laid-out report called „Our Daily“ that contained parliamentary reports on PAS members, commentaries by party leaders and articles critical of the government. This report is then downloaded by party officials in the branches from the website and distributed to mosques, prayer rooms and home of fence-sitters (The Straits Times, 8 April 2003).

In Malaysia, where the local mass media is either directly owned or indirectly controlled by the component parties of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, most reportage favours the ruling coalition. Before the arrival of the internet, PAS relied

on daily political rallies to counter allegations printed in daily newspapers. As the force of these political rallies grew the Malaysia government under the control of the ruling Barisan Nasional moved to enforce a ban on such rallies. But the internet has given opposition parties a new outreach tool to counter misinformation that was previously absent. In some ways, the internet has allowed opposition parties such as PAS to overcome the censorship and negativism they have suffered for a long time in the hands of government-controlled media in Malaysia.

The website of another opposition party, the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) in Cambodia, also acts as a news portal using both the English and Khmer language to reach out to Cambodians in Phnom Penh, as well as its supporters and sympathisers overseas. It is also used to criticise the current Cambodian government under prime minister Hun Sen. The site highlights further cases like the government's „wasteful consumption of natural resources“ and the building of schools to distract from Hun Sen's alleged mismanagement of national funds (Men, 2004, p.612).

The internet gives the SRP an advantage in an otherwise Cambodian People's Party-dominated media environment under Hun Sen who controls both the Khmer print and broadcast media. The success of SRP candidates in Phnom Penh during the last general elections in 2003 has been attributed to the ability of information on the SRP website to reach the city's residents. It was instrumental during the elections in reporting and updating information on irregularities in voter registration, issuing the party's reaction to the process (Men, 2004, p.612).

The Taiwan Independence Party website is the closest that comes to having some „alternative“ news in the Taiwan political party landscape. These include criticism of the mainstream media for the party's lack of coverage there, as well as articles discussing changes in Taiwanese society and history, on the Palestinian issue, and on attempting to revive native languages that have been repressed by the educational system. The Palestinian issue seemed to resonate with the party and its supporters, because the Palestinians share a similarity with the Taiwanese in the sense that they are both not able to establish an independent state. Articles dealing with native languages „provide instructions on how to speak Taiwanese aboriginal languages correctly, allowing members to learn the languages before they disappear“ (Chung, 2002).

The main opposition party in Thailand, the Democrat Party also responded to alleged blockade of media coverage of the opposition by launching its leader's live programme on the internet called „Chuan Online“ on 18 August 2002. For 10-15 minutes every Sunday morning at 10am its party leader Chuan Leekpai answered questions on the party's website at [www.democrat.or.th](http://www.democrat.or.th) and [www.chuan.org](http://www.chuan.org) (The

Nation, 14 August 2002). It was commonly known that this move was in some ways aimed at challenging Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's live radio programme broadcast on government-run stations every Sunday morning. Chuan Online broadcasted for the last time in April 2003 following his retirement as Democrat Party leader (Bangkok Post, 28 April 2003).

Political parties also use their websites in other creative ways. In Thailand, the opposition Democrat Party turned to the internet, after its MPs stormed out of parliament to protest what they called the Thaksin government's unfair allocation of debate time during a no-confidence debate. Refusing to rejoin the session, leading members of the Democrats shifted the debate to their party headquarters. Using charts and photos Democrat Party members instead made their presentations before a camera and broadcast the video on the party's website. Pradit Pataraprasith, Democrat party secretary-general justified the use of the website in this way by claiming that on the day the party walked out of parliament its site received some 120,000 hits (Chokchaimandon, The Nation, 28 May 2004).

A few Filipino political parties, like the Liberal Party of the Philippines also provide some alternative political news. This is mainly done in the sense that „raw“ press statements – unedited by and unfiltered through the mainstream media – from the party's leaders can be found in their website. The website thus provides a platform for the dissemination of the party's public relations statements and news, where party leaders' opinions are actual first-hand reports of what they said. This is in contrast to allegations that the mainstream Philippine media sometimes quote statements by political party figures out of context (Ramos, 2004).

Other entities which carry more definitive alternative news in their websites are the Party-list groups Akbayan and Bayan Muna. The former is the political group of the Philippine socialists, while the latter is the premier organisation of the National Democrats. The websites of both groups have the standard array of press releases, statements, and speeches by their officials. The Akbayan website has opinion-editorial pieces grouped variously under the „Statements“ and „Posts“ sections (www.akbayan.org, website accessed 30 November 2004). The Bayan Muna site is noted for its „Researches“, which gives information on data of the state of politics, healthcare and the national budget in the Philippines, most of them in downloadable Zip files (www.bayanmuna.net/researches/index.htm, website accessed 30 November 2004).

Whether a political party website acts as an alternative news site can be easily gleaned from the amount of space dedicated to „news“ and the frequency of updates. It also often means that political parties that use their websites in this

way have a more aggressive outlook towards reaching out to the public. Political parties also use email lists to circulate news and send out press releases. The contrast to this would be political parties preferring to limit their use of their websites to put up mostly static information about party history, organization, officials and party activities. How political parties use their websites is influenced by the political culture operating within a political party and its leadership and their attitude towards technology.

## Moving election campaigning to online platforms

By far what is most important for political parties is the ability to generate and put out news during election times in the hope that this will have an impact on its electoral fortunes. Often it is during elections and the run up to election times that many political parties in the opposition, operating in media environments where the incumbents have control, seek to harness the internet the most.

In South Korea, the internet has become an important information and campaign tool and is widely considered the key to the success of President Roh Moo-hyun in the 2002 presidential elections. Online fan clubs were projected to play an important role in supporting the candidates in their campaigns. The fan club for Roh Moo-hyun, „Nosama“ (www.nosamo.org), was seen as the front-runner „in both online and offline political activity“ (Roh won the election and is the current president of South Korea). The Grand National Party's candidate Lee Hoi-chang was also supported by his fan club „Changsarang“ (www.changsarang.com) which was first established on his homepage. Independent candidate Chung Mong-joon also had a few „internet fan clubs“ which he had planned to utilize for his presidential bid (Korea Times, 2 September 2002). Roh's electoral success, particularly, was due to an online community made up of mostly young people in their 30s who supported him via a network of websites and internet chat rooms actively spreading messages imploring fellow citizens to vote and to raise funds for his campaign. The proliferation of websites for debates, and the use of the internet for participation and volunteering in campaign events played a crucial role in being a counterweight to the mainstream print media, which supported Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party, the candidate expected to win the election.

In the Indian elections of 2004 it was election campaign laws that affected traditional media coverage of the elections that indirectly pushed the election campaign onto the online platform. Hence, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) turned to the web and mobile phones after the Election Commission announced that election-related and political advertisements on radio and television would not be

allowed. Some of the efforts included a recorded message of Vajpayee, appealing for another chance to serve the nation. The BJP also tied up with mobile service providers to offer screensavers, ring tones, Vajpayee's thought for the day and his poetry to mobile phone users who dial or message a four digit mobile phone number (Gupta, 2004). The party also collected a database of some 20 million email addresses to disseminate information by email.

One South Asian media agency reported that Sri Lanka's 2004 parliamentary elections was also seeing the internet emerge as a tool for campaigning (Joshi, 2004). Emails proclaiming the virtues of political parties and candidates as well as canvassing for votes were being circulated in the run-up to the campaign. Apart from reaching out to resident Sri Lankans, the online election campaign was also reaching out to the large overseas Sri Lankan community. Although Sri Lanka was not known for high internet penetration its ability to reach out to the youth as well as the overseas community was seen as an important and useful campaign outreach exercise. To some extent online campaign activities during India's general elections were said to have influenced the situation in Sri Lanka.

Elections can move poll debates into cyberspace. In late 2000, The Nation newspaper of Thailand reported that the general elections scheduled for 6 January 2001 caused Thai online chat rooms to bustle with debate (The Nation, 25 December 2000). One of the hottest topics of debate was, „Who would make a better prime minister, Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai or Thai Rak Thai's Thaksin Shinawatra?“ Websites in Thailand also ran online public opinion polls asking visitors to vote for their favourite party. Such discussion of elections, rumours and opinion polls would lead several countries to enact legislation to control or limit online election advertising.

Similarly when there is next to no coverage on elections, internet portals can fill the void. In mainland China, reportage on Taiwanese elections effectively received a news blackout. During the 2004 Taiwanese presidential elections, China's state television stations carried no election reports. Foreign news channels broadcasting on the mainland were occasionally jammed. For instance a CNN interview with Taiwanese policy maker Tsai Ing-wen was interrupted for several minutes (Ma and Leu, South China Morning Post, 21 March 2004). Nevertheless this did not prevent information creeping into internet portals and fuelling discussions about the Taiwanese elections.

Apart from election campaigning, political parties can also use the Net to offer „instant“ results of their election outcomes on their websites. The Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP) in 2002 announced that the outcome of its election would be publis-

hed on the party's website ([www.sapp.org.my](http://www.sapp.org.my)) as soon as the results were known (Bernama, 3 May 2002). The aim was to keep members of the public who are interested in the latest developments of the party informed in a timely manner.

Again, not all political parties can manage online campaigning effectively. Only parties which are either willing to consciously implement an online campaign strategy for elections and are willing to invest manpower and resources succeed in this area. Interestingly it is often opposition parties with a fairly young membership that actively use the internet in this way. Ruling parties often rely on their existing control over the mainstream media to get their campaign news out.

## Tightening the use of the internet during elections

Although there were mixed responses to political parties going online, in more and more cases comprehensive rules are being introduced to guide political parties' use of the internet. At the heart of such legislations is the aim to control content put out by political parties during the electoral period. Often the incumbent parties in power have the traditional media under firm control. But the internet and its use, usually by opposition parties, have led to a loophole which they have now moved to close.

The use of the internet by political parties in Japan is shaped by its political environment. Before the 2001 election, the ruling Liberal Democrat Party (LDP) had insisted that the use of the internet as an active political campaign tool could be misused, for example in promoting defamation, and may break the regulations contained in the POEL. In Japan, controls over how political parties use the internet for election campaigning come in the form of the Public Offices Election Law (POEL), which has been applied to the use of the internet during election campaign periods. This did not seem to affect the willingness or ability for politicians to use websites for electioneering purposes, as can be seen with over 90% of the incumbents in the 2001 Upper House election owning and utilizing websites for campaigning during the election period (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003a). However the Japanese government's application of strict limits to politicians' and parties' use of the internet prevented political campaigning in the „crucial 7- to 20-day period prior to any election“. Throughout the two elections periods of 2000 and 2001, issues dealing with the internet and the POEL repeatedly came up, with smaller parties in Japan calling for the revision of the existing legislation. The government thus commissioned a council to recommend revisions, and its report was expected in 2002. The advent of the internet has assisted the opening of new channels of communication for smaller parties and candidates. The strength of opposition

political players challenging the establishment to reform a part of its system has made the Japanese situation unique in contrast to those in other countries (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003b).

Singapore's elections regulations are governed mainly by the Parliamentary Elections [Election Advertising] Act. However, amendments dealing with online political campaigning were not put in place before the first attempt by opposition parties to use the internet for election campaigning in 1997. The relevant Singapore government department, then known as the Singapore Broadcasting Authority, instructed two opposition parties to remove biodata and posters of their candidates from their sites. Although the rules at the time neither provided for nor proscribed internet campaigning, that did not stop the government from curbing the internet activities of these opposition parties (Rodan, 1998, p.87). Under the current amendments - made prior to the general election in 2001 - party websites are not allowed to conduct „polls, transaction services, announcements or notices referring to the sale of political merchandise and other fund raising activities“ (Internet Campaigning Rules, 2001). The editors and owners of online forums and chat rooms were to be held responsible for the postings on their discussion boards. Only moderated chat rooms are allowed on political party sites. Content managers and internet service providers would be held responsible for any material deemed libellous, even if these were from anonymous posters. Policing was rigorous: the elections department told a number of opposition parties and a non-party organisation to remove certain links, articles and notices that were deemed to have breached these electoral laws (Gomez, 2002, pp37-38).

In the run up to the Malaysian general elections in 2004, the Malaysian Election Commission proposed a plan to police the internet. Under the plan, the election body could summon candidates to court if they post incendiary comments on the Net about opponents or other political parties. Under this proposal, candidates are also liable for errant postings by supporters or others found to be affiliated with them (The Straits Times, 23 July 2003). Malaysian opposition parties in particular were troubled as they depend heavily on alternative media to disseminate their news. It prompted Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) MP Syed Azman Syed Ahmad to say, „Victorious candidates could be charged in court and disqualified for something done by someone else. This is really unfair to the opposition.“ (The Straits Times, 23 July 2003) In countries such as Malaysia the major component parties of the ruling coalition such as the United Malay National Organisation, the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress all have well developed websites. However these political parties still rely on the control over the main-

stream media to get their news out. This is why opposition parties in Malaysia still rely on the internet more.

In South Korea the revision of election laws to stipulate the dos and don'ts of online election campaigning resulted only in a surge of online offenders. According to the National Election Commission the number of election law violations on the internet had increased tenfold to more than 6,750 cases between 1 October to 7 April 2004 compared to the same period in the 2000 general elections (Kim, The Korea Herald, 10 April 2004). 30 percent of the violations evolve around slander on the internet while the remaining percentages were in the form of pre-campaigning breaches such as specifying for or against support for political parties. According to Korean law those who post abusive content on the internet are subject to a maximum of seven years in prison and between 5-30 million won in fines. It is unclear whether this is the way to deal with the problem as there is a need to better understand internet culture and etiquette before laws can effectively solve the problem.

However this does not prevent single party states such as Laos to put up legislation to safeguard their interests from political competition. In October 2000, the National internet Management Committee issued a directive that prohibits the use of the Net for „lying, deceiving or persuading people inside or outside the country to protest against the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, or for destroying the peace, independence, democracy, unity and prosperity of the country. (Bangkok Post, 1 December 2000). Those who flout this directive stand to face penalties that may include warnings, fines, expulsion or prosecution. This directive was issued in spite of the fact that many observers feel that the country's poor telecommunications infrastructure and the small number of users will not pose a threat to the party's political status in the short term.

The use of the internet by political parties has resulted in the emergence of new laws that seek to control how political parties use the internet especially during elections times. Conservative regimes in Asia that have long had the habit of denying any media access to their political opponents now want to ensure that the internet does not afford its critics an unmediated platform from which to mount a challenge. Often legislation is rushed in countries where a dominant political force seeks to retain its powers even if the internet does not stand to make any real political impact. Otherwise, the use of the internet by political parties is largely ignored as is the case in Cambodia.

## E-voting: moving towards efficient ballot counting

Another issue of concern for Asian political parties has been the emergence of e-voting. Many countries in the region have begun experimenting with e-voting but most are reluctant to implement it because of problems associated with security and reliability. E-voting in Asia has so far meant electronic balloting machines, not registering or sending votes over the internet.

In Singapore, the Elections Department announced in April 2001 that e-voting will go on trial in selected districts in the next General Election that were scheduled to be held by August 2002. If the pilot phase was successful, e-voting was to be implemented in all electoral districts in future elections. Even a prototype of the electronic voting machine was shown during the press briefing and the procedure explained (The Straits Times, 22 April 2001). Voters on presentation of their identity cards will be directed to a touch screen computer at a polling booth where the voter indicates his choice of language followed by touching a spot on the screen next to the political party of his choice. This grand announcement was dismissed six months later on the grounds that an expert study in the US on online voting found it insecure (The Straits Times, 16 October 2001).

However, Japan announced that it had managed to carry out successfully its first electronically-assisted poll to choose a mayor and members of a municipal assembly in Niimi, Okayama Prefecture. At the polling stations, election administration officials handed out magnetic strip cards to verified voters who then inserted these cards into voting machines. A stylus was then used to select a mayoral candidate and candidates for the assembly in separate steps by touching the computer screens. Visually handicapped people voted using the machines following audio instructions (Yomiuri Shimbun, 25 June 2002). However, it remains to be seen if the new system will be expanded in the future to include other prefectures or even the Diet elections. However it was acknowledged that electronic-assisted polls certainly cut down significantly on the time needed to process the results.

The Indian experiment with e-voting was the most watched in 2004. India's expertise with electronic voting machines (EVMs) goes back to when these machines were first introduced two decades ago in the North Paravur Parliamentary by-elections in Kerala (The Hindu, 30 July 2003). Indian EVMs employ a semi-electronic technology where the balloting is electronic but voting machines still have to be carried manually into counting centres. The main draw of the Indian system is paperless voting. Media estimates put the number of EVMs used in the Indian 2004 parliamentary elections to just over 1.08 million units (The Hindu, 6 May 2004).

Semi-electronic voting systems seem to be the preferred option. In Hong Kong, Lee Chan-Hee, director of the internet Security and Public Key Infrastructure Application Centre at City University department of computer science said the best way to harness the speed and efficiency of electronic voting while addressing security concerns was to improve the current polling methods. For instance, he argues that instead of voters dropping their completed ballot papers into a box to be counted later, these could be scanned and recorded electronically. This would allow votes to be counted instantly while ensuring the security level associated with paper-based systems (South China Morning Post, 8 June 2004).

Hence it seems that some form of self-contained semi-electronic voting system would be making more appearances at Asian elections in the near future. The aim of adopting such a system is likely to ensure that technological innovations can be harnessed for the counting of votes in a more efficient and faster way than the traditional method of counting paper ballots. Nevertheless concerns over software security as well as the need to have a paper trail to tabulate votes in case of technical failure remain high. At this stage, internet voting is unlikely to take-off given issues of Net security and hacking over the World Wide Web. Very few government level elections have featured internet voting (IDEA website, accessed 1 December 2004). Since voting is a crucial concern, especially for opposition parties seeking to come into power, this is a notable area of concern that will be of interest for political parties.

## Online electoral information increases transparency

The arrival of the internet has also forced governments to put up more information about election rules and processes that have an impact on political parties. Most often this is done through the website of election commissions or departments. The amount and kind of information that is available on these sites is also reflective to some extent on the openness of the electoral or political system of the country. Principally elections commission websites provide information for voter registration, absentee ballots, information for candidates, political party funding regulations or criteria, regulations for political party registration, provision of election results and etc.

The website of the election commission in Bangladesh contains „Observer Reports“, something that most election websites lack. These reports include those from the United Nations Electoral Assistance Secretariat, who supported and coordinated the visit of international observers to the 2001 parliamentary elections, as well as a congratulatory message to the election commission from former United

States president Jimmy Carter ([www.bd-ec.org/index.php3](http://www.bd-ec.org/index.php3), website accessed 13 December 2004). The Thai election commission is also somewhat similar in that it has a link that provides details in terms of how NGOs can play a role in election monitoring. There are provisions for NGOs to both register as well as not register with the election commission of Thailand. There is also background information on how to monitor elections and why one should monitor elections ([www.ect.go.th](http://www.ect.go.th), website accessed 13 December 2004).

Among the website features of the department of elections of Sri Lanka is a link to political parties. Under this section the visitor is given a list of 52 political parties entries which contains details of the party name, symbol, its secretary, the contact phone and fax numbers as well as the postal address of the secretary. Not all elections department websites provide such comprehensive information on political parties ([www.slelections.gov.lk](http://www.slelections.gov.lk), website accessed 14 December 2004). In the Thai case links are provided to the websites of six parties that have an online presence. Links on the website of elections commissions or departments can tell us a lot about behind the thinking behind electoral democracy in a country. In the Singapore elections department website there is no guide to get more information on the various political parties in the country. In fact the links section entitled „Useful Links“ takes the visitor to a list of other government department but not to any other political party ([www.elections.gov.sg](http://www.elections.gov.sg), website accessed 14 December 2004). Whereas in the link sections of most election commission websites, such as those in Thailand or Malaysia, the major political parties are listed.

India's election commission website publishes online handbooks for candidates, polling agents and the like. Comprehensive information is provided to ensure that the candidate is aware of the qualifications and criteria that are needed to be eligible as a candidate. There are even entire manuals of the election laws in the site. These and other information make it one of the most extensive and comprehensive sites of its kind out there ([www.eci.gov.in](http://www.eci.gov.in), website accessed 14 December 2004). India also announced that software is being designed to enable enrolment in the electoral list to be filed online. Chief Electoral Officer, M. Narayana Rao announced in September 2004 that in addition to the traditional methods of application at polling centres, post offices and house to house visit by enumerators, voters can check their names or correct personal details by filing the relevant forms online (The Hindu, 27 September 2004).

The Korean National Election Commission website is not as massive as the Indian one, but still gives sufficient information, notably guidelines on how political parties are organized and funded in South Korea ([home.nec.go.kr/english/main.htm](http://home.nec.go.kr/english/main.htm),

website accessed 14 December 2004). Information on the South Korean election commission is offered both in Korean and English. In the English version one of the interesting sections of the website is listed under the header „Duties of Election Commission“. The reader is informed that under Korean law should the election commission decide there is a need for new laws or amendments concerning elections, referenda and/or political parties, it can submit its ideas or proposals to the National Assembly ([www.home.nec.go.kr](http://www.home.nec.go.kr), website accessed 14 December 2004). This information points to the independence of the election commission in the Korean case. In the case of other countries, election departments are not independent but part of the government. In the Singapore case, the elections department is a unit under the prime minister's office.

Taiwan's English-language election commission site is quite bland, with its sections merely describing the processes, procedures and rules governing elections in the country ([www.cec.gov.tw/e-cec/Preface.asp](http://www.cec.gov.tw/e-cec/Preface.asp), website accessed 15 December 2004). Much more comprehensive is a counterpart site that focuses on the presidential elections of 2004 ([www.gio.gov.tw/elect2004/index.html](http://www.gio.gov.tw/elect2004/index.html), website accessed 15 December 2004). Its features include the candidates' photo profiles, official reports, links to the major political parties' websites, a timetable of press conferences and activities, and other related information.

Election history and an archive of election results is also another common feature of many of the election commission websites. In the Philippines case, results of the 2004 elections are available online for party list results as well as the senatorial race. For easy appreciation of the results the outcome of the senatorial race can be viewed by alphabetical order of the candidates or by their ranking according the number of voters each candidate had polled ([www.comelec.gov.ph](http://www.comelec.gov.ph), website accessed 15 December 2004).

Although the 1999 general elections in Indonesia were not conducted online, voters were able to access information like the calculation of the poll statistics from 300,000 individual polling stations, through all levels of government to the final centralized national tally. This was done via the website of the semi-independent General Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum*, or KPU) (Hill, 2003, pp529, 535–536). During the run-up to the presidential election in October 2004, the KPU announced that a „new-and-improved computerized vote counting system“ was ready for the election, and would help to reduce vote-rigging in the poll“. It would be „more resistant to possible attacks from hackers, who had broken into the data in previous elections“ (Indonesia.com - News, 2004). Hence, studies that look at the use of the internet in Indonesian politics focus on this feature as opposed to the use by political parties (Hill, 2003).

The internet has brought out a certain amount of transparency with regards to online election information from sitting regimes in Asia. But how much information and what kind of details these regimes make available online varies from country to country. There is a fairly clear difference between information uploaded by independent election commissions as opposed to election departments under government control. To some extent the information uploaded onto these websites offer a window into the state of multi-party democracy of a country.

## Conclusion: between freedom and censorship

Asian political parties are increasingly becoming Net-savvy in their interaction with the public. However to a large extent how political parties use the internet depends whether the party and its policy makers see the internet as a tool for political communication.

The wider legal structure and political culture affect the use of the internet by political parties. Although party constitution, structure and ethos are important in determining the use of the internet, the surrounding political culture is also equally important especially in the context of Asia and one-party regimes in the region such as Japan, Vietnam, China and Singapore, as well as military regimes such as Burma. Political culture determines how political parties and their personnel actually use the internet for party work and campaign activities.

Political culture is a factor explaining the take-up rate of the internet by political parties even if the technology is present. This is true in the case of India. The transparency and levelling of hierarchies which IT brings with it sits uncomfortably with a feudal kind of politics that thrives on personality cults, coteries, intrigues and an inexplicable secrecy about even mundane matters. Hence, the political culture keeps the extensive use of IT by Indian political parties in check (Seetha, 2004).

It is not surprising therefore to learn that often the members of a party's website initiative are the younger ones. Older members will often point to the wisdom of traditional grassroots work while younger members will point to the constituency of online readers. Whether a web initiative takes off depends on the strength of obstacles or restrictions that party members themselves place on the idea. Often times once a Web initiative is approved within the party, it is the younger members in the party that take responsibility for it and keep the initiative going. Some older members may not even know what is going on online!

Notwithstanding political culture, in many Asian countries the trend seems to

point towards the internet as another tool that political parties are harnessing for their communication needs. As a result, government regulation and restrictions on internet usage by parties especially during elections are coming into place. At the same time, the evolution of e-voting and election commission websites are bringing another set of pressure on the political party system.

As more and more political parties in Asia go online, it remains to be seen if the internet heralds a real opening up of political space for democracy. At the moment political parties are exploring the freedom of the internet even as Asian governments begin to introduce laws to regulate this space.

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