



Founded in 2019, DigitalReach is a digital rights organization based in Southeast Asia. The organization looks at how technology affects human rights and democracy in the region, with a particular focus on information control, platform accountability, and digital security. It advances this work through research and monitoring, advocacy, and community building and empowerment.

Published in 2026 by DigitalReach



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METHODOLOGY

In the context of DigitalReach, digital rights are human rights involving the use of technology. The report is based on the scope of the organization's work, exploring how technology affects human rights from the perspective of civil and political rights.

This report summarizes the development of digital rights in Southeast Asia from January to December 2025. It covers the digital rights situation in eight Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, which are DigitalReach's target countries.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of digital rights developments in 2025. These developments help deepen understanding of both the local context in each country and the broader regional context, based on the trends and issues they share. The report also serves as a foundational source of information to support the design and implementation of initiatives that are responsive to these contexts.

The report has been reformatted from its previous 2023 version. The format of this 2025 report is based on DigitalReach's revised organizational strategies. Under these new strategies, the organization's work is divided into three main areas: Control of Information, Platform Accountability, and Digital Security.

ISSUES	DEFINITIONS
Controls of Information	State control of information through approaches including, but not limited to, internet restrictions, censorship, and deployment of a state-affiliated cyber army.
Platform Accountability	Accountability of social media platforms according to human rights principles—for example, respecting freedom of expression by not censoring content at the regime's request and making efforts to ensure that their platforms do not fuel disinformation and propaganda through their policies and design choices.
Digital Security	Ability of political dissidents to stay safe in the digital sphere. This includes their online communications, data, and identities being safeguarded from surveillance, interception, manipulation, or retaliation by hostile actors, particularly authoritarian governments.

In the regional chapter, there is a summary of developments in the eight countries. Regional trends in 2025 are then analyzed across the three topics derived from events in these eight countries, before moving on to potential future work at the regional level. This potential work is framed around three main aspects: research and documentation, advocacy, and capacity building.

In the country chapter, each section begins with the political context of that country, as digital rights developments often mirror broader political dynamics. This is followed by an overview key digital rights situations in 2025, and the chapter concludes with an analysis of their implications for human rights and democracy.

In the section on the Implications of the Situations for Human Rights and Democracy, the analysis is guided by four questions:

- (1) What are the most concerning issues based on the key digital rights situations in 2025?
- (2) Why do these situations pose a threat to human rights and democracy?
- (3) How do these situations set a precedent for future events?
- (4) What are the challenges in responding to these concerning issues?

Sources of information used in this report are cross-checked to verify their accuracy. Independent media outlets are preferred; however, in some cases, state-affiliated sources are also used as references, depending on the context. When state-affiliated sources are used, they are intended to provide factual details about events; any partisan angles are excluded from the report.

This approach applies to the three countries covered in this report—Cambodia, Singapore, and Vietnam—where information from local sources is often tightly controlled by the government. In Cambodia, given the border conflict with Thailand, some referenced information comes from Thai media outlets that are considered non-partisan and trustworthy. In Singapore, the state-owned CNA is used throughout the country chapter to describe “what happens.” Similarly, selected state media sources are cited in the Vietnam chapter to provide factual details of “what happens.”

REGIONAL OVERVIEW



In 2025, digital rights remain under threat in all Southeast Asian countries covered in this report. Governments and regimes across the region are intensifying efforts to control information, compelling social media platforms to comply with censorship directives, and tightening control over telecommunications, thereby increasing risks to the digital security of dissidents.

In Cambodia, the border conflict with Thailand that escalated in May 2025 illustrates how propaganda and disinformation were spread by state actors, including through official statements issued by government agencies. Although Hun Sen stepped down as prime minister in 2023, he still exerts a dominant influence over Cambodian politics. Through his Facebook page, Hun Sen's claims are amplified by other state actors and pro-regime media. In the absence of counter-narratives—caused by the severe crackdown on independent media and the harassment of critics—propaganda and disinformation produced by state actors have successfully created a one-sided infosphere. The regime also plans to resurrect the National Internet Gateway (NIG) to tighten control over information and expand mass surveillance.

In Indonesia, digital rights under the Prabowo administration are increasingly at risk due to the expanding powers of the military and police. Several laws were amended in 2025 to facilitate this shift. Protests against the government, particularly in August 2025, highlight how Prabowo administration has failed to respect democracy and human rights. Digital tools were also used in the crackdown, during which security forces arrested a number of activists critical of the authorities online, claiming they were spreading narratives that could escalate tensions. Following the demonstration, TikTok suspiciously suspended its live feature and was compelled to hand over user data to the government after initially having its operations disrupted for refusing to comply.

The use of political “buzzers”—state-hired cyber troops—continues under the Prabowo administration to serve the government’s political interests. In 2025, surveillance is also one of the main concerns regarding digital rights in Indonesia. The Attorney General’s Office reached an agreement with four telecommunications companies to install wiretapping devices, claiming it was for law-enforcement purposes. This raises concerns that the state is stepping up its surveillance efforts, especially given that alleged state surveillance has already been documented in Indonesia.

In Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim’s government is pressing ahead with censorship, particularly of narratives related to the “3Rs,” which stands for race, religion, and royalty. The Communications and Multimedia Act and the Sedition Act remain in use to prosecute political dissidents, despite the 2022 election manifesto of Anwar’s Pakatan Harapan coalition, which promised to amend them. The government has also tightened control over social media platforms by automatically registering them in order to dictate how they can operate. A new law governing social media platforms, the Online Safety Act, was also enacted in May 2025.

In 2025, Myanmar’s military junta was preparing to stage a sham election in an attempt to legitimize its rule. Following the 2021 coup d’état, the country had been plunged into civil war and transformed into a surveillance state. The junta has reportedly used Chinese surveillance technology to monitor online activities of political activists, and many individuals were arrested ahead of the election on the grounds that they were obstructing the electoral process. The Chinese technology was reportedly deployed through telecommunications companies operating in the country. A 2025 revelation showed that Telenor, a Norway-based company that exited Myanmar after the 2021 coup, had complied with the military’s request to hand over user data, including information belonging to Aung San Suu Kyi. The Cybersecurity Act was also passed, officially making it illegal to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass the junta’s blocking of websites and applications or to evade surveillance.

Regarding the Philippines, policymakers have been working to regulate disinformation—an effort that carried over from the previous year but intensified in 2025, when a committee was established specifically to examine the issue. However, the move has raised concerns about free speech, as it may leave the law open to abuse by criminalizing critical narratives under the guise of combating disinformation. The Philippines also held midterm elections in 2025, which saw a surge in AI-generated disinformation and propaganda. These false narratives were largely in favor of the Duterte family, following the March 2025 arrest of Rodrigo Duterte and the impeachment of Vice President Sara Duterte, a process that began in 2024.

In Singapore, ahead of the 2025 general election (GE2025), digital tactics targeting the opposition have become increasingly sophisticated. While the repressive Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was used directly by the government against opposition figures in the previous election in 2020, the tactics observed in GE2025 appear more indirect in their links to the government or the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Although POFMA played a more limited role during GE2025 itself, the law continued to be used throughout 2025 to crack down on free speech by activists and independent media.

In Thailand, a key concern is military-affiliated information operations (IO), which have become increasingly sophisticated. Leaked documents presented by the opposition party in March 2025 show that the operations are coordinated, involving all branches of the military and the police. The documents also revealed a list of individuals targeted by the operations. The National Human Rights Commission of Thailand confirmed that the documents are authentic and condemned the operations as a violation of human rights. In a separate development, a lawsuit filed in 2021 against the Royal Thai Army by three activists—who alleged that the military conducted the operations that harassed them on their social media accounts—was concluded in 2025. The court's ruling also confirmed the existence of the operations.

Regarding Vietnam, the Tô Lâm administration has significantly expanded the powers of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), which functions as the national police force. As part of a broader streamlining process, during which major reforms have taken place across successive administrations, Tô Lâm's government has tightened control over the digital space, with the MPS serving as the main agency enforcing this control. These developments have put all aspects of digital rights in Vietnam at risk. As part of its information control efforts, the government also launched programs in 2025 to incentivize online influencers to promote messages favorable to the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). Surveillance efforts in the country have likewise intensified, raising concerns that Vietnam could become a surveillance state through the "Digital Citizens" initiative, under which citizens are rated based on their online behavior.

Summary of Key Situations Rights Situations in Southeast Asian Countries in 2025

Countries	Concerns Related to Digital Rights in 2025
Cambodia	Drawing on the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, disinformation and propaganda have been carried out at the state level under Hun Sen's regime.
Indonesia	Indonesia is becoming increasingly militarized under Prabowo, which could endanger digital rights in all aspects given the expanding powers of the military and police.
Malaysia	The government censors and controls information related to the 3Rs.
Myanmar	The military has sought legitimacy through a sham election while tightening its control over human rights, including digital rights.
Philippines	The government seeks to regulate disinformation via legislation, which may risk limiting free speech in the country.
Singapore	Information is controlled by the government via a series of repressive laws.
Thailand	Information operations (IO) are becoming more sophisticated in their methods and tactics.
Vietnam	The expansion of police powers, which risks abuse of authority and tighter control over human rights, including digital rights.

To identify broader trends across these countries, the issues are grouped into three categories: control of information, platform accountability, and digital security. These categories are based on actions taken by regimes and governments throughout Southeast Asia. The details are as follows:

1. Control of Information

Developments in 2025 show that governments and regimes across the region used a range of tactics to control online information. These include, but are not limited to, adopting new laws and regulations, ordering service providers to block content, deploying trolls or cyber armies, and imposing internet restrictions.

Several Southeast Asian countries have long been documented as having state-affiliated cyber armies or trolls—coordinated networks of online accounts that spread propaganda or disinformation to benefit the government or ruling regime. Evidence from 2025 shows that these state-linked cyber armies and troll networks have grown significantly more sophisticated.

In Cambodia, the 2025 border conflict with Thailand offers insights into how information disorders and propaganda are systematically produced by state actors under Hun Sen's leadership¹. The regime has previously been documented for its state-affiliated cyber armies, but the growing role of state agencies and key figures in producing propaganda and disinformation—later amplified through pro-regime media—marks a notable development in how the regime manipulates information for its political interests². This situation is the result of years of crackdowns on independent media and critical voices.

In Indonesia, where the government has a history of employing political buzzers to support its policies and initiatives since Joko Widodo's tenure, their use has persisted under Prabowo Subianto's government³. This has been particularly evident during the 2025 protests against the government.

A network of coordinated, inauthentic accounts benefiting Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was uncovered by Malaysiakini, an independent media outlet, in October 2025⁴. The discovery suggests that this operation was driven by a political agenda, likely aimed at boosting Anwar's reputation as his political coalition faces a serious challenge from the growing popularity of the hardline Islamist party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

In Myanmar, in the events leading up to the sham election scheduled for the end of 2025, a pro-junta coordinated network was documented. It was also found that TikTok has been added to the list of prominent platforms used by pro-junta figures. While this is not surprising, given that pro-military cyber troopers have been documented before, these developments show that Facebook remains a key platform for pro-military figures to conduct election campaigns, despite being officially blocked following the coup. The incident also shows that TikTok has now become part of the information ecosystem, a change from the situation during the 2020 election.

1. "The State-Affiliated Systematic Disinformation Campaign and Propaganda in Cambodia." *DigitalReach*, 15 Dec. 2025, digitalreach.asia/news/blog-news/the-state-affiliated-systematic-disinformation-campaign-and-propaganda-in-cambodia.

2. Ibid.

3. "Efforts to Undermine Demonstrations Through Influencers." *Tempo.co*, 4 Sep. 2025, www.tempo.co/politik/narasi-influencer-merepons-tuntutan-demonstran-2066522.

4. Koh, Jun Lin. "Deception and Data: Inside Pro-Anwar CIB Network Investigation." *Malaysiakini*, 1 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/756652.

In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte's arrest by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in March 2025 for his war on drugs—when he was Mayor of Davao and later President of the Philippines—became a key narrative shaping the 2025 midterm elections^{5,6}. A major development in the midterm elections is the spread of disinformation in the form of AI-generated content.

Since Singapore held its 2025 general election in May, opposition members have been targeted with various online tactics, including bots and fake accounts—a situation that was not documented in previous elections⁷.

In Thailand, the opposition political party revealed in March that the military-led information operations (IO) have become more sophisticated^{8,9}. Although the military had never officially admitted this before—despite the operations being exposed since 2020—a court ruling in October 2025 proved that official documents submitted as evidence in the lawsuit against the military included details of the operations' instructions, confirming their authenticity¹⁰. An investigation by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) also confirms the existence of the network¹¹.

Regarding Vietnam, Force 47 and Steering Committee 35 continue to operate in support of the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) interests. Force 47 is a military-run cyber unit first unveiled in 2017, while Steering Committee 35 is composed of CPV members. Both are tasked with protecting the CPV's ideological foundations and combating "wrongful and hostile views" against the Party. In 2025, both groups incorporated AI-related issues into their strategies to protect the CPV's political interests. The Vietnamese government also launched programs in 2025 to incentivize online influencers to shape public narratives in favor of the CPV¹².

5. "Duterte Case: The Prosecutor vs. Rodrigo Roa Duterte." *International Criminal Court*, www.icc-cpi.int/philippines/duterte.

6. "Information Disorders in the Philippine Elections Getting More Complex." *DigitalReach*, 30 June 2025, digitalreach.asia/news/analysis/information-disorders-in-the-philippine-elections-getting-more-complex.

7. "Digital Tactics to Undermine Opposition Parties in the 2025 Singapore Election." *DigitalReach*, 18 May, 2025, digitalreach.asia/news/analysis/digital-tactics-to-undermine-opposition-parties-in-the-2025-singapore-election.

8. "Chayaphon Unveils IO Operations: Escalating Targeting of Dissenters and Key Government Figures Through Fabricated Claims." *The Standard*, 25 Mar. 2025, thestandard.co/no-confidence-debate-2568-43.

9. "Opposition Accuses Paethongtarn Government of Allowing Military to Conduct IO Operations—Revealing 46 Target Names That Have Been 'Lock On.'" *BBC News Thai*, 25 Mar. 2025, www.bbc.com/thai/articles/c20lw5qx4z1o.

10. "The Administrative Court in Thailand Dismissed a Lawsuit Regarding the State-Linked Information Operations." *DigitalReach*, 2 Nov. 2025, digitalreach.asia/news/the-administrative-court-in-thailand-dismissed-a-lawsuit-regarding-the-state-linked-information-operation.

11. "Thai Military Uses Information Operations Against Political Dissidents, NHRC Finds." *Prachatai English*, 28 Oct. 2025, prachataienglish.com/node/11631.

12. "Is Tran Thanh Really 'Tone-Deaf', 'Out of Tune', or 'Dangerous.?' " *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 7 Sep. 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/c0lkpzz002xo.

These situations show that cyber armies and trolls have become tools of regimes and governments across Southeast Asia, growing more sophisticated over time in serving their political interests. To counter these operations, media freedom and freedom of speech must be protected. However, this is particularly challenging given the political situations in several countries in the region. In Cambodia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam, for example, independent media and regime critics are regularly harassed and prosecuted in a highly repressive environment. Meanwhile, pro-government outlets and cyber troopers face few constraints and can dominate the information space with little effective opposition.

In 2025, one of the factors that further contributed to the shrinking space for facts was the withdrawal of funding from the U.S. government under Donald Trump for media outlets, including Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA). RFA¹³ and VOA¹⁴ shut down in October 2025 following disruptions in their operations earlier in the year^{15, 16, 17}. Their decision to cease operations was also driven by the government shutdown, which occurred when the U.S. Congress failed to pass appropriations legislation for the 2026 fiscal year. BenarNews, which operates under Radio Free Asia, announced a pause in its operations in April 2025¹⁸.

The shutdown of these outlets is a win for authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia. In a Facebook post, Cambodia's Hun Sen, for example, described the closure of U.S.-funded outlets as "a major contribution to eliminating fake news, disinformation, lies, distortions, incitement, and chaos around the world."¹⁹ In 2017, RFA closed its Phnom Penh bureau amid an intense media crackdown by Hun Sen's regime²⁰. Its website was blocked in Cambodia following Hun Sen's order in 2023²¹.

¹³. "RFA Suspends Remaining Editorial Operations Amid Funding Uncertainty." *Radio Free Asia*, 29 Oct. 2025, www.rfa.org/english/about/releases/2025/10/29/rfa-suspends-remaining-editorial-operations.

¹⁴. Mackintosh, Thomas, and Merlyn Thomas. "Trump Moves to Close Down Voice of America." *BBC News*, 17 Mar. 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvge4l109r3o.

¹⁵. Kim, Minh. "Voice of America Stops All Broadcasting After Government Shuts Down." *The New York Times*, 1 Oct. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/10/01/us/politics/voice-america-shutdown.html.

¹⁶. "RFA Operations May Cease Following Federal Grants Termination." *Radio Free Asia*, 15 Mar. 2025, www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/03/15/radio-free-asia-voa-rfa-usagm-executive-order-federal-grants-termination.

¹⁷. Folkenflik, David. "From 1,300 to 81 Workers: Trump Official Plans to Cut Voice of America to the Bone." *NPR*, 6 June 2025, www.npr.org/2025/06/06/nx-s1-5424581/voa-job-cuts-kari-lake.

¹⁸. "Letter from Editors: BenarNews Pauses Operations." *BenarNews*, 2 Apr. 2025, www.benarnews.org/english/world/asia/2025/06/22/letter-from-editors-benarnews-pauses-operations-04022025104657.

¹⁹. "Chinese Media, Hun Sen Celebrate White House Order to Close US-Funded News Outlets." *Radio Free Asia*, 17 Mar. 2025, www.rfa.org/english/asia/2025/03/17/rfa-hun-sen-china.

²⁰. "RFA Closes Phnom Penh Bureau Amid Crackdown by Hun Sen." *Radio Free Asia*, 12 Sep. 2017, www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/crackdown-raf-09122017084157.html.

²¹. "Hun Sen's Government Orders RFA, Other News Outlet Websites Blocked." *Radio Free Asia*, 17 July 2023, www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/media-sites-blocked-07172023171743.html.

The closure of RFA has further contributed to the military coup's crackdown on independent media in Myanmar²². The RFA Burmese-language service was shut down in May 2025 due to the funding cuts. VOA Burmese was also shut down after it announced a temporary suspension in March 2025^{23, 24}. Both outlets were crucial in providing independent information following the 2021 coup d'état, as they offered shortwave radio services in Burmese, which were a key source of information for people in areas where the junta imposes internet disruptions²⁵.

Min Aung Hlaing reportedly "thanked" Trump for stopping funding to the media outlets²⁶. The junta leader was reported as saying, "Assessments influenced by one-sided misinformation and distorted narratives ultimately led to the imposition of economic sanctions on Myanmar."²⁷

VOA Burmese began in 1942 and ranked second in total weekly broadcast hours in 2024, with 182.25 hours—just behind VOA Tibetan—according to statistics from the #SAVEVOA campaign²⁸. However, statistics from July 2025 show that its weekly broadcast hours had dropped to zero. RFA Burmese was established in 1997²⁹.

At least 15 media outlets have had their licenses revoked since the 2021 coup, and 64 newsrooms have had to cover the country from exile³⁰. The U.S. funding cuts have also negatively impacted the operations of these local outlets, including DVB, The Irrawaddy, Mizzima, and Narinjara News³¹.

²². "Radio Free Asia Burmese-Language Service Closes Permanently; Myanmar Media Struggles with U.S. Funding Cuts." *DVB English*, 10 May 2025, english.dvb.no/radio-free-asia-burmese-language-service-closes-permanently-myanmar-media-struggle-with-us-funding-cuts.

²³. Ibid.

²⁴. "Suspension of VOA, RFA Burmese Services Deepens Information Void in Myanmar." *The Irrawaddy*, 27 Mar. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/suspension-of-voa-rfa-burmese-services-deepens-information-void-in-myanmar.html.

²⁵. Ibid.

²⁶. Maung Kavi. "Myanmar Junta Chief Thanks Trump for Shutting Down VOA and RFA." *The Irrawaddy*, 11 July 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-chief-thanks-trump-for-shutting-down-voa-and-rfa.html.

²⁷. Ibid.

²⁸. "Measuring the Loss of VOA Around the World." *SaveVOA*, 31 July 2025, savevoa.com/data/measuring-the-loss-of-voa-around-the-world.html.

²⁹. "Suspension of VOA, RFA Burmese Services Deepens Information Void in Myanmar." *The Irrawaddy*, 27 Mar. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/suspension-of-voa-rfa-burmese-services-deepens-information-void-in-myanmar.html.

³⁰. "Myanmar Media Faces Severe Restrictions and Funding Challenges on World Press Freedom Day." *DVB English*, 3 May 2025, english.dvb.no/myanmar-media-faces-severe-restrictions-and-funding-challenges-on-world-press-freedom-day.

³¹. Ibid.

2. Platform Accountability

Mark Zuckerberg's January 7, 2025 announcement that Meta would cancel its third-party fact-checking programs³², has raised concerns that the move will fuel disinformation and propaganda while further shrinking the space for verified facts. Meta has partnered with third-party fact-checking initiatives that are members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) since 2016³³. According to Zuckerberg's announcement, these programs will be replaced with Community Notes, similar to the feature used by X (formerly Twitter), where users provide additional context on content considered to be disinformation or misinformation³⁴.

In the announcement, Zuckerberg claimed that fact-checkers had proved to be "biased" in how they selected content to moderate³⁵. He further stated that he wanted to ensure "free speech" across all platforms under Meta, including Facebook, Instagram, and Threads³⁶. The announcement has widely been viewed as evidence of Meta's tilt toward the Trump administration's right-wing ideology³⁷, especially given the swift changes to several company policies following Zuckerberg's private meeting with Trump in 2024³⁸. Zuckerberg was also seen interacting frequently with the U.S. president throughout 2025.

Following the announcement, the initiative still had not been rolled out in Southeast Asia as of 2025. The third-party fact-checking program was set to be replaced with Community Notes, similar to the system used by X (formerly Twitter), raising doubts about how effective it would be in tackling disinformation and propaganda^{39, 40}. According to a statement

³². McMahon, Liv, et al. "Meta to Replace 'Biased' Fact-Checkers with Moderation by Users." *BBC News*, 8 Jan. 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly74mpy8klo.

³³. Jamieson, Amber, and Olivia Solon. "Facebook to Begin Flagging Fake News in Response to Mounting Criticism." *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2016, www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/15/facebook-flag-fake-news-fact-check.

³⁴. Kablan, Joel. "More Speech and Fewer Mistakes." *Meta*, 7 Jan 2025, about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes.

³⁵. Ibid.

³⁶. Ibid.

³⁷. Montgomery, Blake. "Why Did Mark Zuckerberg End Facebook and Instagram's Factchecking Program?" *The Guardian*, 7 Jan. 2025, www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/07/why-did-mark-zuckerberg-end-facebook-instagram-fact-checking.

³⁸. Isaac, Mike, et al. "Inside Mark Zuckerberg's Sprint to Remake Meta for the Trump Era." *The New York Times*, 10 Jan. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/technology/meta-mark-zuckerberg-trump.html.

³⁹. Borenstein, Nadav, et al. "Can Community Notes Replace Professional Fact-Checkers?" *arXiv*, 19 Feb. 2025, arxiv.org/html/2502.14132v1.

⁴⁰. Derhgwawen, Shubhangi. "Fact Check: Are X's Community Notes Fueling Misinformation?" *DW*, 5 Aug. 2025, www.dw.com/en/fact-check-are-xs-community-notes-fixing-or-fueling-misinformation/a-73315972.

by Rafael Frankel, Meta's Director of Public Policy for Southeast Asia, he told policymakers in the Philippines in April 2025 that there were no plans at that time to switch from third-party fact-checking to Community Notes globally, apart from in the U.S.⁴¹

Southeast Asia has been a lucrative market for social media platforms. Facebook remains the most popular platform in the region, with four Southeast Asian countries among the top 10 worldwide with the largest number of Facebook users⁴². In 2025, Indonesia ranked third with 122 million active Facebook users, the Philippines ranked sixth with 90.8 million, Vietnam ranked seventh with 76.2 million, and Thailand ranked ninth with 51 million active users⁴³.

Given the large user base, social media platforms play a crucial role in Southeast Asia's political landscape. This is also why regimes across the region have tried to control how these platforms operate within their borders, as social media is a key space where critics and independent outlets publish content critical of those in power.

On many occasions, Meta has been documented assisting regimes in Southeast Asia in cracking down on such content. As of 2025, this remains a major concern. In Vietnam, Meta has long been reported to cooperate with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). In 2025, the platform allegedly geo-blocked the pages of several human rights activists, the independent media outlet Thoibao.de, and the political party Viet Tan, which advocates for reforms in Vietnam. These blocks were reportedly implemented at the request of the CPV⁴⁴. At the beginning of 2025, it was also reported that posts from the Vietnamese-language Facebook pages of BBC, VOA, and RFA temporarily disappeared⁴⁵. Although the posts later reappeared, these three media outlets have frequently been criticized by the CPV. Meta did not respond to the incident.

⁴¹. Panti, Llanesca T. "Meta Says It Won't Drop Fact-Checking System Outside US." *GMA News Online*, 15 Jan. 2025, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/942306/meta-says-it-won-t-drop-fact-checking-system-outside-us/story.

⁴². "Facebook Users, Stats, Data & Trends for 2025." *DataReportal*, 12 Mar. 2025, datareportal.com/essential-facebook-stats.

⁴³. Ibid.

⁴⁴. Trịnh, Long Hữu, and Lê Giang. "Facebook Blocked the Pages of Lê Trung Koa, Nguyễn Văn Đài, and Việt Tân in Vietnam—at the Request of the Government." *Luật Khoa*, 8 Dec. 2025, luatkhoa.com/2025/12/facebook-chan-trang-cua-le-trung-khoa-nguyen-van-dai-va-viet-tan-o-viet-nam-theo-yeu-cau-cua-chinh-phu.

⁴⁵. "Content on RFA's Facebook Page Suddenly Disappeared Without a Trace." *Radio Free Asia*, 30 Jan. 2025, www.rfa.org/vietnamese/trong-nuoc/2025/01/30/noi-dung-tren-facebook-cua-rfa-tieng-viet-tu-nam-2024-den-2025-bien-mat.

A similar situation occurred in Malaysia following the suspension of independent media outlet Malaysiakini's report on a coordinated network of cyber troopers allegedly working in favor of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim⁴⁶. The suspension, which took place on September 30, 2025, affected Malaysiakini's Facebook pages, including KiniTV⁴⁷. The platform reportedly claimed that these pages violated its Community Standards. Although the pages were eventually restored and the government denied any involvement, the incident still raises concerns about possible political motives. Following the exposé, Meta also stated that it found no evidence of coordinated inauthentic behavior in favor of Anwar, as alleged by Malaysiakini⁴⁸.

In Singapore, Meta complied with government requests ahead of the 2025 general election by blocking advertisements from the independent media outlet Jom in April 2025⁴⁹. The move was controversial because two of Jom's articles were critical of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), while the third favored its main opposition, the Workers' Party⁵⁰. Around the same time that Meta suspended Malaysiakini's pages, it also suspended the Facebook page of Wake Up, Singapore, which is critical of Singaporean politics. As with Malaysiakini, Meta stated that the page had violated its Community Standards but did not provide any specific details⁵¹.

It is not only Meta's platforms that have been documented aiding governments. In August, during pro-democracy protests against the administration of Prabowo Subianto, TikTok suspended its live-streaming features, preventing users from broadcasting events in real time. The government claimed the suspension was TikTok's own decision and not made at its request⁵². However, it also pressured the platform to hand over user data following the protests. TikTok initially refused but eventually complied after the authorities disrupted its services in the country⁵³.

⁴⁶. "Mkini's FB Pages Were Suspended Due to 'Technical Issue,' Meta Claims." *Malaysiakini*, 9 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/757454.

⁴⁷. "Ibid.

⁴⁸. "Fahmi: Meta Denies Suspending Malaysiakini's FB Pages, Govt Not Behind It." *Malaysiakini*, 1 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/756708.

⁴⁹. "Singapore Blocks Jom Articles on Meta Over Election Ad Rules, Citing Unauthorised Paid Promotion." *The Online Citizen*, 30 Apr. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/04/30/singapore-blocks-jom-articles-on-meta-over-election-ad-rules-citing-unauthorised-paid-promotion.

⁵⁰. Ibid.

⁵¹. "Wake Up, Singapore Says Meta Suspended Its Facebook Page Over Unclear Cybersecurity Reasons." *The Online Citizen*, 3 Oct. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/10/03/wake-up-singapore-says-meta-suspended-its-facebook-page-over-unclear-cybersecurity-reasons.

⁵². Mediana, Caecilia. "TikTok Confirms "TikTok Live" Suspended for the Next Few Days." *Kompas.id*, 1 Aug. 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-tiktok-benarkan-ada-penangguhan-tiktok-live-hingga-beberapa-hari-mendatang.

⁵³. Karmini, Niniek. "Indonesia Lifts TikTok Suspension After Data Sharing Compliance." *AP News*, 5 Oct. 2025, apnews.com/article/indonesia-suspends-tiktok-license-protests-prabowo-data-01255b95de06f007ef3cec1a0d3bd850.

Such a platform-initiated suspension of its own features during a major political event had not been documented before. TikTok's decision sets a troubling precedent for how platforms may respond to future pro-democracy protests. Like Facebook, Indonesia is a lucrative market for TikTok; the country ranks second globally in TikTok users, with around 108 million active accounts in 2025⁵⁴.

Amid ongoing concerns about platform accountability, meaningful engagement with these companies remains challenging. Civil society has long urged platforms to uphold human rights and democratic principles, yet this engagement is often perceived as superficial. Platforms typically convene meetings with civil society and solicit feedback, but there is rarely a long-term plan for sustained engagement or for improving accountability over time. These efforts are further undermined by a lack of transparency.

3. Digital Security

Digital security refers to the protection of political dissidents in the digital sphere. This includes safeguarding their online communications, data, and identities from surveillance, interception, manipulation, or retaliation by hostile actors, particularly authoritarian governments. Across Southeast Asia, the digital security of political dissidents is a serious concern as threats have intensified. In 2025, governments and regimes across the region further increased their influence over national telecommunications sectors, making large-scale digital security risks more likely.

A significant example is Myanmar, which has become a surveillance state following the 2021 coup d'état. The military now controls all telecommunications service providers in the country, enabling it to intercept users' communications and monitor their online activities. The situation in Myanmar clearly illustrates how the regime, in cooperation with telecommunications companies and related service providers, is able to intercept communications and surveil users.

The case of Telenor, a Norway-based telecommunications company that operated in Myanmar until its exit in 2021, illustrates how a telecommunications company can aid an authoritarian regime through its handling of user data, leading to the harassment and prosecution of government opponents. Telenor reportedly handed over data from at least 1,300 customers, including Aung San Suu Kyi and Zay Yar Thaw⁵⁵. Zay Yar Thaw,

⁵⁴. "TikTok Users, Stats, Data & Trends for 2025." *DataReportal*, 12 Mar. 2025, datareportal.com/essential-tiktok-stats.

⁵⁵. "Parliament Probes Telenor's Exit From War-Torn Myanmar." *News in English*, 16 Dec. 2025, www.newsinenglish.no/2025/12/16/parliament-probes-telenors-exit-from-war-torn-myanmar.

a pro-democracy activist and opposition politician, was allegedly arrested after the military obtained his data from Telenor⁵⁶. He was executed in 2022⁵⁷.

The military has reportedly used Chinese technology from a firm called Geedge Networks to monitor users' online activities and detect the use of VPNs⁵⁸. At least, 13 telecommunications companies, including Atom, Mytel, Ooredoo, and MPT, have allegedly been involved in installing Geedge Networks' technology⁵⁹. This situation reportedly grants the military unrestricted access to the data of 33.4 million internet users in Myanmar⁶⁰.

Using technology from Geedge Networks, the system enables the junta to track network traffic at the individual level and identify the geographic location of mobile subscribers in real time by linking their activity to specific cell identifiers⁶¹. It has also been reported that the junta has used AI technology to monitor online communications. By using predefined keywords, the AI can detect terms in online communications and automatically record them, notify the relevant authorities, or even obtain the estimated location of phone users⁶².

Indonesia and Vietnam have also seen their governments increase influence over the telecommunications sector. In 2025, Indonesia's Attorney General's Office (AGO) signed a wiretapping agreement with four major local telecommunications operators, putting the data of 350 million users at risk. The four companies are PT Telekomunikasi Indonesia, PT Telekomunikasi Selular, PT Indosat, and PT XLSMART Telecom Sejahtera⁶³. The memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the AGO and these companies potentially allows prosecutors to access communications without adequate legal safeguards. Under the MoU, the companies are required to "install wiretapping devices, share telecommunications data, and provide real-time information" at the request of the AGO⁶⁴.

⁵⁶. Sue Win. "Telenor Faces Lawsuit Over Alleged Transfer of User Data to Myanmar Military." *Myanmar Now*, 8 Oct. 2025, myanmar-now.org/en/news/telenor-faces-lawsuit-over-alleged-transfer-of-user-data-to-myanmar-military.

⁵⁷. Beech, Hannah. "Phyo Zeya Thaw, Burmese Pro-Democracy Rapper, 41, Is Executed." *The New York Times*, 27 July 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/07/27/world/asia/27phyo-zeya-thaw-dead.html.

⁵⁸. "Report Reveals How China's Geedge Networks and Myanmar Telecoms Companies Are Enabling the Illegal Junta's Digital Terror Campaign." *Justice For Myanmar*, 9 Sep. 2025, www.justiceformyanmar.org/press-releases/report-reveals-how-chinas-geedge-networks-and-myanmar-telecoms-companies-are-enabling-the-illegal-juntas-digital-terror-campaign.

⁵⁹. "Can the Chinese Government Access the Data of Millions of Myanmar Internet Users?" *BBC News Burmese*, 4 Nov. 2025, www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/cy8rpv2mvj7o.

⁶⁰. Ibid.

⁶¹. Ibid.

⁶². "5 Surveillance Techniques Used by the Military Council." *BBC News Burmese*, 22 May 2025, www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/cewddpeqj07o.

⁶³. Redaksi, Tim. "Why Are the Attorney General's Wiretapping Powers Controversial?" *Kompas.id*, 27 June 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-mengapa-kewenangan-penyadapan-kejaksaan-menjadi-kontroversial.

⁶⁴. Ibid.

In Vietnam, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) took over MobiFone in 2025. MobiFone, previously under the Ministry of Information and Communications, is the country's third-largest telecommunications provider⁶⁵. The MPS also acquired a majority stake in FPT Telecom, one of Vietnam's largest internet providers. These moves are part of the broader streamlining efforts led by Tô Lâm, General-Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The largest and second-largest telecommunications providers in the country, Viettel and Vinaphone, are also state-owned⁶⁶. Together, these three companies hold around 98 percent of Vietnam's telecommunications market⁶⁷.

Under Tô Lâm, the MPS, which functions as Vietnam's national police force, has significantly expanded its role. The transfer of MobiFone to the MPS and the acquisition of FPT Telecom reinforce the perception that it will be easier for the police to conduct surveillance. In June 2025, the Personal Data Protection Law was passed, designating the MPS as the enforcement authority⁶⁸. This grants the ministry the power to access personal data without consent for reasons of national security and to compel businesses to surrender user data without court approval. The ministry is also tasked with building a national information portal for personal data protection.

The revised Cybersecurity Law, passed by the National Assembly in December 2025, further grants the MPS full authority over cybersecurity, replacing the previous shared model with the Ministry of Information and Communications. Among its provisions is a requirement that online service providers identify the IP addresses of all organizations and individuals using their services and provide this information to cybersecurity authorities upon request⁶⁹.

In Cambodia, the reported resurrection of the National Internet Gateway (NIG) could turn the country into a surveillance state⁷⁰. This stems from the NIG's potential to enable mass online monitoring mirroring China's Great Firewall. Given Cambodia's close relationship with China, there is no guarantee that Hun Sen's regime will not import and deploy Chinese surveillance technologies to advance its own political interests.

⁶⁵. "Explained: Why Is Vietnam's Police Ministry Overseeing a Large Telecom?" *Radio Free Asia*, 17 Jan. 2025, www.rfa.org/english/vietnam/2025/01/17/vietnam-mobifone-takeover.

⁶⁶. Le, Lam. "How Vietnam's Military Built One of the Hottest Tech Companies in Southeast Asia." *Rest of World*, 10 Sep. 2025, restofworld.org/2025/vietnam-viettel-global-tech-player.

⁶⁷. An, Binh, and Thúc Kháng. "The Revamped Ministry of Public Security Under General Secretary Tô Lâm." *The Vietnamese*, 19 Mar. 2025, thevietnamese.org/2025/03/the-revamped-ministry-of-public-security-under-general-secretary-to-lam.

⁶⁸. An, Trường. "Việt Nam 2025: The Power Expansion of the Ministry of Public Security." *The Vietnamese*, 5 Jan. 2026, www.thevietnamese.org/2026/01/viet-nam-2025-the-power-expansion-of-the-ministry-of-public-security.

⁶⁹. An, Trường. "The Quiet Passing of Vietnam's 2025 Cybersecurity Law." *The Vietnamese*, 12 Dec. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/12/the-quiet-passing-of-viet-nams-2025-cybersecurity-law.

⁷⁰. Kelliher, Fiona. "Cambodia Resurrects Plan for Controversial Internet Gateway." *Nikkei Asia*, 20 Oct. 2025, asia.nikkei.com/business/telecommunication/cambodia-resurrects-plan-for-controversial-internet-gateway.

Filling in the Gap: Moving Forward with Future Work

Given these developments, it is clear that governments and regimes across Southeast Asia are intensifying their use of digital strategies to suppress dissent and secure political advantage.

Regarding information control, several areas warrant further exploration. These include examining how state-affiliated coordinated networks operate to serve political interests by harassing critics and disseminating disinformation and propaganda. Much of this work will require building the capacity of civil society to document such activities, which often demands technical skills to detect and analyze these networks.

The 2025 court case in Thailand on information operations (IO) illustrates why further investigation is critical. The case stemmed from a 2021 lawsuit in which three activists sued the Royal Thai Army for allegedly conducting IO (see Thailand chapter). One of the biggest challenges lay in proving that the accounts in question were part of an IO network and that their activities were coordinated.

Although the court accepted that the documents submitted as evidence—showing instructions for IO operations—were authentic, it dismissed the case, reasoning that the harassment of activists could have been carried out by individuals acting on their own personal beliefs.

The lesson from this situation is the need to demonstrate that the accounts attacking activists are part of a coordinated network and are being directed to do so. Network analysis can reveal patterns in how these accounts operate as a coordinated network—for example, by posting the same content at around the same time.

Another concern is the rise of AI, which will further complicate this landscape, as state-affiliated cybertroopers become equipped with AI-generated content. Developments in 2025 show that state-affiliated cyber armies in Thailand and Vietnam are learning to produce such content. AI-generated content was extensively documented in the 2025 midterm elections in the Philippines, as well as in the Indonesian general election earlier in 2024. These events set a precedent that AI will play an increasingly crucial role in the online space. This technology has the potential to harm democracy, as it can shape state-affiliated disinformation and propaganda campaigns. This situation makes it equally important for civil society to build AI literacy and develop the skills needed to detect and respond to these technologies.

Disinformation and propaganda are also closely tied to the issue of platform accountability. While politically motivated censorship is the main concern in many Southeast Asian countries, broader discussions on platform accountability in the region remain limited—particularly regarding how platform design and architecture can fuel disinformation and propaganda.

For example, state-affiliated cybertroopers or trolls can amplify their narratives through paid advertisements, as social media platforms often overlook how such narratives can be disseminated as sponsored content. The blue checkmark on X (formerly Twitter)—once used to verify the authenticity of an account—can now be purchased, enabling bad actors to spread disinformation under the guise of credibility. In addition, social media algorithms can trap users in echo chambers that reinforce their existing beliefs and make them more susceptible to political propaganda.

These issues warrant further examination, as they underscore that platform accountability is crucial to protecting human rights and upholding democratic values. Although advocacy directed at governments across many countries in the region, as well as at social media platforms, can be particularly challenging, other avenues remain available, including documentation, capacity building, and strategic litigation.

In terms of digital security, as threats become more sophisticated, those at risk must be better equipped to respond to these challenges. The growing influence of the telecommunications sectors in Indonesia and Vietnam requires further documentation, particularly regarding their impact on human rights and democracy. In Cambodia, it is crucial to monitor whether the regime will resurrect the NIG and how it intends to implement it. In Myanmar, which has effectively become a surveillance state, documentation must continue, and opportunities for capacity building among vulnerable groups can be further explored.

While 2025 has seen a trend of increasing state influence over telecommunications sectors, other digital threats have long been documented across Southeast Asia. The abuse of spyware, for example, has been recorded in Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam. In 2025, Singapore was named among the countries linked to the use of Graphite spyware, produced by the Israeli company Paragon Solutions⁷¹, adding to the already worrying situation involving other surveillance technologies documented earlier⁷².

In Thailand, leaked documents about information operations (IO) in March 2025 revealed that cyber armies are learning tactics to attack political targets using brute-force attacks and evil twin attacks⁷³. These types of attacks allow perpetrators to gain access to information in the accounts of targeted individuals. These developments compound

⁷¹. Marczak, Bill, et al. "Virtue or Vice? A First Look at Paragon's Proliferating Spyware Operations." *The Citizen Lab*, 19 Mar. 2025, citizenlab.ca/research/a-first-look-at-paragons-proliferating-spyware-operations.

⁷². Loon, Yee. "Exposé Reveals Israeli Spyware Firm's Mysterious Singapore Project Dating Back to 2018." *Gutzy Asia*, 15 Dec. 2023, gutzy.asia/2023/12/15/expose-reveals-israeli-spyware-firms-mysterious-singapore-project-dating-back-to-2018.

⁷³. The leaked documents, presented in Parliament on March 25, 2025, can be found at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16n2xNG_NvIcEM52vW9uPlpi7bsfVUJ5q.

earlier concerns, including the discovery of Pegasus spyware in Thailand in 2022, used against political dissidents during the height of pro-democracy protests against the then-government of Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who staged a coup d'état in 2014⁷⁴.

In Indonesia, as the Attorney General's Office reached an agreement with the four telecommunications companies in the country, raising further concerns in light of previously documented surveillance technology linked to Q Cyber Technologies (the parent company of NSO Group), the Intellexa consortium, Saito Tech (also known as Candiru), FinFisher and its wholly owned subsidiary Raedarious M8 Sdn Bhd, and Wintego Systems⁷⁵. Also in 2025, the discovery of First Wap—an Indonesia-based company exporting surveillance technology worldwide—raised questions about how the country should regulate the export of such technology⁷⁶. Following WhatsApp's victory in its case against NSO Group—the manufacturer of Pegasus spyware—over the company's exploitation of WhatsApp in 2019 to spy on users, court documents unsealed in 2025 revealed that more than 50 users in Indonesia were targeted⁷⁷.

Across Southeast Asia, activists' devices are often confiscated when they are arrested. Activists have also raised concerns about technologies such as Cellebrite, which state authorities can use to access data on their devices.

Given these emerging threats, capacity building among people vulnerable to surveillance should be further strengthened, while protections from abuses of surveillance technology at the policy level must also be explored more thoroughly. Moreover, while the presence of surveillance technologies has been documented, their use remains significantly underreported.

⁷⁴. "Parasite That Smiles: Pegasus Spyware Targeting Dissidents in Thailand." *iLaw and DigitalReach*, 2022, www.ilaw.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Pegasus-Spyware-Targeting-Dissidents-in-Thailand.pdf.

⁷⁵. "Indonesia: A Web of Surveillance—Unravelling a Murky Network of Spyware Exports to Indonesia." *Amnesty International*, 1 May 2024, www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa21/7974/2024/en

⁷⁶. "Surveillance Secrets." *Lighthouse Reports*, 14 Oct. 2025, www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/surveillance-secrets.

⁷⁷. Franceschi-Bicchierai, Lorenzo. "Court Document Reveals Locations of WhatsApp Victims Targeted by NSO Spyware." *TechCrunch*, 9 Apr. 2025, techcrunch.com/2025/04/09/court-document-reveals-locations-of-whatsapp-victims-targeted-by-nso-spyware.

COUNTRY CHAPTERS

CAMBODIA



A. Political Situations

Even though Hun Sen stepped down from the premiership in 2023 and his eldest son, Hun Manet, succeeded him as prime minister, Hun Sen continues to dominate Cambodian politics. This has been evident in various contexts, especially during the 2025 border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, which erupted amid longstanding border tensions that have persisted for decades.

His social media use, particularly on Facebook, serves as a key channel for messages that are widely regarded as the Cambodian government's responses to the conflict⁷⁸. He called for a boycott of strategic goods from Thailand, including electricity, internet services, fuel, and gas^{79, 80}. He also ordered the suspension of all Thai dramas and other content

⁷⁸. Ghoshal, Devjyot, et al. "Cambodia's Hun Sen at the Helm in Border Conflict With Thailand." *Reuters*, 31 July 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodias-hun-sen-helm-border-conflict-with-thailand-2025-07-31.

⁷⁹. "Hun Sen Threatens to Close Border With Thailand, Ban Thai Products." *Thai PBS World*, 16 June 2025, world.thaipbs.or.th/detail/hun-sen-threatens-to-close-border-with-thailand-ban-thai-products/57865.

⁸⁰. "Thailand's Measures Will Fail, Cambodia Will Survive: Hun Sen." *Bangkok Post*, 21 June 2025, www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/3054587/thailands-measures-will-fail-cambodia-will-survive-hun-sen.

from being broadcast in Cambodia^{81, 82}. After Cambodia was accused of hiring foreign mercenaries to assist in the conflict, Hun Sen also took to Facebook to deny the allegations⁸³.

On his Facebook page, he also attacks opponents and spreads disinformation and propaganda⁸⁴. His comments and behavior have further strained relations between the two countries. In June 2025, he posted a 17-minute recording of a phone call between himself and then-Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra on his Facebook page⁸⁵. In the leaked call, Paetongtarn was heard calling him “uncle” as they discussed the border tensions. She also referred to the Thai army commander, Boonsin Padklang, then in charge of the border area where the clash occurred, as “an opponent.”⁸⁶ The phone call ultimately led to Paetongtarn’s removal from office in August 2025⁸⁷.

Some observers suspect that the border tensions in 2025 stem from a personal feud between Hun Sen and Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister of Thailand and Paetongtarn’s father. It is known that the Hun family and the Shinawatra family were once close^{88, 89}. On his Facebook page, the former prime minister, who later became Senate president, has attacked his former ally on several occasions in a threatening manner^{90, 91, 92}.

⁸¹. “Cambodia’s Hun Sen Urges Halt to Thai Imports, Thai Shows Off Air.” *Thai PBS World*, 4 July 2025, world.thaipbs.or.th/detail/cambodias-hun-sen-urges-halt-to-thai-imports-thai-shows-off-air/58091.

⁸². “Hun Sen Proposes Suspension of Thai Films and Imports Amid Border Tensions.” *The Nation*, 13 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/world/40051185.

⁸³. “Hun Sen Denies Presence of Foreign Mercenaries.” *The Nation*, 17 Dec. 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40059915.

⁸⁴. Baliga, Ananth, and Meng Kroypunlok. “Hun Sen Shows He Is in Charge of Cambodia’s Border Crisis.” *Nikkei Asia*, 25 July 2025, asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/thailand-cambodia-conflict/hun-sen-shows-he-is-in-charge-of-cambodia-s-border-crisis.

⁸⁵. Saksornchai, Jintamas. “Thai Prime Minister’s Leaked Phone Call With Cambodia’s Hun Sen Sparks Outrage and Political Turmoil.” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 2025, www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2025-06-19/thai-prime-ministers-leaked-phone-call-with-cambodias-hun-sen-sparks-outrage-and-political-turmoil.

⁸⁶. “Hun Sen Admits to Recording Phone Call With Thai PM and Sharing With 80 Officials.” *The Nation*, 18 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40051411.

⁸⁷. Baker, Graeme. “Thai Court Removes PM Over Leaked Phone Call With Cambodian Leader.” *BBC News*, 29 Aug. 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgeqlw05rzo.

⁸⁸. “33 Years of History: Thaksin and Hun Sen’s Complex Relationship of Love and Hate.” *The Nation*, 20 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/asean/40051502.

⁸⁹. Head, Jonathan. “The Fractured Friendship Behind the Fight at the Thailand-Cambodia Border.” *BBC News*, 25 July 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg1gdgy2pyo.

⁹⁰. ““I Was Betrayed First”: Hun Sen’s Livestream Exposes Rift With Thaksin.” *The Nation*, 27 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40051822.

⁹¹. “Hun Sen Shares Photos of Paetongtarn Visiting Former PM’s Rooms in Phnom Penh.” *The Nation*, 20 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40051519.

⁹². “Hun Sen Says Thailand Owes Him Gratitude, Threatens to Expose Shinawatras.” *Bangkok Post*, 27 June 2025, www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/3059273/hun-sen-says-thailand-owes-him-gratitude-threatens-to-expose-shinawatras.

The exact cause of the feud is unknown, and what Hun Sen hopes to gain from the tension remains unclear. However, observers view the border conflict as part of Hun Sen's plan to bolster his son Hun Manet's legitimacy as his successor, with the crisis seen as a means of stirring nationalism among Cambodians⁹³.

As border tensions have escalated, an information war has unfolded between the two countries. The situation offers insights into Cambodia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, which has developed over decades of authoritarian rule and the intense crackdown on independent media.

As information warfare intensified, some sources noted possible links to Cambodia's scam operations, often described as among the largest in the world⁹⁴. In 2025, several individuals allegedly involved in these operations were blacklisted by the United States and the United Kingdom^{95, 96}. Many of them reportedly have close ties to the Hun family and other Cambodian political elites^{97, 98, 99}. The Hun family has also been accused of benefiting from these scam operations^{100, 101}.

⁹³. "Hun Sen's Nationalist Card: Border Tensions as a Shield for Dynastic Power." *The Nation*, 7 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40050922.

⁹⁴. National News Bureau of Thailand. Thai National Security Agencies Have Reported a Wave of Coordinated Cyber Activity Linked to Scam Networks and Gambling Financiers. *Facebook*, 25 July 2025, www.facebook.com/nbtworld/posts/thai-national-security-agencies-have-reported-a-wave-of-coordinated-cyber-activi/1145550704275725.

⁹⁵. Lamb, Kate. "Who Are Chen Zhi and the Prince Group, Accused by the US and UK of Large-Scale Scam Operations?" *The Guardian*, 17 Oct. 2025, www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/17/chen-zhi-prince-group-cambodia-cyber-crime-sanctioned.

⁹⁶. Regan, Helen. "The Young Tycoon Accused of Masterminding a Multibillion-Dollar International Fraud Network." *CNN*, 24 Oct. 2025, edition.cnn.com/2025/10/24/asia/cambodia-scams-chen-zhi-prince-group-intl-hnk.

⁹⁷. Faulder, Dominic, and Danielle Keeton-Olsen. "Thailand Strikes at Cambodia With Raids on Tycoon Kok An's Properties." *Nikkei Asia*, 8 July 2025, asia.nikkei.com/spotlight/society/crime/thailand-strikes-at-cambodia-with-raids-on-tycoon-kok-an-s-properties.

⁹⁸. "Prince Group and Chen Zhi Linked to \$15 Billion US Scam and Money Laundering, Thai Firm Denies Involvement." *The Nation*, 18 Oct. 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40056946.

⁹⁹. "Kok An: 'Godfather of Poipet,' Ally of Hun Sen – and Now Thailand's Most-Wanted." *Thai PBS World*, 18 July 2025, world.thaipbs.or.th/detail/kok-an-godfather-of-poipet-ally-of-hun-sen-and-now-thailands-mostwanted-/58238.

¹⁰⁰. "Thai Cyber Police Track Scam Millions to Cambodian Firm, Hun Sen Family Link Probed." *The Nation*, 16 June 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/politics/40051321.

¹⁰¹. "Report: Online Cybercriminal Marketplace Is Part of Cambodian Conglomerate." *Radio Free Asia*, 15 July 2024, www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/huione-elliptic-cybercriminal-online-marketplace-07152024160931.html.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

As information warfare has become part of the border tensions, state actors are now key players in spreading disinformation and propaganda, with Hun Sen at the helm of this effort. Several government agencies, including the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Interior, also play crucial roles. The core message Cambodia seeks to promote is that the country is a victim of the border conflict. Pro-government media outlets, including the Khmer Times, Phnom Penh Post, and Fresh News, function as government mouthpieces, spreading disinformation and propaganda that benefit the ruling regime.

Part of the strategy to control information is the arrest of individuals whom the regime considers a threat for sharing information that contradicts pro-government narratives. Many individuals have been arrested for documenting events or commenting on the situation on social media. According to the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), at least 16 journalists and social media users had been arrested in relation to the border conflict as of its report published on October 31, 2025¹⁰².

Many of those arrested are also members or supporters of the political opposition, including Keo Heang from the National Power Party, Khun Thorngdy from the Move Forward Party, Khou Hang Meang, a supporter of the now-defunct Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), and Chan Cheat, an activist associated with the opposition Khmer Will Party¹⁰³.

Among the journalists arrested were Porn Sopheap and Pheap Pheara from TSP 68 TV Online. They were detained after a reporting trip to Oddar Meanchey, near the Thai border, in July 2025 and charged with “supplying a foreign state with information prejudicial to national defense” under Article 445 of the Criminal Code.

While the exact reason for their arrest remains unclear, Porn Sopheap and Pheap Pheara were the two journalists who took photos with Cambodian soldiers at the Prasat Ta Kwai or Ta Krabei temple, one of the temple ruins at the center of the border conflict. The photos were widely circulated in Thai media because they show unplaced landmines in the background¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰². “Crackdown on Online Speech, Journalism During Thai-Cambodia Border Conflict.” *LICADHO*, 31 Oct. 2025, www.licadho-cambodia.org/articles/20251031/203/index.html.

¹⁰³. “Flash Info: Two Opposition Activists Hit With Incitement, Forgery Charges.” *LICADHO*, 9 Sep. 2025, www.licadho-cambodia.org/flashnews.php?perm=463.

¹⁰⁴. “2 Cambodian Journalists Arrested for Treason Over PMN2 Landmine Photo.” *The Nation*, 9 Sep. 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/asean/40055203.

As part of the information warfare, the Cambodian government has been accused of placing new PMN-2 landmines along the Cambodian-Thai border. Although Cambodian state agencies claimed that the PMN-2 landmines were remnants from past conflicts, the ASEAN Interim Observer Team (IOT)—a group of military representatives from member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations formed to monitor border disputes between Thailand and Cambodia—confirmed that the landmines were newly laid¹⁰⁵. This finding was corroborated by independent inspections by Reuters¹⁰⁶.

The IOT's confirmation was initially misreported by Bernama, the Malaysian National News Agency, which first stated that the landmines were not new, but later corrected the error. Several pro-government media outlets in Cambodia exploited this confusion by selectively reporting on the issue and claiming that the landmines were not newly planted. The pro-government outlet, Khmer Times, for example, reported that the Thai military blamed a "media error," referring to Bernama's initial misreport.

On November 27, 2025, the government further tightened control over information by issuing a prakas on "Qualifications and Journalistic Professionalism."¹⁰⁷ A prakas is an official proclamation: a ministerial or inter-ministerial decision signed by the relevant minister. Such proclamations must conform to the Constitution and to the law or sub-decree to which they refer.

The government also introduced 2026 press card rules that were widely seen as limiting press freedom. According to the pro-government Khmer Times, those seeking a media pass in 2026 must submit a letter of good conduct from local authorities¹⁰⁸. Successful applicants are those with no court convictions or legal complaints against them.

In October 2025, media outlets also reported that the government plans to resurrect the National Internet Gateway (NIG)¹⁰⁹. The plan was first unveiled in 2021 following the adoption of Sub-Decree No. 23 on the Establishment of the National Internet Gateway. Observers believe the NIG was part of Hun Sen's preparations for the 2023 general election. However, little has been reported about its progress since the law was passed.

¹⁰⁵ "ASEAN to Conduct On-Site Probe of Landmine Incident That Derailed Thai-Cambodian Truce, Thailand Says." *Reuters*, 14 Nov. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-conduct-on-site-probe-landmine-incident-that-derailed-thai-cambodian-truce-2025-11-14.

¹⁰⁶ Wongcha-um, Panu, and Devjyot Ghoshal. "Landmines That Sparked Thai-Cambodia Clash Were Likely Newly-Laid, Experts Say." *Reuters*, 16 Oct. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/landmines-that-sparked-thai-cambodia-clash-were-likely-newly-laid-experts-say-2025-10-16.

¹⁰⁷ "New Regulations for Journalist Tighten Grip on Cambodia's Media." *CamboJA News*, 3 Dec. 2025, cambojanews.com/new-regulations-for-journalists-tighten-grip-on-cambodias-media.

¹⁰⁸ Hang, Punreay. "Ministry Opens 2026 Press Card Registration for Journalists." *Khmer Times*, 3 Dec. 2025, www.khmertimeskh.com/501799952/ministry-opens-2026-press-card-registration-for-journalists.

¹⁰⁹ Kelliher, Fiona. "Cambodia Resurrects Plan for Controversial Internet Gateway." *Nikkei Asia*, 20 Oct. 2025, asia.nikkei.com/business/telecommunication/cambodia-resurrects-plan-for-controversial-internet-gateway.

According to a media report, an official document dated May 15, 2025, titled “Install and Manage National Internet Gateways,” provides new details about the government’s implementation plan. It names state-owned Telecom Cambodia and the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPTC) as responsible for infrastructure work beginning in 2026.

If successfully implemented, the NIG will enable the regime to control the infosphere and conduct surveillance in a more sophisticated manner. The system is expected to mirror China’s Great Firewall, under which internet use is tightly controlled and subject to extensive surveillance. However, user behavior in China and Cambodia differs significantly. For example, China’s large population has allowed it to develop its own applications and technologies cost-effectively, enabling the government to closely monitor online activity. Cambodia, by contrast, still relies heavily on Western social media platforms, making it more difficult for the regime to exercise the same degree of control.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

Based on key developments in 2025, the most concerning issue is the regime’s control of information. The situation surrounding the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand demonstrates that state agencies and their affiliates systematically disseminate propaganda and disinformation. When official statements themselves contain propaganda and disinformation to safeguard the regime’s interests, it signifies that press freedom, freedom of expression, and democracy have been entirely eradicated.

This situation stems from years of crackdowns on independent media and critical voices, which have effectively eliminated alternative narratives challenging the government’s messaging. As a result, citizens are losing access to a pluralistic flow of information, which is essential for informed decision-making and public debate.

Given the current context, in which state-controlled propaganda and disinformation proliferate, concerted efforts are needed to counter these narratives. Nonetheless, the regime’s oppressive measures prevent local actors from effectively challenging such propaganda. Journalists and media outlets are regularly harassed for reporting that runs counter to the regime’s interests.

While counter-reporting is needed, building capacity for documenting and reporting the situation is also crucial. However, due to ongoing suppression, this also remains difficult to achieve inside Cambodia. During the height of the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, cyber trolls on social media platforms were documented, suggesting there is more to explore about these operations, including potential links to the state. To properly document and study such activities and their complexity, more tools and techniques are needed.

If the NIG is successfully implemented, threats arising from the initiative will also have to be closely monitored due to the potential for increased censorship and surveillance. With the NIG in place, Cambodia will move closer to becoming a surveillance state, where people are subjected to mass surveillance. Since this indicates that the government will specifically target dissidents, more digital security efforts need to be explored, as well as strategies for circumventing the censorship that is likely to intensify if the NIG is implemented.

INDONESIA



A. Political Situations

2025 marks the first year of Prabowo Subianto's presidency, which began in October 2024. Following the 2024 election, the government has faced no meaningful opposition. The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), which holds 110 of the 580 seats in the Indonesian House of Representatives, is the largest party in the parliament¹¹⁰. Although it is formally in opposition, it has adopted a more cooperative stance toward the government. In the absence of a genuine opposition, this has enabled the government to advance its populist policies with little resistance.

Prabowo, a former general, has made Indonesia more militarized, as reflected in the growing dominance of the armed forces¹¹¹. This trend is evident in the amendment to the Indonesian National Armed Forces Act, which regulates the organization, role, and duties of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia – TNI).

¹¹⁰. Suhenda, Dio. "KPU Announces House Seats With PDI-P on Top, Golkar in Second." *The Jakarta Post*, 26 Aug. 2024, www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2024/08/26/kpu-announces-house-seats-with-pdi-p-on-top-golkar-in-second.html.

¹¹¹. "Prabowo Subianto's Idea to Expand the Military's Role." *Tempo.co*, 20 Oct. 2025, magz.tempo.co/read/national/43562/one-year-of-prabowo.

The revised TNI Law received unanimous approval in parliament on March 20, 2025, and was promulgated in the State Gazette on March 26, 2025^{112, 113}.

The amendment sparked grave concern among civil society groups, who fear Indonesia could return to the era of Suharto, the dictator who ruled the country for more than 30 years until his regime fell in 1998. During Suharto's era, known as the New Order, the military exercised a "dual function," or *dwifungsi*, meaning that, in addition to defending the country, it also played a formal role in civilian administration¹¹⁴.

Following the collapse of Suharto's regime—marked by widespread human rights abuses and systematic corruption—Indonesia entered a period known as Reformasi, a democratic transition toward greater political openness and accountability. During this period, the *dwifungsi* doctrine was formally abolished, and the military was banned from political office following the enactment of Law No. 34 of 2004¹¹⁵.

Among the populist policies of Prabowo's administration is the controversial Free Nutritious Meal program. Due to its high cost, estimated at around USD 28 billion annually, part of the program's budget has been financed by cuts to education and infrastructure, sparking public backlash¹¹⁶. The initial budget cuts, announced in January 2025, totaled 306.7 trillion rupiah (USD 18.7 billion)¹¹⁷. The budget for the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology was reportedly reduced by a quarter to 42.3 trillion rupiah (USD 2.6 billion)¹¹⁸. By the end of 2025, the program was reported to have absorbed about 74.6 percent of the state budget¹¹⁹.

The program also involves the military, as Indonesia's archipelagic geography means that some areas are difficult to reach. The armed forces are viewed as the only state institution capable of ensuring the distribution of meals to remote regions¹²⁰. This reliance

¹¹². Salam, Hidayat. "New TNI Law Enacted, What Are the Changes and Impacts?" *Kompas.id*, 18 Apr. 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-uu-tni-baru-diberlakukan-apa-saja-perubahan-dan-dampaknya.

¹¹³. "House Passes Contentious TNI Law Amendments." *The Jakarta Post*. 20 Mar. 2025, www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2025/03/20/house-passes-contentious-tni-law-amendments.html.

¹¹⁴. Yuniar, Resty Woro. "Indonesia's Military Once Called All the Shots. It May Again Under Prabowo." *South China Morning Post*, 17 Mar. 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3302461/indonesias-military-once-called-all-shots-it-may-again-under-prabowo.

¹¹⁵. "Revision of the TNI Law Could Potentially Restore the Dual Function of the Armed Forces (ABRI) – Why Is There Still Trauma From the Militarism of the New Order Era?" *BBC News Indonesia*, 15 Mar. 2025, www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/cm2jr4r5meyo.

¹¹⁶. Sood, Amy. "Will the 'Dark Indonesia' Protest Against Prabowo's Austerity Cuts Escalate Further?" *South China Morning Post*, 26 Feb. 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3300172/will-dark-indonesia-protests-against-prabowos-austerity-cuts-escalate-further.

¹¹⁷. Ibid.

¹¹⁸. Ibid.

¹¹⁹. "Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program Absorbs 74.6% of Budget." *Tempo.co*, 18 Dec. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2074584/indonesias-free-nutritious-meal-program-absorbs-74-6-of-budget.

has raised concerns about the program's long-term sustainability and the military's growing influence over civilian affairs.

The budget cuts, which initially sparked online outrage, soon fueled a nationwide protest known as the Dark Indonesia movement, or Indonesia Gelap¹²¹. The hashtag #IndonesiaGelap became a trending topic on X (formerly Twitter), reportedly reaching 14 million mentions within 24 hours¹²². Led by university students and civil society organizations, the movement argued that the government's policies served the ruling elite's interests rather than the public good. Demonstrators also rejected the revival of the military's dual function, along with other controversial initiatives and policies¹²³.

Public anger continued to grow as the military's role expanded. Prabowo further inflamed tensions by increasing housing allowances for members of parliament to nearly ten times the minimum wage in Jakarta, triggering mass protests at the end of August. Thousands took to the streets nationwide¹²⁴, at least ten people were killed, and 1,042 protesters injured¹²⁵. During these demonstrations, the suppression of digital rights formed part of the government's broader strategy of systematic repression aimed at controlling dissent.

TikTok was found to have facilitated this repressive approach by suspending its live-streaming feature¹²⁶. A number of social media accounts and pieces of content were blocked in cooperation with the authorities. Police reportedly arrested seven individuals in connection with the protests. The government was also accused of hiring "buzzers," or cyber trolls, to manipulate public opinion about the demonstrations¹²⁷.

¹²⁰. Aditya, Nicholas Ryan, and Bagus Santosa. "The Indonesian National Armed Forces Is Recruiting 2,000 Personnel for the Free Nutritious Meal Program." *Kompas.com*, 22 Nov. 2024, nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/11/22/20403131/tni-rekrut-2000-personel-untuk-program-makan-bergizi-gratis.

¹²¹. Ginanjar, Raden Putri Alpadillah. "Indonesia Gelap' Protestors Call to Prosecute Former President Jokowi." *Tempo.co*, 20 Feb. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/1977914/indonesia-gelap-protesters-call-to-prosecute-former-president-jokowi.

¹²². Aswan, Desi Triana. "Indonesia Gelap Trending on X Reaches 14 Million Tweets in 24 Hours, Student Protest Due to Efficiency." *Tribunnews Sultra*, 18 Feb. 2025, sultra.tribunnews.com/2025/02/18/indonesia-gelap-trending-x-capai-14-juta-cuitan-24-jam-perkara-aksi-demo-mahasiswa-gegar-efisiensi.

¹²³. "Why Did the Massive 'Indonesia Gelap' Demonstration Occur?" *Tempo.co*, 19 Feb. 2025, tempo.co/politik/mengapa-aksi-demonstrasi-indonesia-gelap-masih-terjadi-1209290.

¹²⁴. Livingstone, Helen. "Indonesia Protests Explained: Why Did They Start and How Has the Government Responded?" *The Guardian*, 2 Sep. 2025, www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/02/indonesia-protests-explained-start-how-has-the-government-responded.

¹²⁵. Salam, Hidayat. "YLBHI: 3,337 People Arrested and 10 Killed in the Protest." *Kompas.id*, 3 Sep. 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/yldbhi-3337-orang-ditangkap-dan-10-meninggal-dalam-unjuk-rasa.

¹²⁶. "Bytedance's TikTok Temporarily Suspends Live Feature in Indonesia Following Protests." *Reuters*, 30 Aug. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bytedance-tiktok-temporarily-suspends-live-feature-indonesia-following-protests-2025-08-30.

¹²⁷. "Efforts to Undermine Demonstrations Through Influencers." *Tempo.co*, 4 Sep. 2025, www.tempo.co/politik/narasi-influencer-merepons-tuntutan-demonstrasi-2066522.

Prabowo ordered the TNI and the Indonesian National Police (Polri) to take firm action against protesters. This directive reportedly led to a significant escalation in state violence¹²⁸. Many of the injuries recorded during the protests were attributed to the authorities' extensive use of tear gas and beatings with blunt objects¹²⁹.

The government also sought to amend Law No. 2 of 2002, which regulates the National Police, in a manner similar to the TNI Law¹³⁰. However, this plan was blocked by the Constitutional Court, which ruled in November 2025 that active police officers must resign before taking up positions outside the police force¹³¹. In response, the National Police issued Police Regulation (Perpol) No. 10 of 2025 on December 9, 2025, allowing members of Polri to perform duties outside the police¹³². The move sparked public debate over whether the Perpol violates the Constitutional Court's ruling. Regardless, Prabowo moved ahead by approving a plan to draft a government regulation specifying which positions may be held by active police officers¹³³.

Developments under Prabowo's administration indicate that Indonesian democracy is in a critical condition. They represent a continuation of the democratic backsliding that began in the run-up to the 2024 general election, when then-President Joko Widodo allegedly interfered to preserve his political legacy. A key situation was his reported deal with Prabowo to nominate his son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as Prabowo's vice-presidential running mate. Gibran's candidacy, which initially failed to meet the eligibility criteria, was ultimately allowed by the Constitutional Court, whose chief justice at the time, Anwar Usman, is Widodo's brother-in-law¹³⁴.

¹²⁸. Damayanti Ismi, and Rezha Hadyan. "Indonesia's Prabowo Orders Crackdown on Unrest as Legislators Slash Perks." *Nikkei Asia*, 31 Aug. 2025, asia.nikkei.com/politics/indonesia-s-prabowo-orders-crackdown-on-unrest-as-legislators-slash-perks.

¹²⁹. "Ten People Died in the Wave of Protests – 'The State Must Respond to the Demands of the People.'" *BBC News Indonesia*, 3 Sep. 2025, www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/cp949kn2d84o.

¹³⁰. Trikarinaputri, Ervana. "Indonesia's Revised Police Law to Regulate Dual Positions for Active Police Officers." *Tempo.co*, 18 Nov. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2066783/indonesias-revised-police-law-to-regulate-dual-positions-for-active-police-officers.

¹³¹. "Constitutional Court Removes Opportunity for Active Police Occupying Civil Positions, DPR: Don't Rush to Be Implemented." *VOI*, 14 Nov. 2025, voi.id/en/news/53356.

¹³². "Waiting for the President to Revoke Police Regulation 10/2025." *VOI*, 17 Dec. 2025, voi.id/en/tulisan-seri/544006.

¹³³. "Prabowo Approves Regulation to Govern Police in Civil Positions." *Antara*, 21 Dec. 2025, en.antaranews.com/news/397228/prabowo-approves-regulation-to-govern-police-in-civil-positions.

¹³⁴. Janti, Nur, and Yericai Lai. "Chief Justice Demoted Over Gibran Ruling." *The Jakarta Post*, 8 Nov. 2023, www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2023/11/08/chief-justice-demoted-over-gibran-ruling.html.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations 2025

The expansion of the role of the military and police into civilian posts, along with the passage of the Criminal Procedure Code, has raised concerns about heightened risks of abuse of power.

Following the passage of the revised TNI Law on March 20, 2025, the military reportedly planned to conduct information and disinformation operations to counter perceived “threats to national sovereignty” in cyberspace¹³⁵. These operations allegedly targeted groups considered to be undermining public trust in defense institutions and the government¹³⁶.

Monitoring of online activities, or “cyber patrols,” is one method Indonesian authorities use to track content on social media platforms. However, this approach is controversial because authorities act as the sole arbiters of online content, and the criteria used to determine which narratives constitute threats to national security remain unclear.

In September 2025, the TNI targeted Ferry Irwendi, a content creator known for discussing controversial issues on his channel, including public policy. The military alleged that Irwendi committed criminal acts of defamation, hate speech, provocation, misinformation, and incitement that harmed national security. The TNI cited two examples of Irwendi’s content as misleading, and capable of causing public unrest and potentially disrupting national security: his analysis of a viral video involving TNI personnel, and his comments on the August 2025 riot that also involved the military¹³⁷. The allegations against Irwendi resulted from the TNI’s cyber patrols¹³⁸. At the time, his YouTube channel had around 1.92 million followers¹³⁹. Civil society condemned the military, arguing that it is not the TNI’s duty to act as a law enforcement agency^{140, 141}.

¹³⁵ Yaputra, Hendrik. “Defense Ministry: Cyber Operations to Counter Threats to National Sovereignty.” *Tempo.co*, 26 Mar. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/1990896/defense-ministry-cyber-operations-to-counter-threats-to-national-sovereignty.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Fajri, Daniel Ahmad. “TNI Claims Ferry Irwandis Content Misleading and Disrupts Stability.” *Tempo.co*, 12 Sep. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2048299/tni-claims-ferry-irwandis-content-misleading-and-disrupts-stability.

¹³⁸ Azzahra, Nabiila. “TNI Cyber Unit Suspects Influencer Ferry Irwandi of Criminal Act.” *Tempo.co*, 8 Sep. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2047180/tni-cyber-unit-suspects-influencer-ferry-irwandi-of-criminal-act.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Aswara, Dani. “Rights Watchdog Urged Prabowo to Halt TNI Cyber Unit’s Social Media Patrols.” *Tempo.co*, 9 Sep. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2047328/rights-watchdog-urges-prabowo-to-halt-tni-cyber-units-social-media-patrols.

¹⁴¹ Aswara, Dani. “Setara Institute: Indonesian Military Cyber Patrols Risk Digital Repression.” *Tempo.co*, 9 Sep. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2047479/setara-institute-indonesian-military-cyber-patrols-risk-digital-repression.

During the mass protests at the end of August 2025, Indonesian police reportedly intensified cyber patrols¹⁴². The National Police, together with the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, reportedly blocked 592 social media accounts deemed to be “spreading provocative and seditious narratives.”¹⁴³ Authorities named seven suspects for allegedly inciting people to attack the homes of parliament members and police stations¹⁴⁴. The alleged incitement was reportedly spread through online platforms. However, some of these individuals are merely activists critical of the government and state institutions¹⁴⁵.

Indonesia is known for employing “buzzers,” online trolls recruited to manipulate public opinion. These cyber trolls have also reportedly been used under Prabowo’s administration to favor the government. During the mass protests between August and September 2025, social media influencers reportedly received messages from unknown numbers offering paid collaborations¹⁴⁶. They were asked to create content calling for peace in exchange for payments amounting to hundreds of millions of rupiah¹⁴⁷.

Drone Emprit, a social media monitoring agency in Indonesia, reported activity by influencer accounts questioning the mass demonstrations¹⁴⁸. These accounts questioned the demonstrations’ agenda and whether they were sponsored¹⁴⁹. They also claimed that groups with negative intentions toward Prabowo were behind the incident. Another research team from the Monash Data and Democracy Research Hub found that of ten million social media conversations they recorded in relation to the demonstrations, only around 13,000 appeared to reflect netizens’ authentic voices¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴². Ristiyanti, Jihan. “Police in Indonesia Claim to Step up Cyber Surveillance Ahead of Week-Long Protests.” *Tempo.co*, 4 Sep. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2046094/police-in-indonesia-claim-to-step-up-cyber-surveillance-ahead-of-week-long-protests.

¹⁴³. Ibid.

¹⁴⁴. Ristiyanti, Jihan. “Indonesian Police Name Seven Suspects for Provocation, Incitement on Social Media Leading to Riots.” *Tempo.co*, 4 Sep. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2045995/indonesian-police-name-seven-suspects-for-provocation-incitement-on-social-media-leading-to-riots.

¹⁴⁵. “Chronology of the Arrest of Riau Student Activist Khariq Anhar: Changing News Quotes by KSPI President Said Iqbal.” *Tempo.co*, 1 Sep. 2025, www.tempo.co/hukum/kronologi-penangkapan-aktivis-mahasiswa-riau-khariq-anhar-ubah-kutipan-berita-presiden-kspi-said-iqbal-2065442.

¹⁴⁶. “Efforts to Undermine Demonstrations Through Influencers.” *Tempo.co*, 4 Sep. 2025, www.tempo.co/politik/narasi-influencer-merepsons-tuntutan-demonstran-2066522.

¹⁴⁷. Ibid.

¹⁴⁸. “A War of Narratives Suppresses Demonstrations Against the Dissolution of the House of Representatives.” *Tempo.co*, 7 Sep. 2025, www.tempo.co/politik/perang-narasi-demonstrasi-pembubaran-dpr-2067320.

¹⁴⁹. Ibid.

¹⁵⁰. Ibid.

During the Indonesia Gelap movement in early 2025, there was also a counter-movement suspected of being operated by buzzers called Bright Indonesia or Indonesia Terang.¹⁵¹ This aligns with findings by the Monash Data and Democracy Research Hub, which identified attempts to counter the narrative in support of the Indonesia Gelap movement on X (formerly Twitter). The counter-narratives were posted by several politicians before being amplified by political buzzer accounts¹⁵².

Under Prabowo's administration, the government has tightened its control of information on social media platforms while drafting revisions to the Cybersecurity and Resilience Bill¹⁵³. The revision, which the government aims to pass into law by the end of 2025, reportedly includes penalties for platforms that fail to "adequately protect their cybersecurity." Among the highlighted provisions is Article 56 of the draft law, which would allow the military to act as investigators in cyber-related crimes alongside the police and other government agencies¹⁵⁴. However, the Ministry of Law has claimed that the military's authority proposed in the bill is limited to handling cyber-related crimes involving only military personnel¹⁵⁵.

The government also announced the National Moderation and Complaint Administration System (SAMAN) in 2025, a system used by the government for content moderation—another mechanism that lacks transparency¹⁵⁶.

As mass demonstrations erupted in August 2025 and TikTok announced that it had suspended its live-streaming features¹⁵⁷, the government suspended the platform's operating license in October after it refused to provide government data related to the use

¹⁵¹. "Efforts to Undermine Demonstrations Through Influencers." *Tempo.co*, 4 Sep. 2025, www.tempo.co/politik/narasi-influencer-merepons-tuntutan-demonstran-2066522.

¹⁵². "Attempt to Influence Public Opinion in the "Indonesia Gelap" Protest." *Monash University*, 23 Feb. 2025, www.monash.edu/indonesia/news/attempt-to-influence-public-opinion-in-the-indonesia-gelap-protest.

¹⁵³. "Indonesia Prepares Cybersecurity, Resilience Bill." *Antara*, 3 Oct. 2025, en.antaranews.com/news/383973/indonesia-prepares-cybersecurity-resilience-bill.

¹⁵⁴. Ritonga, Machradin Wahyudi. "The TNI's Authority in the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill Is Under the Spotlight, Deemed to Be Harming Democracy." *Kompas.id*, 4 Oct. 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-dinilai-cederai-demokrasi-wewenang-tni-dalam-ruu-keamanan-dan-ketahanan-siber-jadi-sorotan.

¹⁵⁵. Harbowo, Nikolaus, and Machradin Wahyudi Ritonga. "The Government Will Limit the TNI's Authority in Cyber Crime Investigations." *Kompas.id*, 8 Oct. 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-pemerintah-bakal-batasi-kewenangan-tni-dalam-penyidikan-pidana-siber.

¹⁵⁶. Nidhal, Muhammad, et al. "Shadows of Censorship: Indonesia's Content Moderation Policy Development." *Center for Indonesian Policy Studies*, July 2025, repository.cips-indonesia.org/media/publications/619819-shadows-of-censorship-indonesias-content-bad635c0.pdf.

¹⁵⁷. Nugroho, Novali Panji. "Indonesian Ministry Addresses TikTok 's Limited Live Streaming Feature in the Wake of Mass Protest." *Tempo.co*, 31 Aug. 2025, en.tempco.co/read/2044801/indonesian-ministry-addresses-tiktoks-limited-live-streaming-feature-in-wake-of-mass-protest.

of its live-streaming feature¹⁵⁸. According to TikTok, the government asked the company to hand over traffic, streaming, and monetization data. The suspension was later lifted after the company complied and provided the requested data¹⁵⁹. The government reportedly needs the data to trace accounts tied to online gambling that monetized TikTok's live-streaming feature during the protests¹⁶⁰.

Toward the end of 2025, the government also enacted a revised Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP) on November 18, 2025¹⁶¹. The new law grants law enforcement broad powers with limited oversight, including the authority to make early-stage arrests, conduct searches, carry out surveillance, and authorize wiretaps without prior judicial approval¹⁶². It came into effect in January 2026.

In June 2025, it was reported that the Attorney General's Office had signed an agreement with four telecommunications operators to install wiretapping devices. This development further expands government surveillance efforts, as the agreement permits prosecutors to access telecommunications recordings and exchange data for law enforcement based on suspicion, even without formal charges or legally identified suspects¹⁶³. The agreement was criticized by civil society in Indonesia because it lacks proper oversight and threatens the country's constitutional right to privacy. Article 40 of Indonesia's 1999 Telecommunications Law prohibits the interception of communications without legal authorization¹⁶⁴.

¹⁵⁸. "Indonesia Suspends TikTok Registration Over Data Sharing Failures, Ministry Says." *Reuters*, 3 Oct. 2025, www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/indonesia-suspends-tiktok-registration-over-data-sharing-failures-ministry-says-2025-10-03.

¹⁵⁹. Uli, Maretha. "Government Lifts TikTok Suspension After Platform Fulfills Data Obligations." *The Jakarta Post*, 5 Oct. 2025, www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2025/10/05/government-lifts-tiktok-suspension-after-platform-fulfills-data-obligations.html.

¹⁶⁰. Karmini, Niniek. "TikTok Gets Its Indonesian Operating License Back After Giving Government Data From Protests." *AP News*, 5 Oct. 2025, apnews.com/article/indonesia-suspends-tiktok-license-protests-prabowo-data-01255b95de06f007ef3cec1a0d3bd850.

¹⁶¹. Hamdhi, Akmalai. "Revised Criminal Procedure Law Set to Take Effect Jan. 3, Despite Protests." *Jakarta Globe*, 18 Nov. 2025, jakartaglobe.id/news/revised-criminal-procedure-law-set-to-take-effect-jan-2-despite-protests.

¹⁶². *Ibid.*

¹⁶³. Teresia, Ananda, and Stefano Sulaiman. "Indonesia Signs Wiretapping Pacts With Telco Operators; Analysts Flag Privacy Concerns." *Reuters*, 27 June 2025, www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/indonesia-signs-wiretapping-pacts-with-telco-operators-analysts-flag-privacy-2025-06-26.

¹⁶⁴. Yuniar, Resty Woro. "Indonesia's Wiretap Pact Could Create Digital Dragnet for Dissent, Watchdogs Warn." *South China Morning Post*, 25 July 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3319576/indonesias-wiretap-pact-could-create-digital-drag-net-dissent-watchdogs-warn.

In 2025, it was also revealed that First Wap, a company registered in Indonesia, has been selling technology used to target tens of thousands of phone numbers belonging to activists and public figures around the world, including those in Indonesia¹⁶⁵. This revelation raised concerns about the country's export regulations for surveillance technology and added to existing concerns about the alleged abuse of surveillance technology, which has already been documented in Indonesia¹⁶⁶.

Despite numerous incidents indicating a decline in digital rights, there has been a positive development: the Constitutional Court's decision on the repressive Electronic Information and Transaction (ITE) Law. On April 29, 2025, the Court partially granted a petition by environmental activist Daniel Frits Maurits Tangkilisan, who challenged a controversial defamation clause in the law¹⁶⁷.

In April 2024, Tangkilisan was sentenced to seven months in prison for Facebook comments criticizing the environmental impact of a shrimp pond project in the Karimunjawa Islands, off northern Central Java. Local residents filed a complaint, claiming his posts offended them, which led to his prosecution under the ITE Law¹⁶⁸.

The Court's April 2025 ruling clarified that defamation charges under the law can be initiated only by individuals, not by "government agencies, groups with specific identities, institutions, corporations, professions, or positions."¹⁶⁹ Judge Arif Hidayat stated that Tangkilisan's criticism was "a form of supervision, correction, and suggestions related to community interests."¹⁷⁰

This ruling marks a significant step forward for free expression in Indonesia, where the ITE Law has often been used to target critics of the government and state institutions. According to Amnesty International Indonesia, between January 2018 and July 2025, at least 758 civilians were criminalized under the vague provisions of the ITE Law¹⁷¹.

¹⁶⁵. "Investigation: Tracing Phone Numbers of Activists and Public Figures." *Tempo.co*, 15 Oct. 2025, www.tempo.co/investigasi/lacak-nomor-ponsel-aktivis-tokoh-publik-2079647.

¹⁶⁶. "Israeli Firms Sold Invasive Surveillance Tech to Indonesia: Report." *Al Jazeera*, 3 May 2024, www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/3/israeli-firms-sold-invasive-surveillance-tech-to-indonesia-report.

¹⁶⁷. Yuniar, Resty Woro. "Victory for Free Speech in Indonesia as Court Curbs Defamation Law." *South China Morning Post*, 18 May 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3310674/victory-free-speech-indonesia-court-curbs-defamation-law.

¹⁶⁸. Ibid.

¹⁶⁹. Basyari, Igbal, and Hidayat Salam. "Constitutional Court Prohibits Government Agencies From Complaining About Defamation." *Kompas.id*, 29 Apr. 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-mk-larang-lembaga-pemerintah-adukan-pencemaran-nama-baik.

¹⁷⁰. Yuniar, Resty Woro. "Victory for Free Speech in Indonesia as Court Curbs Defamation Law." *South China Morning Post*, 18 May 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3310674/victory-free-speech-indonesia-court-curbs-defamation-law.

¹⁷¹. Siagian, Oyuk Ivani. "Amnesty: 758 Criminalized Under ITE Law Despite President's Call for Criticism." *Tempo.co*, 15 Aug. 2025, en.tempo.co/read/2039900/amnesty-758-criminalized-under-ite-law-despite-presidents-call-for-criticism.

Of these, 710 were charged with hate speech and defamation¹⁷². Police cyber patrols have processed the cases of 347 people, according to Amnesty, while the rest were named suspects following reports from the government, the military, social organizations, and private companies alleging defamation and insult¹⁷³.

In a separate ruling, the Constitutional Court also redefined the legal meaning of “public unrest” in cases involving the spread of disinformation online. It held that the term “unrest” in the ITE Law must be strictly interpreted as unrest occurring in the physical public space, not in digital or cyberspace. The ruling clarifies that Article 28 (3), which punishes anyone who disseminates false information that causes unrest, applies only if the unrest leads to actual, physical disruption of society¹⁷⁴.

However, despite the April 2025 ruling, cases continue to arise in contravention of the Constitutional Court’s decisions. In May 2025, a university student was arrested by the police and charged under the ITE Law for creating a satirical meme of Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo kissing¹⁷⁵. The meme, reportedly an AI-generated image uploaded to X (formerly Twitter) before going viral on multiple social media platforms, referred to an alleged deal between Prabowo and Widodo during the 2024 general election, where Widodo’s interference significantly contributed to Prabowo’s victory¹⁷⁶.

Following the mass demonstrations in August 2025, several activists were arrested, including Delpedro Marhaen Rismansyah, Muzaffar Salim, Syahdan Husein, and Khariq Anhar. All four were charged with provocation under the Criminal Code and with spreading false information online to incite public unrest under the ITE Law¹⁷⁷. Their cases have been widely covered by the media, as they highlight the deterioration of freedom of expression under Prabowo’s administration, particularly in its handling of pro-democracy protests.

¹⁷². Ibid

¹⁷³. Ibid.

¹⁷⁴. “MK Rules for Free Speech: Criticism Against Gov’t Cannot Be Criminalized Under ITE Law.” *Jakarta Globe*, 29 Apr. 2025, jakartaglobe.id/news/mk-rules-for-free-speech-criticism-against-govt-cannot-be-criminalized-under-ite-law.

¹⁷⁵. Martiar, Norbertus Arya Dwiangga. “Student Who Created Presidential Meme Arrested and Charged With ITE Law Draws Heavy Criticism.” *Kompas.id*, 9 May 2025, www.kompas.id/artikel/en-mahasiswa-pembuat-meme-presiden-ditangkap-dan-dijerat-dengan-uu-ite-menuai-kritik-keras.

¹⁷⁶. Uli, Maretha, and Radhiyya Indra. “Police Release ITB Student Arrested Over ‘Incident’ Meme.” *The Jakarta Post*, 13 May 2025, www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2025/05/13/police-release-itb-student-arrested-over-indecent-meme.html.

¹⁷⁷. Lai, Yericia. “Prosecutors Indict Four Activists for Inciting August Unrest.” *The Jakarta Post*, 18 Dec. 2025, www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2025/12/18/prosecutors-indict-four-activists-for-inciting-august-unrest.html.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The most concerning issue in Indonesia's digital rights landscape in 2025 is the growing militarization of the state under Prabowo's administration, which heightens risks across all aspects of digital rights. This trend suggests that Indonesia is becoming increasingly authoritarian under his leadership. The government also shows disregard for the rule of law, as its actions have repeatedly contradicted Constitutional Court rulings. There is a pressing need to document how digital rights are being affected, particularly in light of the expanding roles of the armed forces and the police.

Cyber patrols by state authorities to monitor online activities have raised concerns about the transparency of these efforts, especially regarding the criteria used to determine which content is considered harmful to national security, including material deemed to spread "false information" or "incite public unrest." State-controlled moderation can be used to suppress dissent, unpopular opinions, or minority viewpoints under the banner of "public order."

Allegations that state agencies continue to use buzzers—a practice carried over from Joko Widodo's administration—suggest that these networks will remain a political weapon for gaining advantage through propaganda and disinformation. Under Prabowo's administration, media freedom may further erode amid democratic backsliding. In the absence of strong counter-reporting, such propaganda and disinformation are likely to flourish.

The situation regarding TikTok's suspension of its own live-streaming features is also a major concern, as it indicates an erosion of platform accountability in a politically charged context. A further concern is whether this will set a precedent for future demonstrations and similar political situations. Following the government's pressure on TikTok to hand over user data, this also reflects a broader trend of the state attempting to control social media platforms. The data request also raises concerns about social media platforms complying with government orders in a non-transparent manner.

In light of these issues around information control, further efforts can focus on strengthening measures to counter disinformation and propaganda. Regarding social media accountability, efforts can prioritize resisting censorship and preventing the exploitation of user privacy for political gain. While capacity building in these areas can be further explored, under Prabowo's administration, advocacy appears to face additional challenges for civil society, given the current political situation in which democracy is declining and meaningful opposition is largely absent.

In terms of surveillance, with the new Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP) in force and the Attorney General's Office signing an agreement with four telecommunications operators, dissidents may face increased surveillance. This underscores the need to step up digital security efforts for dissidents, as well as capacity building on surveillance-related issues. The discovery that the Indonesian company First Wap is exporting its surveillance technology worldwide also raises a new concern: how to prevent the abuse of this technology against people outside Indonesia as well as Indonesian citizens.

MALAYSIA



A. Political Situations ■■■

Since 2018, Malaysia's politics have been unstable. Barisan Nasional (BN), the political coalition that had ruled Malaysia for decades since independence, was defeated for the first time in the 2018 General Election (GE14). Mahathir Mohamad, then leading the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, became prime minister for the second time. However, his government lasted only 22 months, ending after an event dubbed the "Sheraton Move," in which members of the ruling coalition plotted to withdraw from the government.

The government then collapsed, plunging Malaysia into a political crisis ahead of the 2022 General Election (GE15). The outcome of GE15 marked a significant political development: the rise of a hardline Muslim conservative party, the Malaysian Islamic Party or Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). As part of the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, PAS became the single party with the most seats in parliament, winning 43 out of 222 seats in the lower house¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁸. Zainudin, Faiz. "PAS Aiming for 80 Seats in GE16, Says Vice-President." *Free Malaysia Today*, 13 Sep. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/09/13/pas-aiming-for-80-seats-in-ge16-says-nik-amar.

The rise of PAS is widely believed to be linked to the decline of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), as Muslim Malays seek an alternative party that aligns with their aspirations to protect Islam and preserve Malay privileges. UMNO, a dominant member of the BN coalition, has been marred by corruption scandals, including the 1MDB scandal, which led to the prosecution of former prime minister Najib Razak.

Since Anwar Ibrahim became prime minister following GE15, his administration has been challenged by PAS's growing popularity. Many observers argue that if PAS wins the next general election, Malaysia could become more conservative. In GE15, PAS campaigned strategically both online and offline. TikTok played a crucial role in its online campaign, and the party also leveraged a vast nationwide network of Muslim clerics who promote a conservative Islamic ideology to young people.

During the GE15 campaign, Anwar promised reforms, including a review and repeal of "provisions of acts that can be abused to restrict free speech."¹⁷⁹ This includes the repressive 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) and the 1948 Sedition Act. However, his administration has stalled these reforms, and state authorities have significantly increased censorship.

Some observers suggest that this shift may be politically motivated, given that the administration needs to secure votes from Malay supporters who appear to back PAS, as observed in state elections following GE15¹⁸⁰. According to these observers, increased censorship may indicate that the government is adopting a more conservative stance for political gain and to curb PAS's strategic advances, particularly given that its GE15 campaign was dominated by political propaganda and disinformation^{181, 182}.

¹⁷⁹. Yosof, Iman Muttaqin. "Activists: Malaysia's Decade-Old Crackdown on Free Speech Shows No Signs of Easing." *BenarNews*, 31 Mar. 2025, www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/anwar-free-speech-03312025115152.html.

¹⁸⁰. "Islamist Parties Are Gaining Ground in Malaysia." *The Economist*, 7 Aug. 2025, www.economist.com/asia/2025/08/07/islamist-parties-are-gaining-ground-in-malaysia.

¹⁸¹. Azmi, Hadi. "Malaysia Eyes Censorship Powers Over Netflix, Other Streaming Content Amid Creeping Conservatism." *South China Morning Post*, 22 Mar. 2024, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3256387/malaysia-eyes-censorship-powers-over-netflix-other-streaming-content-amid-creeping-conservatism.

¹⁸². Mahmud, Aqil Haziq. "Analysis: The Anwar Government's Growing Push Against Big Tech Raises Questions of Its True Intentions." *CNA*, 8 Aug. 2024, www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-social-media-licence-big-tech-anwar-ibrahim-meta-tiktok-4534646.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

A significant development in digital rights in Malaysia in 2025 was the Court of Appeal's August 2025 ruling clarifying the terms "offensive" and "annoy" in Section 233 of the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA). The court held that it is no longer a crime in Malaysia to make "offensive" online comments with the intention to "annoy."¹⁸³

Section 233 previously made it an offense for a person to make, create, solicit, or initiate the transmission of any online comment that was "obscene, indecent, false, menacing, or offensive" with the intent "to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass another person."¹⁸⁴

According to the judge, "A premium should be given to truth, and the fact that some truths may be unpalatable does not justify criminalizing the messenger merely because some masses of the people do not like the message." The judge also stated that there is no uniform societal standard for what is "offensive," and that what one person finds offensive may not be offensive to another in a diverse society¹⁸⁵.

However, in December 2024, the government passed an amendment to Section 233 of the CMA, replacing the word "offensive" with "grossly offensive." The revision took effect in February 2025. The ruling therefore applies only to the previous version of the law and covers only ongoing cases that involve that earlier wording¹⁸⁶.

The ruling stemmed from a 2021 case against Heidi Quah, founder of Refuge for the Refugees. She was charged with posting "offensive" comments on Facebook that highlighted the alleged mistreatment of refugees in immigration detention centers¹⁸⁷. She subsequently challenged whether the words "offensive" and "annoy" in the provision were inconsistent with the fundamental human rights enshrined in the Constitution under Articles 8 and 10¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸³. Anbalagan, V. "Unconstitutional to Criminalise Offensive Speech Made Online, Rules Court." *Free Malaysia Today*, 19 Aug. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/08/19/unconstitutional-to-criminalise-offensive-speech-made-online-rules-court.

¹⁸⁴. "Govt Heads to Federal Court to Appeal Ruling on Offensive Online Speech Provision." *Free Malaysia Today*, 12 Sep. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/09/12/govt-heads-to-federal-court-to-appeal-ruling-on-offensive-online-speech-provision.

¹⁸⁵. Lim, Ida. "Don't Shoot the Messenger: Court of Appeal Says Offensive Online Remarks to 'Annoy' Can't Be a Crime in Malaysia." *Malay Mail*, 19 Aug. 2025, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/08/19/dont-shoot-the-messenger-court-of-appeal-says-offensive-online-remarks-to-annoy-cant-be-a-crime-in-malaysia/188168.

¹⁸⁶. Kamarulzaman, Zikri. "Court Strikes Down 'Annoyance' Offence From Communications Law." *Malaysiakini*, 19 Aug. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/752739.

¹⁸⁷. "Refuge for the Refugees Founder Heidi Quah Charged in KL With Internet Misuse." *Malay Mail*, 27 July 2021, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/07/27/refuge-for-the-refugees-founder-heidy-quah-charged-in-kl-with-improper-use/1992992.

¹⁸⁸. Anbalagan, V. "Appeals Court Reserves Ruling on Activists' Challenge to Online Speech Law." *Free Malaysia Today*, 11 June 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/06/11/appeals-court-reserves-ruling-on-activists-challenge-to-online-speech-law.

Following the ruling, the government appealed¹⁸⁹. Media reported that Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim defended the decision, saying that institutional reforms could not be based solely on court decisions but must be studied holistically before implementation¹⁹⁰.

According to the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) Malaysia, a human rights organization, there were 123 cases under Section 233 of the CMA in 2025, up from 99 in 2024. The law remains the most frequently used to criminalize free speech in Malaysia. The CIJ report also found that the number of cases under the 1948 Sedition Act increased in 2025, with 36 cases recorded, compared with 19 in 2024¹⁹¹.

In December 2025, activist and graphic artist Fahmi Reza was arrested and charged after criticizing the Crown Prince of Johor, Tunku Ismail Sultan Ibrahim, in a social media post. Fahmi has been arrested and charged multiple times in similar circumstances. In the post, he questioned why the Crown Prince was able to act with impunity and face no legal repercussions¹⁹².

It is unclear which situation the post referred to. It was published shortly after Bullish Aim Sdn Bhd, a company chaired and owned by Tunku Ismail, launched a new cryptocurrency stablecoin, RMJDT. Earlier, the Johor Regent had drawn public attention for his alleged involvement in a scandal over the recruitment of seven football players who played for the Malaysia national football team¹⁹³. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) accused them of falsifying documents to obtain Malaysian citizenship¹⁹⁴.

Media reported that Fahmi was detained on December 19, 2025, and charged under Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act for acts with seditious tendency, and under Section 233 of the CMA for the improper use of network facilities or services¹⁹⁵. The arrest followed a wave of police

¹⁸⁹. "Gov't to Take 'Offensive', 'Annoys' Ruling to Federal Court." *Malaysiakini*, 20 Aug. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/752921.

¹⁹⁰. Easwaran, Elill. "Reform Must Be Studied, Not Just Left to Courts, Says Anwar." *Free Malaysia Today*, 21 Aug. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/08/21/reform-must-be-studied-not-just-left-to-courts-says-anwar.

¹⁹¹. "A Report on the State of Freedom of Expression (FOE) in Malaysia 2025." *Center for Investigative Journalism Malaysia*, 9 Dec. 2025, cijmalaysianet/a-report-on-the-state-of-freedom-of-expression-foe-in-malaysia-2025.

¹⁹². Kamarulzaman, Zikri. "Fahmi Reza Targets Johor Regent; Death Threat, Police Reports Emerge." *Malaysiakini*, 17 Dec. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/763639.

¹⁹³. Bedi, Rashvinjeet S. "Fans, Critics Say 'Many Unanswered Questions' on Malaysia Football Scandal, as Minister Defends Citizenship Process." *CNA*, 9 Oct. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/fifa-malaysia-football-scandal-minister-fans-critics-answers-5391751.

¹⁹⁴. Solhi, Farah. "Tunku Ismail Defends 7 'Heritage' Players, Says They Have Legit Papers." *Malaysiakini*, 25 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/759004.

¹⁹⁵. Kumar, Datuk M. "Fahmi Reza's Statement Recorded Over Alleged Insult to Johor Royal Institution." *Bernama*, 19 Dec. 2025, www.bernama.com/misc/rss/news.php/news.php?id=2504626.

reports, with media reporting that a total of 284 complaints were filed against the activist for allegedly insulting the Crown Prince¹⁹⁶. Some of those who lodged the reports were reportedly Johor state assembly members, non-governmental organizations, youth groups, and community leaders.

In Malaysia, race, religion, and royalty—commonly referred to as the “3Rs”—is a sensitive socio-political topic concerning ethnic relations, Islam’s status, and the monarchy. The government of Anwar Ibrahim has been perceived as cracking down harshly on freedom of speech related to the 3Rs. In July 2025, Anwar issued a “final warning” to the public not to exploit the 3Rs to undermine national security¹⁹⁷. He added that the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) would monitor the situation without exception.

In 2023, Anwar Ibrahim justified the use of the Sedition Act when it involves the monarchy¹⁹⁸. His comment stemmed from the case of Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, then the caretaker head of government in the Malaysian state of Kedah. The comment can be seen to have a political dimension, as Sanusi is from the opposition PAS. He was charged in 2023 under the Sedition Act for remarks allegedly insulting the Sultan of Selangor, Sharafuddin Idris Shah, and the 16th Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Al-Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah.

The comment regarding the Sultan of Selangor concerned his appointment of the head of government in Selangor, Amirudin bin Shari, who is from Anwar’s Pakatan Harapan coalition. The comment involving the 16th Yang di-Pertuan Agong related to the Sultan’s role in the formation of Anwar Ibrahim’s government, given the political vacuum that followed the 2022 general election, which resulted in a hung parliament. Sanusi was acquitted in both cases in December 2024 and February 2025, respectively^{199, 200}.

¹⁹⁶. “Fahmi Reza Out on Police Bail After Post on TMJ Sparks 284 Police Reports.” *Malay Mail*, 20 Dec. 2025, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/12/20/fahmi-reza-out-on-police-bail-after-post-on-tmj-sparks-284-police-reports/202578.

¹⁹⁷. Final Warning to Those Playing Up 3R Issues.” *Ministry of Communications*, 11 July 2025, www.komunikasi.gov.my/en/public/news/24381-final-warning-to-those-playing-up-3r-issues-anwar.

¹⁹⁸. Lim, Ida. “PM Anwar Justifies Sedition Act in Cases Involving Royalty.” *Malay Mail*, 18 July 2023, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/07/18/pm-anwar-justifies-sedition-act-in-cases-involving-royalty/80362.

¹⁹⁹. “Sanusi Freed of One Sedition Charge Against Selangor Sultan.” *Free Malaysia Today*, 10 Dec. 2024, staging-beta.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/12/10/sanusi-freed-of-one-sedition-charge-against-selangor-sultan.

²⁰⁰. Asyraf, Faisal. “Sanusi Acquitted of Sedition Against Ex-King.” *Free Malaysia Today*, 24 Feb. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/02/24/sanusi-acquitted-of-sedition-against-former-agong.

Aside from the sedition charge, Fahmi was reportedly notified by X (formerly Twitter) that the MCMC had ordered the platform to remove his post criticizing the Johor Regent, which the platform refused to do²⁰¹. His post remained publicly visible on X and Facebook at the time of the report on December 17, 2025.

Under Anwar Ibrahim's administration, control of information has been extensive. The government has attempted to require social media platforms with over eight million users to obtain a license to operate in the country. However, because many of them had not complied with the registration in 2025, the government adopted a new approach by automatically designating qualifying platforms as license holders starting January 1, 2026²⁰². According to the MCMC, platforms that meet the criteria include WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube²⁰³.

The Online Safety Act, a new law governing social media platforms, was also enacted in May 2025²⁰⁴. The law grants the government authority to take legal action against social media platforms for running fraudulent advertisements and failing to comply with regulations²⁰⁵. Despite concerns that it could be used to restrict freedom of speech, the government claimed that it was specifically designed to protect the safety of social media users²⁰⁶. Following its promulgation, the MCMC reportedly developed 10 sub-legislations under the law to strengthen accountability among licensed service providers in addressing online harms, which are expected to be completed by June 2026²⁰⁷.

²⁰¹. Kamarulzaman, Zikri. "Fahmi Reza Targets Johor Regent; Death Threat, Police Reports Ensur." *Malaysiakini*, 17 Dec. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/763639.

²⁰². "Social Media Platforms With Over 8 Million Users Deemed Registered From Jan 1." *Free Malaysia Today*, 15 Dec. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/12/15/social-media-platforms-with-over-8mil-users-deemed-registered-from-jan-1.

²⁰³. "Social Media Platforms 'Registered' From Jan 1." *New Straits Times*, 16 Dec. 2025, www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/12/1337933/social-media-platforms-registered-jan-1.

²⁰⁴. Iskandar, Ilyia Marsya, and Qistina Sallehuddin. "Azalina: Online Safety Act to Take Effect Jan 1, 2026." *New Straits Times*, 13 Nov. 2025, www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/1314384/azalina-online-safety-act-take-effect-jan-1-2026.

²⁰⁵. Aryf, Dania Kamal. "Fahmi: Online Safety Act Lets Govt Take Legal Action Against Meta." *Malaysiakini*, 7 Nov. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/760145.

²⁰⁶. Tan, Rex. "Online Safety Act Will Protect, Not Control, SocialMedia Users, Says MCMC." *Free Malaysia Today*, 15 Dec. 2025, www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/12/15/online-safety-act-will-protect-not-control-social-media-users-says-mcmc.

²⁰⁷. As, Mohamad Al, and Nor Ain Mohamed Radhi, "MCMC Drafting 10 Subsidiary Laws Under Online Safety Act – Fahmi." *New Straits Times*, 3 Nov. 2025, www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/1307634/mcmc-drafting-10-subsidiary-laws-under-online-safety-act-fahmi.

From January 1, 2022, to July 1, 2025, social media platforms reportedly removed 37,845 instances of false information and 7,846 posts linked to 3Rs issues following the MCMC's requests²⁰⁸. Social media platforms have repeatedly been called to the MCMC's offices over such matters during Anwar's administration²⁰⁹.

According to the Ministry of Communications, the removals also included the takedown of politically driven troll accounts that manipulated information to provoke racial and religious tensions²¹⁰. In 2024, the MCMC claimed that a troll farm was aiming to tarnish Anwar Ibrahim's reputation on social media²¹¹.

Despite that claim, in October 2025, independent outlet Malaysiakini discovered at least 263 accounts participating in a coordinated campaign to artificially boost support for Anwar Ibrahim on his official Facebook page²¹². A coordinated inauthentic behavior network with a political agenda had previously been uncovered in 2022, when Meta found a network linked to the Malaysian police²¹³. The police were alleged to have attempted to manipulate public discourse by setting up a "troll farm."²¹⁴

Following the discovery, Malaysiakini's Facebook pages were suspended. According to Meta, the suspension was due to "a technical issue," but no specific explanation was provided²¹⁵. Malaysiakini also reported that Meta told them it found no evidence of policy violations related to Anwar's Facebook page. The government also denied involvement in the suspension and claimed that Meta confirmed that the network Malaysiakini discovered

²⁰⁸. "Ministry: Over 82,000 Immoral Social Media Posts in Malaysia Taken Down Since 2022; Over 37,000 More on False Info." *Malay Mail*, 14 Aug. 2025, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/08/14/ministry-over-82000-immoral-social-media-posts-in-malaysia-taken-down-since-2022-over-37000-more-on-false-info/187579.

²⁰⁹. "Malaysia Summons TikTok Management Over Delays Tackling Fake News Report, Says." *Reuters*, 2 Sep. 2025, www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/malaysia-summons-tiktok-management-over-delays-tackling-fake-news-report-says-2025-09-02.

²¹⁰. "Ministry: Over 82,000 Immoral Social Media Posts in Malaysia Taken Down Since 2022; Over 37,000 More on False Info." *Malay Mail*, 14 Aug. 2025, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/08/14/ministry-over-82000-immoral-social-media-posts-in-malaysia-taken-down-since-2022-over-37000-more-on-false-info/187579.

²¹¹. "Those Who Used Troll Farm to Abuse Online Identified." *The Star*, 18 July 2024, www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/07/18/those-who-used-troll-farm-to-abuse-online-identified.

²¹². Koh, Jun Lin. "Deception and Data: Inside Pro-Anwar CIB Network Investigation." *Malaysiakini*, 1 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/756652.

²¹³. Nimmo, Ben. "Meta's Adversarial Threat Report, Second Quarter 2022." *Meta*, 4 Aug. 2022, about.fb.com/news/2022/08/metad-adversarial-threat-report-q2-2022.

²¹⁴. "Govt Must Explain Troll Farm's Police Links – DAP Leader." *Malaysiakini*, 5 Aug. 2022, www.malaysiakini.com/news/631025.

²¹⁵. "Mkini's FB Pages Were Suspended Due to 'Technical Issue,' Meta Claims." *Malaysiakini*, 9 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/757454.

was not genuine^{216, 217}. Meta's spokesperson stated, "Our review has not found evidence of violations of our coordinated inauthentic behavior policy related to the prime minister's Facebook page."²¹⁸

In addition, in October 2025, the government unveiled a plan to limit prepaid SIM card registration to two per telecommunications company for Malaysians and two in total for foreigners, in order to tackle online fraud and misuse²¹⁹. The government reportedly expects that the measures will curb the misuse of prepaid SIM cards to register social media accounts used for fraud, deception, and threats²²⁰.

Media reported that the government sent a letter in April 2025 to telecommunications firms in the country, requesting detailed records of users' phone calls and internet activity, including call records, IP call records, and location data²²¹. The MCMC stated that the requested data would be used to generate granular statistics to track active broadband subscriptions and penetration²²². According to the MCMC, telecommunications firms would be required to anonymize the data before submission so that no individual subscriber could be identified²²³.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The most concerning digital rights issue in Malaysia is the state's control of information, particularly through censorship and restrictions on online speech under the CMA and Sedition Act. Under Anwar's administration, these laws continue to be used against free expression, contradicting his coalition's election manifesto promise to repeal them. As censorship and these laws are used to crack down on free speech, they reduce the diversity of viewpoints users can encounter, potentially silencing dissenting and marginalized voices.

²¹⁶. Yusry, Muhammad. "Fahmi, Meta Denies Malaysiakini Facebook Takedown, Fake Accounts Linked to Anwar." *Malay Mail*, 1 Oct. 2025, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/10/01/fahmi-meta-denies-malaysiakini-facebook-takedown-fake-accounts-linked-to-anwar/193036.

²¹⁷. "Mkini's FB Pages Were Suspended Due to 'Technical Issue,' Meta Claims." *Malaysiakini*, 9 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/757454.

²¹⁸. "No Sign of Policy Violations on Anwar's FB Page, Says Meta." *Malaysiakini*, 30 Sep. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/756612.

²¹⁹. "Govt to Limit Malaysians to 24 Prepaid SIM Cards per Person." *Malaysiakini*, 22 Oct. 2025, www.malaysiakini.com/news/758697.

²²⁰. Ibid.

²²¹. Sipalan, Joseph. "Malaysia Orders Telecoms Firms to Hand Over User Data, Raising Privacy Concerns." *South China Morning Post*, 6 June 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3313339/malaysia-orders-telecoms-firms-hand-over-user-data-raising-privacy-concerns.

²²². Ibid.

²²³. Ibid.

Regarding the 3Rs, the issue is rooted in Malaysia's societal norms. While the human rights concerns surrounding 3R-related topics are sensitive, those who address them are also challenging social norms that position Malay Muslims as having the most privileges in Malaysian society. In addition, criticism of the royal institutions is prohibited, regardless of the circumstances, because they are considered revered.

This situation underscores the conservative nature the Malaysian society, a trend that may deepen with the growing popularity of the hardline Islamist party PAS. While Malaysia's democratic system is often viewed as more advanced than that of many neighboring countries, efforts to advance democratic reforms are constrained by 3R-related issues, particularly identity politics.

On a more positive note, the ruling in response to Heidi Quah's challenge to the CMA provision set an important precedent. Even though it applies only to the previous version of the law, it establishes grounds to challenge the new version as well. What remains to be seen is whether the government's appeal will succeed. If the appeal is dropped, this could mark a milestone in terms of positive progress for freedom of expression in Malaysia.

Regarding social media accountability, it will be important to monitor whether control of information—especially censorship through orders requiring platforms to comply—intensifies following the automatic license registration of social media platforms. The main concern is transparency in government content policing and censorship decisions. When the government holds sole authority over these matters, it can lead to abuse of its power, allowing officials to silence opponents, minorities, or unpopular ideas without accountability.

MYANMAR



A. Political Situations

Since 2021, Myanmar has been in a state of civil war following a coup d'état led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 1, 2021. The coup overthrew the government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), which had won a majority of votes in the November 2020 election. The junta claimed election fraud as justification for staging the coup, a claim observers have found baseless²²⁴.

The National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (NUG), formed by elected lawmakers and parliamentary members ousted in the coup, was subsequently established. The NUG later created the People's Defense Force as its armed wing. Over time, the military has struggled to gain full control of the country, leading to widespread clashes between military forces and resistance groups.

²²⁴. "Myanmar Election: No Evidence of Fraud in 2020 Vote, Observers Say." *BBC News*, 17 May 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57144397.

In July 2025, the military enacted an election law that imposes penalties of up to the death sentence on anyone who opposes or disrupts the election²²⁵. In the same month, it also enacted the Military Secrets Protection Law, which criminalizes the disclosure of military secrets. This law is intended to prevent the release of military-related information and to deter defection²²⁶.

On August 1, 2025, the junta formed an interim government after ending a state of emergency that had lasted more than four years²²⁷. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the presidency while remaining the head of the military. Following the formation of the interim government, the junta announced on August 18, 2025, that it would hold the first phase of a multi-stage election on December 28, outlining a roadmap for the first national polls since the coup. On October 29, the junta announced January 11, 2026, as the date for the second phase of the election. According to an announcement on December 26, 2025, January 25, 2026, will be the final phase of the election²²⁸.

The junta claimed that the election must be held in multiple phases due to security concerns²²⁹. However, observers believe that deep political and social divisions in the country make it nearly impossible to hold a genuine nationwide election. Some areas are dominated by resistance forces. Of Myanmar's 330 townships, the three-phase election reportedly covers 265, including areas where the junta does not have full control²³⁰.

In what has been widely described as a sham election, only six parties will contest nationwide²³¹. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD was dissolved in 2023 after it refused to comply with the Political Parties Registration Law imposed by the military²³². In July 2025,

²²⁵. "Myanmar's Military Government Enacts Tough New Electoral Law Ahead of Year-End Vote." *AP News*, 30 July 2025, apnews.com/article/myanmar-election-democracy-law-vote-military-fc36d312dafb24a7a-30e201a612239c9.

²²⁶. Myanmar Junta Enacts Sweeping Law on Protection of Military Secrets." *Myanmar Now*, 29 July 2025, myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-junta-enacts-sweeping-law-on-protection-of-military-secrets.

²²⁷. Maung Kavi. "Myanmar Junta Boss Forms New Government with Eye on December Election." *The Irrawaddy*, 31 July 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/myanmar-junta-boss-forms-new-government-with-eye-on-december-election.html.

²²⁸. "Myanmar to Hold Third Phase of Election Voting on January 25, State Media Reports." *Reuters*, 26 Dec. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-hold-third-phase-election-voting-january-25-state-media-reports-2025-12-26.

²²⁹. "Myanmar Junta Forms New Government Ahead of Elections." *Radio Free Asia*, 31 July 2025, www.rfa.org/english/myanmar/2025/07/31/myanmar-state-of-emergency-elections.

²³⁰. "Myanmar Junta Says Voter Turnout at 52% in First Phase of Election." *Reuters*, 31 Dec. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-says-voter-turnout-52-first-phase-election-2025-12-31.

²³¹. "'Not for the People': Myanmar Junta Prepares for Elections Designed to Legitimise Grip on Power." *The Guardian*, 26 Dec. 2025, www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/26/myanmar-junta-prepares-elections-legitimise-power.

²³². Min Ye Kyaw, and Rebecca Ratcliffe. "Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Faces Dissolution." *The Guardian*, 28 Mar. 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/28/aung-san-su-kyi-national-league-democracy-faces-dissolution-myanmar.

the military amended this law, allowing for the dissolution of any party accused of electoral fraud or unlawful conduct during voting²³³.

The six parties include the military's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which contested the election as the largest party with the greatest number of candidates. Aside from the primary motive of gaining legitimacy, it has also been reported that China pressured the military to hold the vote due to political instability affecting China's interests²³⁴. The vote is reportedly the result of an agreement between Min Aung Hlaing and Chinese President Xi Jinping²³⁵.

In the lead-up to the election, more than 200 people have reportedly been arrested and charged under the election law for allegedly sabotaging the electoral process²³⁶. According to media reports, those charged include filmmakers, an actor, a comedian, children, members of the People's Defense Forces, and members of ethnic armed groups fighting the army²³⁷.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

Following the 2021 military coup, the suppression of digital rights has intensified, as shown by laws specifically targeting the digital space, efforts to control information, and expanded surveillance.

In 2025, the Cybersecurity Law took effect on July 30, after being enacted on January 1²³⁸. It regulates the use of virtual private network (VPN) services in the country, as the junta claims VPNs can bypass censorship and make internet activity more difficult to surveil.

Under the law, establishing or providing VPN services without approval is a crime²³⁹. Individuals who violate the law face imprisonment of one to six months, a fine of 1-10

²³³. Maung Kavi. "Myanmar Regime Sets More Traps to Guarantee Election Win." *The Irrawaddy*, 29 July 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/myanmar-regime-sets-more-traps-to-guarantee-election-win.html.

²³⁴. "Myanmar Is Going to the Polls, but It's Not the People Who Hold the Power—It's China." *The Guardian*, 28 Dec. 2025, www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/28/myanmar-is-going-to-the-polls-but-its-not-the-people-who-hold-the-power-its-china.

²³⁵. "China Says Myanmar Junta Election Stems From Xi-Min Aung Hlaing Deal." *The Irrawaddy*, 30 Dec. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/elections/china-says-myanmar-junta-election-stems-from-xi-min-aung-hlaing-deal.html.

²³⁶. "Myanmar's Military Junta Charge Hundreds With Breaking Election Law as Voting Date Nears." *CNN*, 17 Dec. 2025, edition.cnn.com/2025/12/17/asia/myanmar-military-election-law-arrests-intl-hnk.

²³⁷. Ibid.

²³⁸. Diamond, Cape. "Myanmar's Cybersecurity Law Comes Into Force, Putting Businesses on Alert." *Nikkei Asia*, 20 Aug. 2025, asia.nikkei.com/spotlight/myanmar-crisis/myanmar-s-cybersecurity-law-comes-into-force-putting-businesses-on-alert.

million Myanmar kyat (approximately USD 470 – 4,700), or both, in addition to the confiscation of evidence. For companies or organizations, the minimum fine is ten million kyat, and all proceeds from the violation are confiscated²⁴⁰.

Residents have reported random phone checks by the military, during which soldiers search for social media use and VPN apps²⁴¹. After the 2021 coup, the junta banned access to Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram in Myanmar, prompting people to use VPNs to regain access²⁴². Facebook, in particular, has long been one of the most popular social media platforms in the country, with 13.1 million users in Myanmar as early as 2025²⁴³.

Under the Cybersecurity Law, digital platform service providers are required to collect users' names and data for up to three years and disclose this information to authorities upon request. The law also penalizes those who read, store, or share articles from media outlets or groups that the military has banned or designated as terrorist. It further grants authorities the power to shut down online services for reasons of national security and the "public good," and enables actions against Myanmar citizens outside the country's borders²⁴⁴.

Despite this repressive environment, media have reported that Facebook has been used extensively by the junta's proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) for election campaigns²⁴⁵. USDP Facebook pages reportedly published five to seven posts daily during the campaign period, focusing on rallies, speeches, and campaign promises. The USDP also campaigned on TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube.

Many USDP figures, including its chairperson Khin Yi, are reportedly among the most active users on social media²⁴⁶. Media reports indicate that he has increased his social media activity since September 2025, posting three to four video clips a day in which he

²³⁹. Ibid.

²⁴⁰. Ibid.

²⁴¹. "Myanmar Junta Launches Street Phone Checks as Cybersecurity Law Takes Effect." *The Irrawaddy*, 6 Aug. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-launches-street-phone-checks-as-cybersecurity-law-takes-effect.html.

²⁴². Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2025: Myanmar." *DataReportal*, 3 Mar. 2025, datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-myanmar.

²⁴³. Ratcliffe, Rebecca. "Myanmar Coup: Army Blocks Facebook Access as Civil Disobedience Grows." *The Guardian*, 4 Feb. 2021, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/04/myanmar-coup-army-blocks-facebook-access-as-civil-disobedience-grows.

²⁴⁴. "Myanmar's New Cybercrime Law Will Suppress Information, Say Analysts." VOA, 3 Jan. 2025, www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-s-new-cybercrime-law-will-suppress-information-say-analysts/7923821.html.

²⁴⁵. Myo Pyae. "Myanmar Military's Favorite Election Campaign Platform? Banned Facebook." *The Irrawaddy*, 12 Dec. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/myanmar-militarys-favorite-election-campaign-platform-banned-facebook.html.

²⁴⁶. Kavi Maung. "Pro-Junta Politicians Ramp up Online Activity as Election Nears." *The Irrawaddy*, 17 Oct. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/pro-junta-politicians-ramp-up-online-activity-as-election-nears.html.

answers pre-arranged questions and highlights his “experience” and “service to the nation.” However, many of the accounts engaging with his content were reportedly newly created, suggesting a coordinated network of inauthentic accounts²⁴⁷.

In Myanmar, observers have documented coordinated social media campaigns favoring the military over the years. Following Facebook’s 2018 ban on military-affiliated accounts, the military shifted to other social media platforms to disseminate propaganda and disinformation²⁴⁸. Pro-military social media accounts have also harassed and doxed those considered to be on the opposite side, leading to their arrests.

In 2025, Myanmar Now reported a pro-military coordinated campaign on Facebook²⁴⁹. According to the report, the tactics used involved organized “comment campaigns” to influence public opinion. Fake accounts reportedly flooded posts critical of the military with comments, specifically targeting the channels of independent media outlets, including Myanmar Now, The Irrawaddy, and Mizzima²⁵⁰.

The Myanmar Internet Project also reported in 2025 that TikTok has become a favored platform for spreading military propaganda²⁵¹. This platform has likewise been used for election campaigns by pro-military figures in the sham election. As of early 2025, TikTok reportedly had 19.6 million users in Myanmar²⁵².

Following the 2021 coup, the military intensified its crackdown on independent media to dominate the information space with its propaganda. This led to a shrinking supply of factual reporting that could counter pro-military narratives, while pro-junta media thrived in the tightly controlled environment.

In October 2025, ahead of the 47th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, pro-junta media and Telegram channels claimed that Min Aung Hlaing would attend the summit after Malaysian outlet New Straits Times listed his name among attendees. It was later confirmed that the junta leader had not been invited²⁵³.

²⁴⁷. Ibid.

²⁴⁸. “Removing Myanmar Military Officials From Facebook.” *Meta*, 28 Aug. 2018, about.fb.com/news/2018/08/removing-myanmar-officials.

²⁴⁹. Sa Tun Aung. “Exclusive: Myanmar Regime Using Facebook Comments to Spread Disinformation.” *Myanmar Now*, 23 Aug. 2025, myanmar-now.org/en/news/exclusive-myanmar-regime-using-facebook-comments-to-spread-disinformation.

²⁵⁰. Ibid.

²⁵¹. “Weaponizing TikTok in Myanmar.” *Myanmar Internet Project*, 23 Aug. 2025, www.myanmarinternet.info/post/weaponizing_tiktok_in_myanmar.

²⁵². Kemp, Simon. “Digital 2025: Myanmar.” *DataReportal*, 3 Mar. 2025, datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-myanmar.

²⁵³. “ASEAN Leaders, Global Reps to Attend 47th ASEAN Summit – PM Anwar.” *Bernama*, 23 Oct. 2025, www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2481933.

In 2025, Justice For Myanmar, an organization working to expose the military, reported that Facebook, YouTube, Twitch, and MediaFire removed several pro-military channels and accounts after it sent letters to the platforms²⁵⁴.

According to the organization, Twitch, owned by Amazon, took down accounts that were livestreaming Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) and Myanmar Radio channels on its website and mobile apps available in the Google and Apple app stores. Additionally, Twitch reportedly removed the Myanmar International TV (MITV) livestream embedded on the MITV website. All these channels—MITV, MRTV, and Myanmar Radio—are operated by the military's Ministry of Information.

Facebook reportedly removed the pages of MITV and the Yadanabon Newspaper, which is linked to the pro-junta Myawaddy Newspaper. Yadanabon's MediaFire account, where it stored some newspaper files shared on social media, was reportedly removed as well. Justice For Myanmar further reported that YouTube refused to delete the MITV account but did remove an account belonging to the Ministry of Information.

In terms of surveillance, Justice For Myanmar revealed in September 2025 that Geedge Network, a Chinese company linked to the Chinese government, has helped the military expand its monitoring capabilities²⁵⁵. According to the report, the company's technology enables tracking of network traffic at the individual level and can identify the geographic location of mobile subscribers in real time by linking users' activity to specific cell identifiers. The technology allegedly gives the junta access to the online activities of 33.4 million internet users in the country.

The report followed Justice For Myanmar's 2024 findings that the junta had adopted a new surveillance and censorship system, implemented by Geedge Network, starting in late May 2024, to tighten control of the internet²⁵⁶. According to the 2024 report, the system uses Tiangou Secure Gateway (TSG) and Cyber Narrator. TSG is an internet surveillance and censorship product that can analyze users' online behavior, while Cyber Narrator is a network intelligence platform designed to monitor and analyze internet traffic, including flagging the use of VPNs.

²⁵⁴. "Twitch, Facebook, YouTube, and MediaFire Removed Myanmar Junta Propaganda Accounts." *Justice For Myanmar*, 18 Dec. 2025, www.justiceformyanmar.org/press-releases/twitch-facebook-youtube-and-mediafire-removed-myanmar-junta-propaganda-accounts.

²⁵⁵. "Report Reveals How China's Geedge Networks and Myanmar Telecoms Companies Are Enabling the Illegal Junta's Digital Terror Campaign." *Justice For Myanmar*, 9 Sep. 2025, www.justiceformyanmar.org/press-releases/report-reveals-how-chinas-geedge-networks-and-myanmar-telecoms-companies-are-enabling-the-illegal-juntas-digital-terror-campaign.

²⁵⁶. "The Myanmar Junta's Partners in Digital Surveillance and Censorship." *Justice For Myanmar*, 19 June 2024, www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/the-myanmar-juntas-partners-in-digital-surveillance-and-censorship.

In May 2025, Myanmar Now and Finance Uncovered also published a joint investigation revealing that Frontiir, an internet service provider in Myanmar, had installed intercept technology from Geedge Network²⁵⁷. According to the investigation, this technology enabled Frontiir to assist the military by tracking individuals online, blocking websites, and preventing users from accessing VPNs.

Following the 2021 coup, telecommunications and internet service providers in Myanmar were ordered to install intercept technology to allow the army to eavesdrop on citizens' communications²⁵⁸. Justice For Myanmar reported that technology from Geedge Network was deployed with the cooperation of telecommunications companies and related service providers in the country, including ATOM (formerly Telenor Myanmar), Mytel, Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), Ooredoo Myanmar, Frontiir, StreamNet, Golden TMH Telecom, Internet Maekhong Network (IM-Net), Myanmar Broadband Telecom (MBT), Myanmar Telecommunication Network (MTN), Campana, Global Technology Group, and China Unicom²⁵⁹.

Shortly after the coup, one of the country's four telecommunications service providers, Telenor, a Norway-based company, sold its business to a military-linked firm in 2021. The company said it would otherwise have been required to help the military regime conduct surveillance on its clients in order to continue operating. The move was controversial, as many raised concerns about the company's accountability.

Although the decision to exit appeared well-intentioned, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) revealed in August 2025 that Telenor had repeatedly complied with military requests to hand over user data, putting its customers at risk hundreds of times after the coup²⁶⁰. The data shared included names, addresses, call logs, last known locations, and national ID numbers, which the junta could use to identify and arrest dissidents. According to NRK, at least 1,300 customers had their data handed over or had their phones blocked at the junta's request, and Telenor's own analysis showed that nearly 500 customers may have been at risk of arrest if their data was shared²⁶¹.

²⁵⁷. Henshaw, Caroline, and Aung Naing. "European Govts Back Company That Uses Chinese Tech to Monitor Myanmar Internet Users." *Myanmar Now*, 23 May 2025, myanmar-now.org/en/news/european-govts-back-company-that-uses-chinese-tech-to-monitor-myanmar-internet-users.

²⁵⁸. Potkin, Fanny, and Poppy McPherson. "Insight: How Myanmar's Military Moved in on the Telecoms Sector to Spy on Citizens." *Reuters*, 19 May 2021, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-myanmars-military-moved-telecoms-sector-spy-citizens-2021-05-18.

²⁵⁹. "Silk Road of Surveillance: The Role of China's Geedge Networks and Myanmar Telecommunications Operators in the Junta's Digital Terror Campaign." *Justice For Myanmar*, 2025, jfm-files.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/public/Silk+Road+of+Surveillance+EN.pdf.

²⁶⁰. Wilde-Ramsing, Joseph. "Telenor's Irresponsible Disengagement From Myanmar." *SOMO*, 20 Aug. 2025, www.somo.nl/telenors-irresponsible-disengagement-from-myanmar.

²⁶¹. "Parliament Probes Telenor's Exit From War-Torn Myanmar." *News in English*, 16 Dec. 2025, www.newsinenglish.no/2025/12/16/parliament-probes-telenors-exit-from-war-torn-myanmar.

The revelations prompted a lawsuit against the company in October 2025. The lawsuit was filed by Defend Myanmar Democracy and the Myanmar Internet Project, together with Tha Zin, whose husband, Zay Yar Thaw—a pro-democracy activist and opposition politician—was arrested and executed by the junta after Telenor allegedly shared his call log²⁶². As Telenor is a Norwegian majority state-owned company, Norway’s parliament launched a probe against the company in December 2025²⁶³.

As the military has tightened its surveillance efforts, it has also relied on the Person Scrutinization and Monitoring System (PSMS), which integrates facial recognition, AI, and digital IDs to identify civilians²⁶⁴. The PSMS is reportedly developed with support from Huawei and uses artificial intelligence and facial recognition to monitor individuals²⁶⁵. The system enables authorities to cross-check national registration numbers against criminal records at checkpoints, hotels, and ticketing counters²⁶⁶. Media reports indicate that its use has intensified in the lead-up to the sham election²⁶⁷.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The most pressing concern, in light of developments in 2025, is the military’s attempt to establish itself as the legitimate government of Myanmar. Such an act would further endanger all aspects of digital rights in the country, despite the already critical situation. The coup d’état carried out by the junta has been widely condemned, and any effort to legitimize this action through a fabricated election should not be internationally recognized as establishing the military as the legitimate head of state.

Events in 2025 continue to underscore the absence of the rule of law and democratic governance in Myanmar. Since the coup, digital strategies have become a pivotal instrument for the military to seize and maintain power, including internet restrictions, the suppression of independent media, censorship, and the deployment of cyber armies

²⁶². “Wilde-Ramsing, Joseph, and Beini Ye. “Telenor Faces Legal Action Over Human Rights Abuses in Myanmar.” *SOMO*, 6 Oct. 2025, www.somo.nl/telenor-faces-legal-action-over-human-rights-abuses-in-myanmar.

²⁶³. “Parliament Probes Telenor’s Exit From War-Torn Myanmar.” *News in English*, 16 Dec. 2025, www.newsinenglish.no/2025/12/16/parliament-probes-telenors-exit-from-war-torn-myanmar.

²⁶⁴. “Digital Tyranny.” *Progressive Voice*, 20 July 2025, progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2025/07/20/65773.

²⁶⁵. Graceffo, Antonio. “China’s Global Security Initiative and the Burma Junta’s PSMS Surveillance.” *Mizzima*, 6 June 2025, eng.mizzima.com/2025/06/06/23126.

²⁶⁶. “Myanmar Junta Launches Street Phone Checks as Cybersecurity Law Takes Effect.” *The Irrawaddy*, 6 Aug. 2025, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-launches-street-phone-checks-as-cybersecurity-law-takes-effect.html.

²⁶⁷. “Mon State Sees Tighter Enforcement of PSMS Surveillance System.” *BNI*, 24 Oct. 2025, www.bnionline.net/en/news/mon-state-sees-tighter-enforcement-psms-surveillance-system.

to dox and harass critics online. Moreover, Myanmar has transformed into a surveillance state, where the junta can readily monitor the online activities of its citizens. These conditions are likely to persist as long as the junta remains in power.

The political context also severely restricts the work of civil society, particularly advocacy within the country. Nonetheless, there are civil society groups that continue to document human rights violations and advocate for the restoration of human rights and democracy in Myanmar. This raises the question of how these communities can be empowered and their work recognized, given the extremely challenging environment they experience.

PHILIPPINES



A. Political Situations

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. became president of the Philippines after the 2022 presidential election, during which social media platforms were widely documented as being weaponized to advance his political interests and spread propaganda. Marcos Jr. forged an alliance with the Duterte family, with Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, running as his vice-presidential candidate. Sara Duterte also won the vice-presidential election, and both were inaugurated as president and vice president of the Philippines, respectively, in June 2022.

The alliance between the two families later collapsed. Sara Duterte accused Marcos Jr. of being incompetent as president and allegedly even plotting to have him assassinated^{268, 269}. This allegation, together with other accusations, including misuse of state funds, led to her impeachment in February 2025²⁷⁰.

²⁶⁸. Flores, Mikhail. "Philippine Political Rift Widens as VP Duterte Accuses Marcos of Incompetence." *Reuters*, 18 Oct. 2024, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippine-political-rift-widens-vp-duterte-accuses-marcos-incompetence-2024-10-18.

²⁶⁹. "Philippines Vice-President Directs Assassin to Kill President." *ABC News*, 24 Nov. 2024, www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-24/philippines-vice-president-directs-assassin-to-kill-president/104640606.

²⁷⁰. "Philippine Vice-President Sara Duterte Impeached." *ABC News*, 6 Feb. 2025, www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-06/philippine-vice-president-sara-duterte-impeached-/104902482.

In March 2025, her father, former President Rodrigo Duterte, was arrested following a warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in connection with his war on drugs campaign while he was mayor of Davao and later president of the Philippines²⁷¹. He was accused of committing crimes against humanity, with an estimated 30,000 people believed to have been victims of extrajudicial killings during the campaign²⁷². The arrest was allegedly aided by Marcos Jr., but the president denied any role in the arrest and dismissed claims of political motivation²⁷³.

As the Philippines held its midterm elections on May 12, 2025, narratives about Rodrigo Duterte's arrest and Sara Duterte's impeachment dominated social media platforms. The results of the election appeared to benefit the Duterte camp.

Impeaching the vice president requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate, meaning 16 of the 24 senators must vote against Sara Duterte to remove her from office. A conviction would also bar her from seeking public office. To survive impeachment, she needs at least nine senators to vote for her acquittal²⁷⁴. This raised the stakes for the 12 available Senate seats in the midterm elections, as they could determine her political future, including a potential presidential run in 2028.

The midterm results showed that pro-Duterte candidates won five of the 12 Senate seats²⁷⁵, five others were aligned with Marcos Jr., and the remaining two went to the opposition.

However, before the senators could convene the impeachment tribunal, the Supreme Court in July 2025 blocked an impeachment trial against Sara Duterte, ruling it unconstitutional^{276, 277}. The court said the House of Representatives—whose majority endorsed the vice president's impeachment in February 2025—had violated a constitutional safeguard prohibiting more than one impeachment proceeding against the same official within a year²⁷⁸.

²⁷¹. "Duterte Case: The Prosecutor vs. Rodrigo Roa Duterte." *International Criminal Court*, www.icc-cpi.int/philippines/duterte.

²⁷². "Philippines Election Results: Who Won, Who Lost, and What's Next." *Al Jazeera*, 13 May 2025, www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/13/philippines-election-results-who-won-who-lost-and-whats-next.

²⁷³. Wee, Sui-Lee. "Philippines: Duterte's Arrest and Marcos's Grip on Power." *The New York Times*, 12 Mar. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/world/asia/philippines-duterte-arrest-marcos.html.

²⁷⁴. Lema, Karen. "Down, Not Out: Philippines Election Gifts Duterte Shot at Political Survival." *Reuters*, 13 May 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/down-not-out-philippines-election-gifts-duterte-shot-political-survival-2025-05-13.

²⁷⁵. Cerojano, Teresa. "Philippines Mid-Term Election: Duterte's Senate Bid." *AP News*, 17 May 2025, apnews.com/article/philippines-midterm-election-duterte-senate-6e612ed03aa880fc3a5a4c9f2456f727.

²⁷⁶. Guinto, Joel, and Koh Ewe. "Philippine Court Strikes Down Landmark Impeachment Bid Against Sara Duterte." *BBC News*, 25 July 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgk3k2ln00no.

²⁷⁷. "Supreme Court Blocks Impeachment Case Against Sara Duterte." *ABC News*, 25 Jul. 2025, www.abc.net.au/news/2025-07-25/supreme-court-blocks-impeachment-case-against-sara-duterte/105575838.

²⁷⁸. *Ibid*.

In total, four impeachment complaints had been filed against the vice president. The three complaints filed in 2024 did not progress, but the fourth complaint, endorsed by House members, violated the one-year ban because the earlier complaints had already been filed²⁷⁹. Despite this, the court clarified that it was not absolving Duterte of the charges against her, and that any new impeachment complaint could only be filed starting February 6, 2026²⁸⁰.

Throughout 2025, beyond the impeachment of Sara Duterte and the arrest of Rodrigo Duterte—which have dominated Philippine political discourse—there was also a feud within the Marcos family. Marcos Jr.’s sister, Senator Imee Marcos, broke with him and accused him of drug use²⁸¹. According to media reports, this rift appears linked to the collapse of the Marcos-Duterte alliance²⁸², with Imee reportedly siding with the Duterte family. However, her precise political motivations remain unclear²⁸³.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

During the 2025 midterm elections, disinformation narratives that went viral on social media largely centered on the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest of Rodrigo Duterte and the impeachment of Vice President Sara Duterte. At the start of the official campaign period on February 11, 2025, impeachment-related narratives about the vice president dominated social media. However, these were soon overtaken in March 2025 by narratives surrounding her father’s arrest, which remained the most prominent until election day. Many of these narratives also negatively targeted President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

Key disinformation themes around Sara Duterte’s impeachment included claims that the Supreme Court had issued a ruling declaring the impeachment void and that the proceedings were unconstitutional. Disinformation about the elder Duterte highlighted false assertions that the ICC lacked jurisdiction over the case because the Philippines withdrew from the Court in 2019, that the ICC had already dismissed the case, or that Duterte had been abducted²⁸⁴.

²⁷⁹. Ibid.

²⁸⁰. “SC House Impeachment Complaint vs VP Duterte Barred by 1-Year Rule: Due Process or Fairness Applies During All Stages of Impeachment Process.” *The Supreme Court of the Philippines*, 25 July 2025, sc.judiciary.gov.ph/sc-house-impeachment-complaint-vs-vp-duterte-barred-by-1-year-rule-due-process-or-fairness-applies-during-all-stages-of-impeachment-process.

²⁸¹. Robles, Raissa. “Marcos Family Feud: Philippine President ‘Microdoses’ Cocaine, Sister Claims.” *South China Morning Post*, 18 Nov. 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3333262/marcos-family-feud-philippine-president-microdoses-cocaine-sister-claims.

²⁸². Dela Peña, Kurt. “Timeline: The Sibling Rivalry of Bongbong and Imee Marcos.” *Inquirer.net*, 18 Nov. 2025, newsinfo.inquirer.net/2142248/timeline-the-sibling-rivalry-of-bongbong-and-imee-marcos.

²⁸³. See, Aie Balagtas. “Maros vs. Marcos: The New Front in Philippine Politics.” *The New York Times*, 2 Dec. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/12/02/world/asia/bongbong-imee-marcos-feud.html.

²⁸⁴. “Information Disorders in the Philippine Elections Getting More Complex.” *DigitalReach*, 30 June 2025, digitalreach.asia/news/analysis/information-disorders-in-the-philippine-elections-getting-more-complex.

Photos and videos from unrelated events were also repurposed to create the false impression of massive crowds gathering in various locations to show support for the Dutertes. Fabricated quote cards featuring public figures allegedly backing Rodrigo Duterte in connection with his ICC arrest were likewise documented throughout the campaign²⁸⁵. Meanwhile, key disinformation narratives against Marcos Jr. were closely tied to the Dutertes, including allegations that the president and his wife had orchestrated the events surrounding Duterte's arrest²⁸⁶.

The 2025 midterm elections also marked the first documented use of AI-generated disinformation content in the country's electoral history. AI-generated content was found to have political influence in the lead-up to the polls. In response, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) issued Resolution No. 11064 in September 2024, regulating the use of social media, AI, and internet technology²⁸⁷. Under this resolution, candidates were permitted to use AI in their campaigns only if the content included a clear disclaimer or disclosure²⁸⁸.

According to Tsek.ph, disinformation in the form of AI-generated deepfake videos and audio accounted for about one-third of the 35 altered claims recorded during the election campaign period²⁸⁹. Among these narratives was a deepfake video of First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos dancing in support of pro-Duterte candidates. Another was a clip of Sara Duterte delivering a speech in fluent Mandarin that circulated on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. In the deepfake, Sara Duterte appeared to comment on her father's arrest, saying, "That's forcibly taking my father to another country and illegally arresting him."²⁹⁰

The Dutertes are known to have online supporters adept at mobilizing disinformation for political advantage. Ahead of the 2025 midterm elections—and amid the collapse of the alliance between Marcos Jr. and the Dutertes—these cyber armies were also reported to be flooding social media platforms to defend Sara Duterte in relation to her impeachment²⁹¹. The Facebook page of the ICC judge responsible for Rodrigo Duterte's case was also reportedly bombarded with comments from Duterte supporters following his arrest²⁹².

²⁸⁵. Ibid.

²⁸⁶. Ibid.

²⁸⁷. Cabalza, Dexter. "Comelec Justifies Regulation of Poll Materials Online." *Inquirer.net*, 4 Nov. 2024, www.inquirer.net/419753/comelec-justifies-regulation-of-poll-materials-online.

²⁸⁸. Ibid.

²⁸⁹. Gonzales, Pipo, and Yvonne T. Chua. "AI Fakery Rises, but Cheapfakes Still Rule the Race." *Tsek.ph*, 10 May 2025, www.tsek.ph/ai-fakery-rises-but-cheapfakes-still-rule-the-race.

²⁹⁰. Ibid.

²⁹¹. Baizas, Gaby. "[Decoded] Duterte Social Media Army Very Much Alive, Roars to Defend Embattled Sara Duterte." *Rappler*, 16 Jan. 2025, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/decoded-duterte-family-social-media-machinery.

²⁹². Abanto, Rowegie. "Duterte Risks Facing More Charges Due to His Supporters' Behavior on Social Media." *ABS-CBN News*, 18 Mar. 2025, www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/3/18/duterte-risks-facing-more-charges-due-to-his-supporters-behavior-on-social-media-1414.

Foreign interference has also been a concerning issue in the Philippines, particularly in relation to disinformation and propaganda. Due to President Marcos Jr.'s foreign policies, which are more closely aligned with the United States, maritime disputes between the Philippines and China have intensified during his administration.

Pro-China propaganda has been documented over the years²⁹³, with media reporting that it was initially spread by pro-Duterte bloggers, given his foreign policies that were more aligned with China²⁹⁴. According to these reports, such narratives justified China's actions in the disputed areas.

There is also speculation that China-funded troll farms operate inside the Philippines. InfinitUs Marketing Solutions Inc., a private company, has allegedly had a contract with the Chinese embassy in Manila to disseminate pro-China narratives²⁹⁵. Amid the midterm election, pro-Duterte candidates were also allegedly linked to troll farms that amplified pro-Duterte content²⁹⁶. Media reported that a formal complaint was filed with the COMELEC, supported by forensic evidence including traffic logs, bot activity reports, and metadata indicating coordinated inauthentic behavior. Fifteen pro-Duterte candidates, including Rodrigo Duterte, were named as beneficiaries of these activities²⁹⁷.

In April 2025, a Chinese national was arrested with an IMSI catcher—a device used to intercept mobile phone traffic—near the COMELEC office²⁹⁸. Media reports stated that the man, a Macau passport holder, had also visited other locations, including the Supreme Court, the Department of Justice, and the U.S. Embassy²⁹⁹.

Lawmakers in the Philippines have been working to combat information disorder in the country, including by considering an “anti-fake news” bill, the creation of a regulatory body to monitor the issue, the registration of foreign-based social media platforms, and a requirement for social media companies to establish local offices.

²⁹³ Baizas, Gaby. “[Decoded] China State Media Unlocked: AFP, DND.” *Rappler*, 6 June 2025, www.rappler.com/technology/decoded-china-state-media-unlocked-afp-dnd.

²⁹⁴ Macaraeg, Pauline. “How Pro-China Propaganda Is Seeded Online in the Philippines.” *Rappler*, 1 Nov. 2023, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/ways-how-china-propaganda-seeded-online-philippines.

²⁹⁵ Abarca, Charie. “Marketing Firm Invited to Senate Probe Into China-Funded Troll Farm.” *Inquirer.net*, 1 May 2025, globalnation.inquirer.net/275427/marketing-firm-invited-to-senate-probe-into-china-funded-troll-farm.

²⁹⁶ Beltran, Sam. “Philippine Midterms: Did Pro-Duterte Candidates Benefit From China-Funded Troll Farms?” *South China Morning Post*, 14 May 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3310355/philippine-midterms-did-pro-duterte-candidates-benefit-china-funded-troll-farms.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Mendoza, John Eric. “Chinese With Spying Device Nabbed Near Comelec.” *Inquirer.net*, 30 Apr. 2025, globalnation.inquirer.net/275183/chinese-with-spying-device-nabbed-near-comelec.

²⁹⁹ Kang, Taejun. “Philippines Arrests Chinese Man for Operating Surveillance Device Near Voting Agency.” *Radio Free Asia*, 1 May 2025, www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/05/01/china-philippines-chinese-man-arrest-election.

Many laws have been proposed in the Philippines to criminalize “fake news,” and at least four more were filed in 2025. These include House Bill No. 11506 during the 19th Congress on May 26, 2025; Senate Bill No. 241 during the 20th Congress on July 8, 2025; House Bill No. 3799 filed on August 18, 2025, during the 20th Congress; and Senate Bill No. 1474 filed on November 3, 2025, during the 20th Congress.

Observers are concerned that these measures, if enacted, could be used to restrict free speech. Several proposed bills seek to amend the existing Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012, yet many of them fail to clearly define “fake news” or disinformation. By the end of 2025, at least 12 anti-fake news bills had been proposed for consideration and possible enactment into law.

The House of Representatives also launched a joint investigation into the spread of disinformation in the country, starting in February 2025, by inviting 40 social media personalities to discuss the issue³⁰⁰. The hearings reportedly aim to examine how disinformation spreads online, its impact on public perception and national security, and the measures needed to combat it³⁰¹. They also seek to identify weaknesses in existing laws and policies governing digital platforms and to propose solutions to ensure the public has access to accurate and reliable information.

Many of the listed invitees are controversial figures known for producing and spreading disinformation on their channels. Several initially refused to participate but eventually agreed after being warned they could face legal action for contempt. During the hearings, many of them failed to justify the content they disseminated, as they could not present any evidence to support it^{302, 303, 304}. Some also attempted to justify their absence by claiming that participating in the hearings might violate their right to free speech, a claim that the court later dismissed³⁰⁵.

³⁰⁰. Gulla, Vivienne. “House to Begin Probe on Fake News, Disinformation; At Least 40 Social Media Personalities Invited.” *ABS-CBN News*, 3 Feb. 2025, www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/2/3/at-least-40-social-media-personalities-invited-as-house-begins-probe-on-fake-news-1753.

³⁰¹. Ibid.

³⁰². Robles, Alan. “Tearful Philippine Influencers Grilled Over Duterte Fake News, Admit Errors, but Change Needed.” *South China Morning Post*, 2 Apr. 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3304926/tearful-philippine-influencers-grilled-over-duterte-fake-news-admit-errors-change-needed.

³⁰³. De Leon, Dwight. “At House Hearing, Pro-Duterte Vloggers Apologize for ‘Fake News,’ Rude Social Media Post.” *Rappler*, 21 Mar. 2025, www.rappler.com/philippines/house-hearing-pro-duterte-vloggers-apologize-fake-news-online.

³⁰⁴. De Leon, Dwight. “House Probe Into ‘Fake News’ Treads Fine Line Between Accountability and Censorship.” *Rappler*, 25 Mar. 2025, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/house-probe-fake-news-treads-fine-line-between-accountability-censorship.

³⁰⁵. Bolledo, Jairo. “SC: No Violation of Vloggers’ Rights When House Invited Them to Disinformation Probe.” *Rappler*, 14 Nov. 2025, www.rappler.com/philippines/supreme-court-decision-vloggers-house-hearing-disinformation.

The House of Representatives also invited representatives from social media platforms, including Meta, TikTok, and Google, to the hearings. Google representatives reportedly attended the hearing in February 2025. TikTok's representative was present at the third hearing in March 2025, and Meta's representatives were present at the fourth hearing in April 2025, after show cause orders were issued to both TikTok and Meta^{306,307}. The social media companies were there to present how they handle information disorder on their platforms and to answer questions from members of the House on related matters.

At the April 2025 hearing, as Meta presented its approach to handling information disorder, House members raised the possibility of regulating social media platforms. Based on media reports, the members stressed that they should be able to directly reach out to Meta in the Philippines regarding issues on the platforms. Meta's representatives, however, explained that their office in the Philippines does not handle content moderation directly; instead, those functions are based in Singapore and the United States³⁰⁸.

The company's representative, Rafael Frankel, Meta's director of public policy in Southeast Asia, reportedly said that he would be "more than happy" for Meta to collaborate with the Philippine government on any disinformation-related regulations³⁰⁹.

Another key moment in the hearing was when Frankel cited the third-party fact-checking program as one of Meta's measures for addressing information disorder on its platform. After Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that the company would discontinue the program in January 2025 and replace it with Community Notes, a House member asked how this change would preserve the integrity of Meta's approach to disinformation and misinformation³¹⁰. Frankel noted that the third-party fact-checking program remains in use everywhere outside the United States and that, at the time of his remarks, there were no plans to change it globally³¹¹.

³⁰⁶. Javier, Paige. "House Panel Issues Show Cause Orders to Social Media Platforms for Snubbing Hearing." *ABS-CBN News*, 18 Feb. 2025, www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/2/18/house-panel-issues-show-cause-orders-to-social-media-platforms-for-snubbing-hearing-1825.

³⁰⁷. Panti, Llanesca T. "House Panel Tells Facebook, TikTok to Explain Absence at Fake News Hearing." *GMA News Online*, 18 Feb. 2025, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/936600/house-tri-comm-facebook-tiktok-fake-news/story.

³⁰⁸. De Leon, Dwight. "At House Hearing, Lawmakers Zero in on Liability of Meta Over False Content." *Rappler*, 8 Apr. 2025, www.rappler.com/philippines/house-hearing-lawmakers-zero-in-liability-meta-false-content.

³⁰⁹. Flores, Dominique Nicole. "Meta Open to Engage Philippines on Regulating Social Media Platforms." *The Philippine Star*, 8 Apr. 2025, www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/04/08/2434491/meta-open-engage-philippines-regulating-social-media-platforms.

³¹⁰. Montgomery, Blake. "Why Did Mark Zuckerberg End Facebook and Instagram's Factchecking Program?" *The Guardian*, 7 Jan. 2025, www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/07/why-did-mark-zuckerberg-end-facebook-instagram-fact-checking.

³¹¹. Panti, Llanesca T. "Meta Says It Won't Drop Fact Checking System Outside U.S." *GMA News Online*, 10 Apr. 2025, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/942306/meta-says-it-won-t-drop-fact-checking-system-outside-us/story.

In 2025, Meta removed additional Facebook pages related to Sonshine Media Network International (SMNI), the broadcast media arm of the church Kingdom of Jesus Christ (KOJC), headed by Apollo Quiboloy³¹². Quiboloy is an influential pastor and a known close ally of Rodrigo Duterte. However, following the rift between the Duterte and Marcos Jr. camps, he has been facing several charges, including child abuse, sexual abuse, and human trafficking, and was subsequently arrested in September 2024^{313, 314}. At the time of his arrest, KOJC was reported to have seven million followers³¹⁵.

SMNI News Channel has played a controversial and influential role in Philippine politics. It ran propaganda campaigns for Duterte and attacked journalists and government critics³¹⁶. The outlet was found to be particularly engaged in red-tagging, which is the practice of labeling an individual as a communist³¹⁷. During the 2022 election, it specifically attacked Leni Robredo and her running mate, Kiko Pangilinan—who were running against Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte—by linking them to the communist movement^{318, 319}. An investigation by Rappler, an independent media outlet in the Philippines, found that SMNI News was among the top content sources of red-tagging networks³²⁰.

According to SMNI, at least 21 of its accounts on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have been disabled since 2023³²¹. Aside from the suspension of additional pages by Meta in

³¹². Mateo, Janvic. "Meta Takes Down SMNI Facebook Pages." *The Philippine Star*, 20 Mar. 2025, www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/03/20/2429705/meta-takes-down-smni-facebook-pages.

³¹³. Beltran, Sam. "Apollo Quiboloy's Senate Bid Tests 'Unholy' Grip of Religion on Philippines Politics." *South China Morning Post*, 13 Oct. 2024, www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3282055/apollo-quiboloys-senate-bid-tests-unholy-grip-religion-philippines-politics.

³¹⁴. Guinto, Joel, and Virma Simonette. "Apollo Quiboloy: Fugitive Pastor Arrested for Sex Crimes." *BBC News*, 9 Sep. 2024, www.bbc.com/news/articles/c75npd1xw9qo.

³¹⁵. Ibid.

³¹⁶. Baizas, Gaby, and Pauline Macaraeg. "Quiboloy's SMNI Fuels Disinformation, Online Attacks on Gov't Critics." *Rappler*, 6 Feb. 2022, www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/apollo-quiboloy-sonshine-media-network-disinformation-attacks-government-critics.

³¹⁷. Lalu, Gabriel Pabico. "House Reps Scold SMNI for Red-Tagging, Being 'a Tool for Misinformation.'" *Inquirer.net*, 6 Dec. 2023, newsinfo.inquirer.net/1871265/smni-scolded-for-past-attacks-red-tagging-of-robredo-solons-its-a-tool-for-misinformation.

³¹⁸. "NET25 and SMNI Propaganda Provokes Questions on Their Role in Spreading Disinformation." *CMFR*, 5 June 2022, cmfr-phil.org/in-context/net25-and-smni-propaganda-provokes-questions-on-their-role-in-spreading-disinformation.

³¹⁹. Baizas, Gaby, and Pauline Macaraeg. "Quiboloy's SMNI Fuels Disinformation, Online Attacks on Gov't Critics." *Rappler*, 6 Feb. 2022, www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/apollo-quiboloy-sonshine-media-network-disinformation-attacks-government-critics.

³²⁰. Hapal, Don Kevin, and Raisa Serafica. "New War: How the Propaganda Network Shifted From Targeting 'Addicts' to Activists." *Rappler*, 3 Oct. 2021, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/how-propaganda-network-created-online-environment-justifies-shifted-killing-activists.

³²¹. Mateo, Janvic. "Meta Takes Down SMNI Facebook Pages." *The Philippine Star*, 20 Mar. 2025, www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/03/20/2429705/meta-takes-down-smni-facebook-pages.

2025, YouTube also suspended more accounts affiliated with the channel that year³²². Social media platforms began taking action against the accounts after the U.S. government imposed sanctions on Quiboloy under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act at the end of 2022. Observers also note that Quiboloy's fall from grace stems in part from political power struggles between the Marcos and the Duterte families^{323, 324}.

Red-tagging, as a concerning practice, has continued from the administration of Rodrigo Duterte. In 2018, the administration of Duterte established the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) under Executive Order No. 70³²⁵. It aims to address the communist rebellion in the country, allegedly led by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA).

Over the years, many individuals have been harassed after being red-tagged by the task force, with their names publicly posted on the NTF-ELCAC's official Facebook page^{326, 327}.³²⁸ Its former spokesperson, Lorraine Badoy, is also known for consistently red-tagging people in her Facebook posts and through her now-suspended TV program, *Laban Kasama ng Bayan*, on SMNI³²⁹. Those targeted include human rights defenders, journalists, and government critics.

³²². Mateo Janvic. "More SMNI-Linked YouTube Accounts Disabled." *The Philippine Star*, 21 Feb. 2025, www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/02/21/2423072/more-smni-linked-youtube-accounts-disabled.

³²³. Robles, Raissa. "Marcos Jnr's Philippines Rattled by Quiboloy Crackdown, Anti-Corruption Push." *South China Morning Post*, 27 Aug. 2024, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3276013/marcos-jnrs-philippines-rattled-quiboloy-crackdown-anti-corruption-push.

³²⁴. Robles, Raissa. "Infamous Philippine Pastor's Arrest Seen as Major Blow to Duterte's Political Fortunes." *South China Morning Post*, 9 Sep. 2024, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3277828/infamous-philippine-pastors-arrest-seen-major-blow-dutertes-political-fortunes.

³²⁵. Ranada, Pia. "Duterte Creates Task Force to Address Causes of Communist Insurgency." *Rappler*, 11 Dec. 2018, www.rappler.com/philippines/218667-duterte-creates-task-force-address-communist-armed-conflict-causes.

³²⁶. Bosano, Raphael. "NUPL Seeks Supreme Court Help on Red-Tagging of Lawyers, Civil Society." *ABS-CBN News*, 5 Dec. 2025, www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2025/12/5/nupl-seeks-supreme-court-help-on-red-tagging-of-lawyers-civil-society-1444.

³²⁷. Fernandez, Daniza. "Badoy Hit With Another Complaint at Ombudsman for Red-Tagging Robredo." *Inquirer.net*, 30 Mar. 2022, newsinfo.inquirer.net/1575805/badoy-hit-with-another-complaint-at-ombudsman-for-red-tagging-robredo.

³²⁸. Macaraeg, Pauline. "Gov't Platforms Being Used to Attack, Red-Tag Media." *Rappler*, 12 May 2020, www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/260602-government-platforms-being-used-attack-red-tag-media/index.html.

³²⁹. Gonzales, Gelo. "Facebook Page of Ex-NTF-ELCAC Spokesperson Lorraine Badoy Unavailable." *Rappler*, 18 Aug. 2023, www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/lorraine-badoy-facebook-page-unavailable-august-2023.

In March 2025, Marcos reportedly said that he had no plan to abolish the task force, despite the Supreme Court's ruling in 2024 that "red-tagging, vilification, labelling, and guilt by association threaten a person's right to life, liberty, or security."^{330, 331, 332} This refusal is consistent with his 2024 interview, in which he said he would not abolish the task force³³³. Meanwhile, his government has also proposed increasing the task force's budget for 2026³³⁴.

Despite these developments, members of the House of Representatives have proposed a bill to penalize red-tagging. In 2025, House Bill No. 213 and House Bill No. 1841 were filed on the matter during the 20th Congress^{335, 336}. The task force opposes the measures, arguing that it is "not a repressive body, but a nationwide peace-building movement."³³⁷

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The situation in 2025 indicates that disinformation continues to threaten democracy, as documented during the midterm elections. It also shows how disinformation has evolved into AI-generated content, making the problem more complex. This has prompted efforts to address disinformation at the policy level; however, such measures can pose risks to human rights, particularly freedom of speech. If the government becomes the sole authority policing content, there is a risk of power being abused and critical narratives being silenced.

³³⁰. Sarao, Zacarian. Marcos Will Never Abolish NTF-ELCAC, Malaya Says." *Inquirer.net*, 26 Mar. 2025, newsinfo.inquirer.net/2047100/marcos-will-never-abolish-ntf-elcac-malaya.

³³¹. Rita, Joviland. "Marcos Reiterates NTF-ELCAC Has to Continue—NSC." *GMA News Online*, 26 Mar. 2025, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/940619/ferdinand-bongbong-marcos-ntf-elcac-national-security-council/story.

³³². "SC: Red-Tagging Threatens Right to Life, Liberty, and Security." *The Supreme Court of the Philippines*, 8 May 2024, sc.judiciary.gov.ph/sc-red-tagging-threatens-right-to-life-liberty-and-security.

³³³. De Leon, Dwight. "Marcos Says He Won't Abolish NTF-ELCAC, Denies Its History of Red-Tagging." *Rappler*, 16 May 2024, www.rappler.com/philippines/marcos-rejects-call-abolish-ntf-elcac-denies-history-red-tagging-may-2024.

³³⁴. Bajo, Anna Felicia. "NTF-ELCAC's Barangay Development Program Gets P8.1 B." *GMA News Online*, 13 Aug. 2025, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/955771/ntf-elcac-s-barangay-development-program-gets-p8-1-b/story.

³³⁵. Panti, Llanesca T. "Bill Penalizing Public Officials for Red-Tagging Filed." *GMA News Online*, 1 July 2025, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/951184/bill-penalizing-public-officials-for-red-tagging-filed/story.

³³⁶. "HB 01841 – Anti-Red-Tagging Bill." *House of Representatives (Philippines)*, 14 July 2025, docs.congress.hrep.online/legisdocs/basic_20/HB01841.pdf.

³³⁷. Nepomuceno, Priam. "NTF-ELCAC: Anti-Red-Tagging Bill Protects Terror, Insurgency Enablers." *Inquirer.net*, 4 July 2025, newsinfo.inquirer.net/2078321/ntf-elcac-anti-red-tagging-bill-protects-terror-insurgency-enablers.

The rift between the Marcos and Duterte camps, the potential impeachment of Sara Duterte, and Rodrigo Duterte's trial at the ICC have shaped political discourse in the Philippines in 2025. These developments are likely to drive narratives around information disorder in the country until they are resolved.

As the government moves to regulate disinformation, this raises questions about where civil society fits in and whether policymakers will incorporate civil society's feedback to ensure that human rights considerations are reflected in their decision-making.

On red-tagging, 2025 has continued the positive developments seen in 2024. The 2024 Supreme Court ruling condemning red-tagging, the suspension of the Laban Kasama ng Bayan program hosted by Lorraine Badoy and Jeffrey Celiz on SMNI, and the landmark case filed in December 2024 by journalist Atom Araullo—after he and his family were red-tagged by Badoy and Celiz³³⁸—have all set a positive precedent for addressing this issue. If a law criminalizing red-tagging is enacted, it will mark a major milestone in the Philippines' efforts to tackle the problem.

³³⁸ Torres-Tupas, Tetch. "Atom Araullo Wins Red-Tagging Civil Suit vs Badoy, Celiz." *Inquirer.net*, 13 Dec. 2024, newsinfo.inquirer.net/2015321/atom-araullo-wins-red-tagging-civil-suit-vs-badoy-celiz.

SINGAPORE



A. Political Situations

In May 2024, Lawrence Wong assumed the office of prime minister, succeeding Lee Hsien Loong after his 20-year tenure. In the May 2025 general election, Wong led the People's Action Party (PAP) to victory in his first election as party leader. His premiership has continued to advance the political interests of the ruling party.

The PAP won 87 out of 97 seats, with the remaining 10 going to the opposition Workers' Party (WP)³³⁹. Although the PAP's victory was widely expected, given its systemic advantages, the election served as a gauge of public sentiment toward the ruling party and marked Wong's first major test as prime minister³⁴⁰. While the PAP has long sought to maintain an unblemished image, events leading up to the election revealed a high-profile

³³⁹. "GE2025: Live Results for the Singapore General Election." CNA, 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/ge2025-live-results-singapore-general-election.

³⁴⁰. "PAP's GE2025 Victory Shaped by Systemic Advantage, Strategic Subsidies, and Fear-Driven Continuity." *The Online Citizen*, 4 May 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/05/04/paps-ge2025-victory-shaped-by-systemic-advantage-strategic-subsidies-and-fear-driven-continuity.

³⁴¹. Ewe, Koh. "Jailed Ex-Minister Iswaran Moved to House Arrest." *BBC News*, 7 Feb. 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgxy2z27vo.

corruption case³⁴¹, extramarital affairs involving party members³⁴², and controversy surrounding the rental of two colonial-era bungalows by ministers³⁴³.

Over the years, to maintain power, the PAP has adopted harsh approaches toward those critical of the government, the ruling party, and their affiliates. Activists, independent media, and opposition politicians have faced persistent harassment for voicing criticism. A law frequently used to silence online critics is the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), enacted in 2019. It grants the Singaporean authorities broad powers to unilaterally police content and determine what constitutes disinformation and misinformation.

Under POFMA, online entities, including websites and webpages, can be designated as Declared Online Locations (DOLs). The government defines DOLs as online locations that have carried three or more different online falsehoods subject to POFMA directions within a six-month period. A DOL is not allowed to profit from spreading “falsehoods” in Singapore. Individuals and companies are therefore prohibited from providing financial support to DOLs in order to avoid promoting the spread of “falsehoods.” Digital advertising service providers must also “take reasonable steps” to ensure that paid content on DOLs is not communicated in Singapore³⁴⁴.

Following the passage of POFMA in 2019, the government subsequently enacted more laws to control online spaces, including the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) (2021)³⁴⁵, the Online Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill (2022)³⁴⁶, the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA) (2023)³⁴⁷, and the Elections (Integrity of Online Advertising) (Amendment) Bill (ELIONA) (2024)³⁴⁸.

³⁴². Ang, Hwee Min, and Davina Tham. “PAP Faces a Severe Crisis After String of Incidents Including Tan Chuan Jin’s Affair: Analysts.” *CNA*, 17 Jul. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pap-tan-chuan-jin-cheng-li-hui-affair-workers-party-leon-perera-nicole-seah-3634196.

³⁴³. Quek, Hykel. “The Ridout Road Saga Isn’t About Corruption. It’s About the Optics of Privilege.” *Rice Media*, 30 Jun. 2023, www.ricemedia.co/ridout-road-saga-closure.

³⁴⁴. Al Anthony, Darcel. “The Online Citizen’s Operator to Be Barred From Financial Benefit for Two More Years Over Repeated Falsehoods.” *CNA*, 11 Jun. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/online-citizen-operator-barred-financial-benefit-two-more-years-repeated-falsehoods-pofma-5174366.

³⁴⁵. Lim, Vanessa, et al. “Parliament Passes Bill to Deal With Foreign Interference After 10-Hour Debate.” *CNA*, 5 Oct. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/fica-parliament-singapore-foreign-interference-countermeasures-bill-2221236.

³⁴⁶. Lim, Kimberly. “Singapore Parliament Approves Legislation to Limit Harmful Content, Says Free Speech Won’t Be Affected.” *South China Morning Post*, 9 Nov. 2022, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3199036/singapore-parliament-approves-legislation-limit-harmful-content-says-free-speech-wont-be-affected.

³⁴⁷. Commencement of the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA) on 1 February 2024.” *Ministry of Home Affairs*, 30 Jan. 2024, www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/media-detail/commencement-of-the-online-criminal-harms-act-ocha-on-1-february-2024.

³⁴⁸. “Elections (Integrity of Online Advertising) (Amendment) Act 2024 (Commencement) Notification 2025.” *Singapore Statutes Online*, sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/S47-2025?DocDate=20250120.

These laws can operate systematically as part of the government's machinery to control online information for political advantage, especially when social media platforms serve as key venues for critics and other actors to express their views. They grant the Singaporean government broad authority to police content without transparency. This further reinforces Singapore's already tightly controlled media environment, which is dominated by two government-linked entities—SPH Media and Mediacorp—that run major outlets including CNA and The Straits Times.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

The rental of two colonial bungalows on Ridout Road is a significant example of how POFMA has been used to protect the reputation of the government, the PAP, and its members. The incident became public in May 2023 and involved two PAP ministers, K. Shanmugam and Vivian Balakrishnan. They were alleged to have rented the bungalows at 26 and 31 Ridout Road, raising conflict-of-interest concerns because the properties are under the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), a statutory board under the Ministry of Law, both of which were then overseen by Shanmugam. The concern was whether the ministers had received preferential treatment in the bidding process.

In response, the SLA stated that the bungalow rentals were in full compliance with procedures³⁴⁹. The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) also said it found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing or preferential treatment for the two ministers, who rented the properties for their personal use³⁵⁰. The Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) concurred with the CPIB's findings and recommendations³⁵¹.

The issue was first raised by Kenneth Jeyaretnam, secretary-general of the opposition Reform Party. After it was confirmed that there was no conflict of interest involving the ministers, Jeyaretnam continued to allege that the renovation of the bungalows was awarded to LivSpace, a company headed by Shanmugam's son³⁵². Shanmugam later denied that the company had been awarded any contract to work on the properties³⁵³.

³⁴⁹. Tham, Ashley. "Shanmugam, Balakrishnan Bid Above Guide Rent for Ridout Road State Properties, SLA Says." *CNA*, 13 May 2023, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/shanmugam-balakrishnan-bid-above-guide-rent-ridout-road-state-properties-sla-3485161.

³⁵⁰. Ang, Hwee Min. "Ridout Road Properties: Investigations, Including by CPIB, Find No Wrongdoing or Preferential Treatment for Ministers." *CNA*, 18 June 2023, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ridout-road-shanmugam-vivian-balakrishnan-state-bungalows-cpib-investigations-3592041.

³⁵¹. *Ibid*.

³⁵². Ishak, Syahindah. "POFMA Correction Issued to Kenneth Jeyaretnam, Online Magazine Jom Over Ridout Road Content." *Mothership*, 16 July 2023, mothership.sg/2023/07/pofma-ridout-road.

³⁵³. Chew, Hui Min. "Leave My Family Alone: Shanmugam Denies Allegations That Son's Firm Renovated Ridout Road Bungalows." *CNA*, 3 July 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ridout-road-bungalow-shanmugam-son-family-livspace-rent-3602651.

Since the controversy emerged, opposition figures and independent media outlets have received correction orders under POFMA to “correct” what they posted or published online. The investigation into the matter has raised many doubts about its transparency³⁵⁴. Given that POFMA grants the government sole authority to police content without clear criteria, this has fuelled controversy over whether the law is intended to protect the interests of the government and the ruling party.

Jeyaretnam received his first POFMA order over the Ridout Road allegation in July 2023³⁵⁵, a second in August that year³⁵⁶, and more in subsequent years^{357, 358, 359}. Jom, an independent weekly magazine in Singapore, was also issued two POFMA orders in July 2023 for its reporting on the issue. Although it complied with the correction directive, the magazine’s December 2023 explanation provides insights into how the state can interpret messages to serve its interests³⁶⁰.

In 2024, independent media outlets Gutzy Asia and The Online Citizen (TOC) were also issued correction orders for their reports on the Ridout Road controversy³⁶¹. Following the Ridout-related POFMA order and previous POFMA actions against it, Gutzy Asia was later declared a Declared Online Location (DOL)³⁶². TOC had already been declared a DOL in 2023³⁶³.

³⁵⁴. Nehal, Harpreet Singh. “Strengthening the Singapore System: The Ridout Saga and Conflicts of Interest.” *Jom*, 26 May 2023, www.jom.media/strengthening-the-singapore-system-the-ridout-saga-and-conflicts-of-interest.

³⁵⁵. “POFMA Correction Directions Issued to Kenneth Jeyaretnam, Online Publication Jom Over Ridout Road Articles.” *CNA*, 16 July 2023, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ridout-road-pofma-orders-kenneth-jeyaretnam-thamil-selvan-jom-false-statements-3632036.

³⁵⁶. Tham, Ashley. “Kenneth Jeyaretnam Issued Second POFMA Order Over Comments on Ridout Road Rentals.” *CNA*, 3 Aug. 2023, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/kenneth-jeyaretnam-pofma-ridout-road-rental-3672951.

³⁵⁷. Li, Winnie. “Kenneth Jeyaretnam Issued Fifth POFMA Order Over Claims on Reserves, Ridout Road, HDB Prices & Healthcare Expenditure.” *Mothership*, 3 Nov. 2023, mothership.sg/2023/11/kenneth-jeyaretnam-fifth-pofma.

³⁵⁸. “Kenneth Jeyaretnam Issued Sixth POFMA Direction Over Ridout Road Saga.” *Gutzy Asia*, 19 Feb. 2024, gutzy.asia/2024/02/19/kenneth-jeyaretnam-issued-6th-pofma-direction-over-ridout-road-saga.

³⁵⁹. “POFMA Issues 8th Correction Direction to Kenneth Jeyaretnam Over Ridout Road FB Post.” *The Online Citizen*, 4 July 2024, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2024/07/04/pofma-issues-8th-correction-direction-to-kenneth-jeyaretnam-over-ridout-road-fb-post.

³⁶⁰. Vadaketh, Sudhir. “POFMA Fail: The End of Our Journey.” *Jom*, 1 Dec. 2023, www.jom.media/pofma-fail-the-end-of-our-journey.

³⁶¹. “Correction Regarding a Falsehood in Article and Posts Published by Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam on 16 February 2024 and Republished by Gutzy Asia and The Online Citizen Asia.” *Factually.gov.sg*, 18 Feb. 2024, www.factually.gov.sg/corrections-and-clarifications/factually180224.

³⁶². “Gutzy Asia Handed POFMA Restrictions Over ‘Multiple Falsehoods.’” *CNA*, 11 June 2024, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/gutzy-asia-handed-pofma-restrictions-over-multiple-falsehoods-5583136.

³⁶³. “POFMA Restrictions Imposed on The Online Citizen Asia; Operator Cannot Receive Financial Benefits.” *CNA*, 21 July 2023, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pofma-online-citizen-asia-declared-online-location-doc-3645156.

Lee Hsien Yang, estranged brother of former prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, was also issued a POFMA correction order in 2023 over a Facebook post suggesting a possible conflict of interest in the Ridout matter³⁶⁴. Shanmugam and Balakrishnan later sued him³⁶⁵, and in 2024, he was ordered to pay each of them 200,000 SGD (around 147,800 USD)³⁶⁶.

POFMA directives over the Ridout Road controversy continued into 2025. TOC received another correction order in February 2025, along with a YouTube channel, Twenty Two Thirty, which had published a video on February 16, 2025, about the bungalow at 26 Ridout Road³⁶⁷. The TOC article that drew the POFMA correction order was titled “Is Shanmugam building a palace at Ridout Road?”³⁶⁸ TOC’s DOL status was also renewed, as it was set to expire in 2025; the government said this was due to the outlet’s continued publication of falsehoods³⁶⁹.

Beyond Ridout Road, TOC has been repeatedly targeted for its coverage of other issues since POFMA came into effect in 2019. Following the February 2025 correction order, the outlet announced it would legally challenge the directive and subsequently raised 2,000 SGD (USD 1,540) to appeal in June 2025³⁷⁰. Because it has been declared a DOL since 2023, the outlet has had to rely on public support to fund legal costs, which could reach up to 30,000 SGD (USD 23,100) if the case proceeds to the Court of Appeal³⁷¹. This illustrates how costly it is to challenge a POFMA order and how the expense can deter entities targeted under the law from defending themselves. The editor-in-chief of TOC currently lives overseas in self-imposed exile due to concerns about harassment through the legal system.

³⁶⁴. “Issuance of Correction Direction Under the Protection From Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act to Lee Hsien Yang.” *Ministry of Law, Singapore*, 25 July 2023, www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/press-releases/2023-07-25-pofma-correction-directions-to-lee-hsien-yang.

³⁶⁵. “Singapore’s K Shanmugam, Vivian Balakrishnan Sue Lee Hsien Yang for Defamation Over Ridout Rental Allegations.” *South China Morning Post*, 3 Sep. 2023, www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3233237/singapores-k-shanmugam-vivian-balakrishnan-sue-lee-hsien-yang-defamation-over-ridout-rental.

³⁶⁶. Lam, Lydia. “Lee Hsien Yang Ordered to Pay S\$200,000 Each to Shanmugam and Vivian Balakrishnan for Defamation Over Ridout Road.” *CNA*, 24 May 2024, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/lee-hsien-yang-defamation-ridout-road-200000-damages-each-shanmugam-vivian-balakrishnan-4360466.

³⁶⁷. “POFMA Orders Issued to The Online Citizen and Twenty Two Thirty for False Claims on 26 Ridout Road.” *CNA*, 25 Feb. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/online-citizen-twenty-two-thirty-pofma-ridout-road-4959081.

³⁶⁸. “Is Shanmugam Building a Palace at Ridout Road?” *The Online Citizen*, 14 Feb. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/02/14/is-shanmugam-building-a-palace-at-ridout-road.

³⁶⁹. Al Anthony, Darcel. “The Online Citizen’s Operator Barred From Financial Benefit for Two More Years Over Repeated Falsehoods.” *CNA*, 11 June 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/online-citizen-operator-barred-financial-benefit-two-more-years-repeated-falsehoods-pofma-5174366.

³⁷⁰. “Landmark POFMA Appeal: Over \$2,000 Raised for Legal Challenge.” *The Online Citizen*, 16 June 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/06/16/landmark-pofma-appeal-over-2000-raised-for-legal-challenge.

³⁷¹. *Ibid*.

A separate but equally significant example is the series of POFMA orders issued against the Transformative Justice Collective (TJC), a civil society group campaigning against the death penalty in Singapore. Following multiple POFMA correction orders in 2024, TJC was declared a DOL at the end of that year. In January 2025, the group decided to suspend operations of its website and social media accounts until December 2026, when its DOL status will expire³⁷². According to TJC, this decision was taken to protect its members and supporters from legal repercussions.

POFMA correction orders have also been issued against outlets based outside of Singapore. In 2025, MalaysiaNow, a Malaysian independent outlet, received a POFMA directive over its report on the treatment of Malaysian convicted drug trafficker Pannir Selvam Pranthaman, who was controversially executed in Singapore on October 8, 2025^{373, 374}. Because the outlet refused to comply with the order to “correct” its report³⁷⁵, the government subsequently blocked access to the website in Singapore³⁷⁶.

Also in 2025, the Australia-based East Asia Forum was issued a POFMA order over its article, “Singapore’s New Prime Minister Entangled in Old Politics.”³⁷⁷ The government subsequently blocked access to the East Asia Forum website in Singapore, citing non-compliance with the order³⁷⁸. The website had previously been blocked in 2023 under POFMA, but was later unblocked after the removal of the flagged article^{379, 380}.

³⁷². “Transformative Justice Collective to Cease Website and Social Media Operations Until Dec 2026.” *The Online Citizen*, 21 Jan. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/01/21/transformative-justice-collective-to-cess-website-and-social-media-operations-until-dec-2026.

³⁷³. Farmilo, Kathleen. “A Queue for Execution: How Singapore’s Tough Stance on Crime Resulted in Pannir’s Death.” *SBS News*, 26 Oct. 2025, www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/article/a-queue-for-execution-how-singapores-tough-stance-on-crime-resulted-in-pannirs-death/wuui98gwn.

³⁷⁴. Singapore Executes Malaysian Diamorphine Trafficker Pannir Selvam.” *South China Morning Post*, 8 Oct. 2025, www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3328221/singapore-executes-malaysian-diamorphine-trafficker-pannir-selvam.

³⁷⁵. “Singapore Invokes Its Censorship Laws on MalaysiaNow, Tells Portal to Insert ‘Corrections.’” *MalaysiaNow*, 15 Nov. 2025, www.malaysianow.com/news/2025/11/15/singapore-invokes-its-censorship-laws-on-malaysianow-tells-portal-to-insert-corrections.

³⁷⁶. Al Anthony, Darcel. “Singapore to Block Access to News Outlet MalaysiaNow Over Failure to Comply With POFMA Order.” *CNA*, 17 Nov. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/malaysianow-internet-access-blocked-pofma-mha-mddi-imda-5472021.

³⁷⁷. “East Asia Forum Issued POFMA Over Alleged Misleading Claims on Singapore’s Governance.” *The Online Citizen*, 22 Jan. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/01/22/east-asia-forum-issued-pofma-over-alleged-misleading-claims-on-singapores-governance.

³⁷⁸. Wong Ming Jun, Andy. “Singapore Again Blocks Australian Academic Website East Asia Forum.” *Asia Sentinel*, 27 Jan. 2025, www.asiasentinel.com/p/singapore-again-blocks-east-asia-forum.

³⁷⁹. “NUS Assistant Professor Apologised for POFMA-ed Article and Retracts It From East Asia Forum.” *Gutzy Asia*, 19 Sep. 2023, gutzy.asia/2023/09/19/nus-asst-prof-apologised-for-pofma-ed-article-and-retracts-it-from-east-asia-forum.

³⁸⁰. “Singapore Unblocks Access to East Asia Forum After Removal of Article Written by NUS Academic.” *Today*, 22 Sep. 2023, www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-unblocks-access-east-asia-forum-after-removal-article-written-nus-academic-2263286.

If the Singapore government issues a POFMA correction order for a social media post and the author does not comply, it can direct social media platforms to label the content instead. This occurred in September 2025, when the government ordered American comedian Sammy Obeid to correct his posts on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram³⁸¹. After he did not comply, the government instructed Meta and X to issue a “correction notice” to users in Singapore^{382, 383}. The posts in question concerned his claim that his shows in Singapore were cancelled because they referenced the Israel-Palestine conflict³⁸⁴.

Although the 2025 General Election (GE2025) took place in May, POFMA was not directly used against narratives that could damage the PAP’s reputation, unlike during the 2020 General Election^{385, 386}. In GE2025, the opposition Workers’ Party (WP) appeared to be specifically targeted, but through more sophisticated tactics. These included the use of race and religion, content manipulation, online attacks by bots and fake social media accounts, and the leaking of private messages.

Andre Low, a WP candidate, was targeted through the leak of his private Telegram messages, which were posted on Facebook and Reddit on April 29, 2025³⁸⁷. Many of the messages dated from the COVID-19 pandemic period and contained strong language about the government, Singapore’s COVID-19 tracking app TraceTogether, and a resident he met at a Meet-the-People session who had obtained his mobile number and called

³⁸¹. “US Comedian Sammy Obeid Fails to Comply With POFMA Correction Order; Meta, X Directed to Take Action.” *CNA*, 4 Sep. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/sammy-obeid-pofma-meta-x-targeted-correction-direction-imda-mddi-censorship-5332381.

³⁸². Pek, Gawain. “US Comedian Sammy Obeid Fails to Comply With POFMA, Meta & X to Carry Correction Notices for His Original Posts: MDDI.” *Mothership*, 4 Sep. 2025, mothership.sg/2025/09/sammy-obeid-no-comply-pofma.

³⁸³. “POFMA Office Orders Meta and X to Issue Correction Notices Over Sammy Obeid Posts.” *The Online Citizen*, 4 Sep. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/09/04/pofma-office-orders-meta-and-x-to-issue-correction-notices-over-sammy-obeid-posts.

³⁸⁴. Martens, Hannah. “IMDA Says US Comedian’s Show Cancellation Was Not Due to Censorship; POFMA Order Issued.” *Mothership*, 31 Aug. 2025, mothership.sg/2025/08/imda-us-comedian-show-inaccurate-pofma.

³⁸⁵. Mahmud, Aquil Haziq. “In Focus: Has POFMA Been Effective? A Look at the Fake News Law, 1 Year Since It Kicked In.” *CNA*, 3 Oct. 2020, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-pofma-fake-news-law-1-year-kicked-in-688816.

³⁸⁶. Yong, Nicholas. “GE2020: Workers’ Party Is Not ‘Pulling Its Punches’ in Spite of POFMA, Says Pritam Singh.” *Yahoo News Singapore*, 7 July 2020, sg.news.yahoo.com/ge-2020-workers-party-is-not-pulling-its-punches-in-spite-of-pofma-says-pritam-singh-063326754.html.

³⁸⁷. Chua, Ilyda. “WP’s Andre Low Apologises for Leaked Messages.” *Mothership*, 30 Apr. 2025, mothership.sg/2025/04/wps-andre-low-apologises-leaked-messages.

him daily³⁸⁸. Low apologized for the vulgar and inappropriate remarks³⁸⁹. The identity of the person who leaked the messages remains unknown³⁹⁰.

On race and religion, the WP was linked to a claim by hardline, Malaysia-based Singaporean Muslim preacher Noor Deros. Ahead of GE2025, Deros publicly demanded that political parties adopt a Muslim ideology and oppose LGBTQ+ rights and feminism in exchange for his support. He claimed that the WP was the only party to respond to his demands and that he had met all of the WP's Malay candidates³⁹¹.

WP Secretary-General Pritam Singh later clarified that Noor Deros was "sadly mistaken" in believing that WP would advance his agenda in Parliament³⁹². He explained that Deros had made an unannounced appearance at a meeting between WP members and religious leaders, where he presented a list of demands³⁹³. Nevertheless, the PAP continued to raise the issue in Parliament even after GE2025, framing it as a matter of "foreign interference."³⁹⁴ Some observers have suggested that this may be part of the PAP's longer-term strategy to undermine the WP's credibility ahead of the next election³⁹⁵.

At the same time, two Malaysians associated with the Malaysian hardline Muslim party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) also expressed support for WP candidate Faisal Manap in their social media posts³⁹⁶. The authorities described the posts as attempts by foreigners to influence the election by urging Singaporeans to vote along religious and racial lines. As a result, they issued a corrective order under the Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA) to Meta, directing it to disable access to the posts in Singapore^{397, 398}.

³⁸⁸. Ibid.

³⁸⁹. Workers' Party Candidate Andre Low Apologises for Vulgar Messages Leaked From Private Chat." *The Online Citizen*, 30 Apr. 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/04/30/workers-party-candidate-andre-low-apologises-for-vulgar-messages-leaked-from-private-chat.

³⁹⁰. Ibid.

³⁹¹. Lee, Loraine. "GE 2025: Who Is Noor Deros, and What Has He Been Saying in His Online Posts?" *CNA*, 30 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/who-noor-deros-online-posts-5090751.

³⁹². Loh, Renald. "GE 2025: WP Can't Be Successful If It Plays Race and Religion Card and Noor Deros Was 'Sadly Mistaken', Says Pritam Singh." *CNA*, 26 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ge2025-wp-all-races-religions-pritam-singh-5091091.

³⁹³. Ibid.

³⁹⁴. Tham, Davina, et al. "Pritam Singh Accepts Workers' Party Statement on Noor Deros Could Have Been Clearer; Says Didn't Want to Draw Attention to a 'Nobody.'" *CNA*, 14 Oct. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pritam-singh-workers-party-noor-deros-statement-clearer-shanmugam-5400786.

³⁹⁵. Lim, Kolette, and Jean Lau. "Why Singapore's PAP Is Taking Aim at Opposition WP So Soon After an Election." *South China Morning Post*, 15 Nov. 2025, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3332868/why-singapores-pap-taking-aim-opposition-wp-so-soon-after-election.

³⁹⁶. "GE2025: Singapore Identifies Foreigners Trying to Influence Elections; Meta Directed to Block Access to Facebook Posts." *CNA*, 25 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/foreign-interference-mha-eld-ge2025-meta-imda-5089426.

³⁹⁷. Ibid.

³⁹⁸. "Joint MHA – ELD Statement on Takedown of Foreign Online Election Advertising." *Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore*, 25 Apr. 2025, www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/joint-mha-eld-statement-on-takedown-of-foreign-online-election-advertising.

In terms of content manipulation, WP candidate Alia Mattar, who is Muslim, was targeted through a misquotation of her speech. She was falsely quoted as saying, “The Israel-Palestine conflict is more important than bread and butter issues,” and “The deciding factor for me joining the election was the Israel-Palestine conflict.” An AFP fact-check later showed that what she actually said was: “To have our voices heard is important to us as Singaporeans, ranging from local issues such as lift upgrading in the neighborhood, to more major issues that affect Singaporeans as global citizens.”³⁹⁹ Mattar also said, “We meet our MPs to discuss bread and butter issues, yes, but we would also like to meet our MPs to discuss the effects of certain laws or the government’s positions on certain global issues.”⁴⁰⁰

The controversies surrounding Noor Deros’s comments, the support for Manap by PAS-linked individuals, and the misquotation of Mattar are closely connected to Islamophobia in Singapore. These issues were reportedly amplified by pro-PAP social media accounts. While Islamophobia is not institutionalized, discrimination against Muslims in the country persists. It is unclear why Manap was specifically targeted, but he has long advocated for better treatment for Malay Muslims in Singapore in light of prevailing Islamophobia. It is also uncertain why Mattar was singled out, but as a Malay Muslim woman contesting for the opposition, her religion may have made her a convenient target.

Another WP candidate, Harpreet Singh Nehal, was reported by state-owned CNA to have been attacked by bots and a wave of fake Facebook accounts. According to the CNA’s report, these bots and fake accounts also targeted PAP figures⁴⁰¹. However, The Online Citizen reported that the bots appeared to operate overwhelmingly in one direction—against opposition candidates—while amplifying pro-PAP content. TOC also reported that much of the criticism directed at the PAP came from genuine accounts reflecting verifiable grievances, whereas attacks on opposition candidates were largely based on fabricated or misleading claims, often without attribution or factual grounding⁴⁰².

³⁹⁹. “Singaporean Opposition Candidate Misquoted Online Ahead of Polls.” *AFP Fact Check*, 5 May 2025, factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.44CE2WD.

⁴⁰⁰. *Ibid*.

⁴⁰¹. Jun Sen, Ng. “GE2025: Hundreds of Fake Facebook Accounts, Bots Spreading Anti-PAP and Anti-WP Sentiments; MDDI Urges Public to Be Discerning.” *CNA*, 24 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ge2025-bots-facebook-fake-accounts-pap-wp-mddi-influence-5085806.

⁴⁰². “PAP’s GE2025 Victory Shaped by Systemic Advantage, Strategic Subsidies, and Fear-Driven Continuity.” *The Online Citizen*, 4 May 2025, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/05/04/paps-ge2025-victory-shaped-by-systemic-advantage-strategic-subsidies-and-fear-driven-continuity.

In GE2025, social media platforms played a vital role in the campaigns of both the PAP and the opposition⁴⁰³. They provided a space where politicians could engage directly with citizens, and some observers felt this gave more insight into candidates' personal sides than the Meet-the-People Sessions. GE2025 was also the first election in which TikTok was used extensively, and AI-generated content was documented in the lead-up to the polls⁴⁰⁴.

Media reported that, in preparation for GE2025, TikTok, Meta, and Google announced that all AI-generated content would have to be labeled so that audiences were aware of it⁴⁰⁵. However, according to CNA, not all of the AI-generated content documented in the run-up to the election carried such labels⁴⁰⁶.

While various laws regulate online content, the Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA) played the most crucial role during GE2025. In addition to the case involving PAS-linked figures expressing support for the WP, the authorities reportedly issued corrective directions under the PEA to Meta during the election period, requiring it to disable advertising in Singapore for three Jom magazine articles⁴⁰⁷. Two of these articles criticized the PAP, while the third expressed support for the opposition WP.

The two articles that expressed negative sentiments toward the PAP were "Is Shan a Good Bad Cop?" and "Affordability in the Lion City: Is Singapore's Public Housing Model Built to Last?" The first examines K. Shanmugam's role in defending the government's and the PAP's reputation during his tenure as Minister for Law. The second questions the long-term sustainability of Singapore's widely praised public housing model.

The article, viewed as favorable toward the WP, titled "The System Has Stopped Evolving: Why Harpreet Singh Joined the Opposition," explained why the prominent lawyer and Supreme Court Senior Counsel Harpreet Singh Nehal decided to join the WP for GE2025.

⁴⁰³. Yeo, Nikki, and Eunice Sng. "Turning 'Likes' Into Votes – How Social Media and Podcasts Will Shape the GE2025 Campaign." *CNA*, 15 Mar. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/today/big-read/general-election-2025-social-media-podcasts-4997721.

⁴⁰⁴. Tham, Davina. "GE2025: Surge in AI-Generated Videos Related to Elections After Polls Called." *CNA*, 21 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ge2025-deepfakes-ai-generated-tiktok-politicians-disinformation-5078011.

⁴⁰⁵. "Rise of AI and Deepfakes in Lead-up to GE2025." *CNA*, 11 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/interactive/ge2025-deepfake.

⁴⁰⁶. Tham, Davina. "GE2025: Surge in AI-Generated Videos Related to Elections After Polls Called." *CNA*, 21 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ge2025-deepfakes-ai-generated-tiktok-politicians-disinformation-5078011.

⁴⁰⁷. "GE2025: Online Publication Jom Flouted Online Election Advertising Rules by Boosting Articles' Access on Social Media." *CNA*, 30 Apr. 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/jom-articles-facebook-instagram-paid-ads-mddi-5099591.

On November 5, 2025, another law regulating online content—the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Act—was passed to protect victims of online harms, including deepfakes, doxxing, and sexual harassment. The Act will establish the Online Safety Commission (OSC), which is empowered to compel platforms to remove harmful content and unmask anonymous perpetrators. The OSC will also administer a statutory reporting mechanism for victims seeking redress when platforms fail to act. The bill was passed while rejecting the WP’s proposed amendment to include a judicial appeal route beyond the OSC.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The main digital rights concern in Singapore in 2025 is the government’s control of information through a series of laws it has enacted. This trend is likely to continue under the ruling PAP government as it seeks to maintain its reputation and political interests. POFMA, in particular, allows the government to police content with little transparency, and it has frequently been used to silence critics, independent media, and political opposition.

In GE2025, instead of using these repressive laws to directly silence the opposition and critics, harassment has become less overt. As seen in the treatment of the WP’s candidates, the attacks—clearly driven by political motives—have evolved into more sophisticated tactics, often carried out by third parties rather than the ruling PAP itself. GE2025 also shows that the disinformation campaign targeting Alia Mattar, even after it was fact-checked by independent AFP fact-checkers, demonstrates that POFMA primarily serves to protect the interests of the government and the ruling PAP.

Under the PAP government, harassment of dissidents is expected to persist. Despite this hostile climate—where meaningful human rights advocacy directed at state actors is largely impossible—civil society groups in Singapore, many of whom have long faced harassment, still challenge the government and the ruling PAP’s authoritarianism. The case of The Online Citizen challenging the POFMA order, for example, illustrates how difficult and costly such efforts are, especially when the group has been designated a DOL. This challenging and hostile environment has made it extremely difficult for them to carry out their work, underscoring the need for greater support.

THAILAND



A. Political Situations

The political situation in Thailand has remained unstable since the 2023 general election, with three prime ministers serving within two years. Srettha Thavisin, who became prime minister following the election through a mechanism established by the 2014 coup d'état, was removed from office on August 16, 2024, for an ethics violation⁴⁰⁸. Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the daughter of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, succeeded Srettha in 2024 but was also removed at the end of August 2025 for an ethics violation⁴⁰⁹.

In September 2025, Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of the Bhumjaithai Party, became prime minister⁴¹⁰. His premiership resulted from a political deal: the People's Party—formerly

⁴⁰⁸. Saksornchai, Jintamas. "Court Removes Prime Minister Srettha From Office in Another Ruling Shaking Up Thailand's Politics." *AP News*, 15 Aug. 2024, apnews.com/article/srettha-constitutional-court-prime-minister-ethics-b0511e373fdaf598dbb36e51a98c09dd.

⁴⁰⁹. Saksornchai, Jintamas. "Paetongtarn Shinawatra Becomes Thailand Prime Minister After Royal Signoff." *AP News*, 18 Aug. 2024, apnews.com/article/thailand-paetongtarn-thaksin-prime-minister-royal-assent-78e8d41b40c1bd6a77c0885158da5794.

⁴¹⁰. Thepgumpanat, Panarat, and Chayut Setboonsarng. "Thailand's Anutin Charnvirakul Elected PM After Rout of Ruling Party Rival." *Reuters*, 5 Sep. 2025, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailands-anutin-charnvirakul-elected-pm-after-rout-ruling-party-rival-2025-09-05.

the Move Forward Party (MFP), which holds the most seats in parliament—agreed to support him on the condition that he dissolve parliament after four months and hold a public referendum on amending the 2017 constitution, a legacy of the 2014 coup d'état⁴¹¹. This was intended to enable a general election in 2026. Anutin controversially dissolved parliament on December 11, 2025, paving the way for a general election in February 2026⁴¹².

One issue closely tied to politics and capable of reshaping Thailand's political landscape is the role of the monarchy. The MFP, which won the most seats in the 2023 general election, was dissolved in August 2024, with ten of its executives banned from politics for ten years⁴¹³. The dissolution stemmed from the party's campaign pledge to amend Article 112 of the Criminal Code, also known as the lèse-majesté law⁴¹⁴. Earlier, in January 2024, the Constitutional Court ruled that the party's campaign to amend the lèse-majesté law was unconstitutional⁴¹⁵.

The dissolution of the MFP marked a major setback for Thailand's progressive movement. It followed an earlier episode in which its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, failed to secure a majority of votes from members of parliament, preventing him from assuming the prime ministership after the 2023 election⁴¹⁶. The requirement for confirmation from parliamentarians—senators in particular—was a political trap created by the 2014 coup d'état. Pita's inability to win a parliamentary majority, despite the MFP's electoral victory, was attributed largely to the party's campaign to amend the lèse-majesté law⁴¹⁷.

According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR), prosecutions of activists under Article 112 of the Criminal Code, or the lèse-majesté law, have been reported less frequently over the past two years under the civilian government⁴¹⁸. However, following the mass protests of 2020–2021, during which many pro-democracy activists were

⁴¹¹. "People's Party Decides to Support Anutin Charnvirakul for PM With Conditions." *The Nation*, 3 Sep. 2025, www.nationthailand.com/news/politics/40054898.

⁴¹². "PM Anutin Announces Return of Power to the People." *Bangkok Post*, 11 Dec. 2025, www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/3154743/pm-anutin-announces-return-of-power-to-the-people.

⁴¹³. "Court Dissolves Move Forward Party." *Bangkok Post*, 7 Aug. 2025, www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2843182/court-dissolves-move-forward-party.

⁴¹⁴. Ibid.

⁴¹⁵. "Court Rules Pita, Move Forward's Article 112 Campaign Unconstitutional." *The Nation*, 31 Jan. 2024, www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40035184.

⁴¹⁶. "Thailand's Pita Fails PM Bid After Losing Parliament Vote." *Reuters*, 13 July 2023, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailands-pita-fails-pm-bid-after-losing-parliament-vote-2023-07-13.

⁴¹⁷. Ratcliffe, Rebecca, and Navaon Siradapuvadol. "Thailand's Move Forward Leader Pita Limjaroenrat Loses PM Vote." *The Guardian*, 19 July 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/19/thailand-pm-vote-move-forward-leader-pita-limjaroenrat.

⁴¹⁸. "Review of the Situation Regarding Article 112 After Five Years of Its Reimplementation." *Thai Lawyers for Human Rights*, 19 Nov. 2025, tlhr2014.com/archives/79959.

charged under this law, 2024 – 2025 saw a significant number of lèse-majesté cases involving these activists advance to higher courts⁴¹⁹. The law, often applied together with the Computer Crime Act, also serves as a political tool to silence online critics.

According to TLHR's records, lèse-majesté cases peaked in 2021 at 146, then dropped to 72 in 2022, 44 in 2023, 21 in 2024, and nine in 2025⁴²⁰. TLHR reported that the 146 cases stemmed from the Prayuth Chan-o-cha administration's 2020 policy, announced at the height of the mass protests, to intensify legal enforcement by "applying every law and regulation in force" against protesters⁴²¹. More than half of the lèse-majesté cases recorded by TLHR concern the expression of opinions online⁴²².

The Constitutional Court's 2024 ruling, which declared the Move Forward Party's 2023 election campaign to amend the lèse-majesté law unconstitutional, sets a precedent that the law cannot be challenged at all, despite its use as a political weapon to silence dissent.

Despite this, civil society has pushed to include individuals convicted under Article 112 of the Criminal Code in an Amnesty Act. On July 16, 2025, the House of Representatives convened to review five draft amnesty bills proposed by civil society representatives; members of parliament from the Move Forward Party (prior to its dissolution); and members of the Thai Teachers for People Party, the Bhumjaithai Party, and the United Thai Nation Party. Of these, only the drafts from civil society (signed by 36,723 citizens)⁴²³ and the Move Forward Party included amnesty for those convicted under the lèse-majesté law⁴²⁴.

The Move Forward Party's draft amnesty bill received 147 votes in favor, 319 against, and six abstentions⁴²⁵. The citizen-initiated bill received 149 votes in favor, 306 against, and 20 abstentions. Both proposals were rejected because they failed to secure a majority of votes⁴²⁶.

⁴¹⁹. Ibid.

⁴²⁰. Ibid.

⁴²¹. Ibid.

⁴²². Ibid.

⁴²³. "Listen to the 35% of Those Who Voted For: Do You Know? The Amnesty Bill (People's Version) Can Still Move Forward if MPs Push for It." *The Momentum*, 13 June 2024, themomentum.co/feature-amnesty-for-people.

⁴²⁴. Treesuwan, Hataikarn. "Who Is Backing—or Opposing—the Two Draft Amnesty Bills (the People Party's Version and the People's Version) After the Parliament Accepted Three and Rejected Two Drafts." *BBC News Thai*, 16 July 2025, www.bbc.com/thai/articles/cjrlg8gnww7o.

⁴²⁵. Ibid.

⁴²⁶. Ibid.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

The digital rights situation in Thailand in 2025 is dominated by concerns over state-affiliated information operations (IO). During a parliamentary debate on March 25, 2025, Chayaphon Satondee, an MP from the opposition People's Party, revealed a network of IO allegedly run by the military⁴²⁷. Unlike previous disclosures, this 2025 revelation exposes the network's operational structure, identifies those behind it, and details its targets.

In undated documents used as supporting material for the debate, it is noted that a "Special Security Working Group" was established to address a group of individuals described as a "movement opposing the monarchy." Among the IO's targets are pro-democracy activists, NGOs, academics, journalists, and members of the political opposition⁴²⁸.

According to Chayaphon, a new IO structure was created shortly before the 2023 election to ensure unity from the policy level down to the operational level. The head of the operations, known as the "Cyber Team," is reportedly General Thammanoon Withee. Thammanoon is alleged to have played a major role in targeting, prosecuting, and suppressing anti-coup activities since the early days of the 2014 coup d'état. He is also believed to have remained a key figure in the crackdown on pro-democracy protests between 2020 and 2021, during the second administration of coup leader, Prayuth Chan-o-Cha⁴²⁹.

According to a record in the Royal Gazette, in 2021, Thammanoon was appointed as a civil-servant in the royal household, military branch, holding the position of Operational Officer attached to the Office of the Commander of the Royal Guard (Royal Guard Headquarters), the unit tasked with providing security and protection for the monarch⁴³⁰. In 2023, he reportedly served as Deputy Commander of the Royal Guard Headquarters (Unit 1)⁴³¹.

According to the diagram in the documents, the command-level hierarchy of the Cyber Team also includes the Chief of Staff of the Royal Thai Army, the Deputy Commander

⁴²⁷. "Opposition Accuses Paethongtarn Government of Allowing Military to Conduct IO Operations—Revealing 46 Target Names That Have Been "Locked On."" *BBC News Thai*, 25 Mar. 2025, www.bbc.com/thai/articles/c20lw5qx4z1o.

⁴²⁸. The leaked documents, presented in Parliament on March 25, 2025, can be found at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16n2xNG_NvlcEM52vW9uPlpi7bsfVUJ5q.

⁴²⁹. "'Chayaphon' Exposes Sequel of the Military's IO Operations 'Thaksin-Anutin'—Not Safe." *Prachatai*, 26 Mar. 2025, prachatai.com/journal/2025/03/112456.

⁴³⁰. "His Majesty Appoints General Thammanoon Withee as a Royal Civil Servant." *Khaosod*, 28 Sep. 2021, www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_6644718.

⁴³¹. "His Majesty Appoints Three Generals as Royal Civil Servants With the Rank of "Special Field Marshal."" *Thai PBS*, 6 Oct. 2023, www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/332512.

of the 1st Regional Army Area, the Commander of the 1st Division (Royal Guard), the Head of Military Intelligence, the Director of the Army Cyber Center, and the commander responsible for suppressing technology-related crimes from the Royal Thai Police.

At the staff level, the document specifies that the group is composed of personnel from the Royal Guard Headquarters, the Royal Guard Special Operations Unit 904, the Royal Thai Army, and the Royal Thai Police.

The opposition People's Party's parliamentary debate indicates that, even though the government has transitioned to a civilian administration under Paetongtarn Shinawatra of the Pheu Thai Party, the IO operations have continued and become even more centralized. According to the documents presented in March 2025, Paetongtarn herself was also a target of the IO operations, with accounts allegedly involved in the campaign criticizing her handling of the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, her qualifications to be prime minister, and even her fashion sense. Her father, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was also identified as a target in the leaked document due to a *lèse-majesté* case against him arising from a 2015 media interview.

This suggests that Paetongtarn's civilian government might not have full authority over the military. The struggle between the civilian government and the military is also reflected in the leaked phone call between Paetongtarn and Hun Sen, which led to her removal from office.

Based on information in the leaked documents, iLaw, a human rights NGO in Thailand, further investigated posts targeted by IO and found evidence of coordinated activity⁴³². The accounts involved appeared to use the same images and text in posts across different targeted pages⁴³³. These posts were often published at around the same time and date, and the accounts also shared many of the same "friends" on their social media profiles⁴³⁴.

Chayaphon's parliamentary debate was not the first time the operations had been raised in parliament; it was first exposed in 2020. However, the military has never acknowledged the operations, despite reports from social media companies, including Meta (then Facebook)⁴³⁵ and X (then Twitter), that they removed accounts believed to be associated with the Royal Thai Army in 2021 due to coordinated inauthentic behavior⁴³⁶.

⁴³². "IO – Part One: Four Convincing Reasons the Accounts in the '68 Debate Documents Are Indeed Military IO" *iLaw*, 24 Aug. 2025, www.ilaw.or.th/articles/54102.

⁴³³. *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴. *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵. "February 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report." *Facebook*, Feb. 2021, about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/February-2021-CIB-Report.pdf.

⁴³⁶. Tostevin, Matthew, and Patpicha Tanakasempipat. "Exclusive: Twitter Suspends Thai Royalist Account Linked to Influence Campaign." *Reuters*, 30 Nov. 2020, www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/twitter-suspends-thai-royalist-account-linked-influence-campaign-2020-11-30.

In May 2025, following the parliamentary debate, the spokesperson for the Royal Thai Army, Major General Winthai Suvaree, denied the existence of the operation before the House Committee on National Security, Border Affairs, National Strategy, and National Reform⁴³⁷.

However, he stated that the Royal Thai Army does carry out information-gathering activities to build understanding and correct misunderstandings⁴³⁸. This is done through public relations efforts that raise awareness and counter misinformation, all conducted openly⁴³⁹. He further added that, in its counter-operations, the military focuses on individuals who have large followings, including both politicians and academics, because they attract public attention⁴⁴⁰. Other targets include people who hold negative attitudes toward the armed forces⁴⁴¹. The goal, he said, is to give society another perspective on the issues⁴⁴². Therefore, army monitoring “should not be” a cause for concern, since the debate will ultimately be settled by facts⁴⁴³.

Additionally, the army reaffirmed that it does not position itself as an adversary; it merely seeks to offer society an alternative perspective⁴⁴⁴. Its primary communication channel is online. If any content is found to be inaccurate or inappropriate, the army follows legal procedures, such as invoking the Computer Crime Act and defamation statutes⁴⁴⁵. Regarding Facebook pages that claim to represent the military and publish material attacking dissent, the army emphasized that those pages are not official military entities⁴⁴⁶. If such pages are identified, the army can take legal action to verify the facts and enforce the law⁴⁴⁷.

Despite the Royal Thai Army spokesperson’s statement, the investigation conducted by the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRC) reached a different conclusion. Following the parliamentary revelation, one of the individuals named on the list, Anna Annanon, filed a complaint with the NHRC, requesting an investigation into the matter⁴⁴⁸.

437. “Winthai Reiterates That the Military Has No IO, Insists the Page Claiming Soldiers’ Names Against Politicians Is Unrelated.” *Thai PBS*, 1 May 2025, www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/351751.

438. *Ibid.*

439. *Ibid.*

440. *Ibid.*

441. *Ibid.*

442. *Ibid.*

443. *Ibid.*

444. *Ibid.*

445. *Ibid.*

446. *Ibid.*

447. *Ibid.*

448. “Activist Calls on the NHRC to Investigate After Finding Her Own Name Listed as an IO Target by the Security Forces.” *Prachatai*, 27 Mar. 2025, prachatai.com/journal/2025/03/112472.

In its report dated September 30, 2025, the NHRC found that the documents presented during the parliamentary debate contained sufficient valid grounds to be considered authentic, as it outlined the structure of the Special Security Working Group, defined its strategy, and detailed the IO plans⁴⁴⁹. These elements describe the specific tactics and methods employed by security agencies, leading to the conclusion that the material was produced internally⁴⁵⁰. The NHRC also stated that creating a target list of persons or organizations for surveillance constitutes the collection and use of personal data for hostile purposes, amounting to a violation of human rights⁴⁵¹.

According to the NHRC's report, the Royal Thai Army maintained that the documents presented during the parliamentary debate are not Special Security Working Group documents and were not produced by the army⁴⁵². The army explained that the Special Security Working Group was established to address complex security challenges involving multiple security agencies, ensure alignment with government policy, and monitor security situations that could affect the army's operations and the nation's core institutions⁴⁵³. It also stated that it does not compile targeted lists intended to create social division, and instead focuses on promoting accurate information⁴⁵⁴.

The Ministry of Defence, the Royal Thai Navy, and the Royal Thai Air Force all stated that they have no policies or practices that infringe on citizens' rights and freedoms, and that they were not involved with any documents used in the parliamentary debate⁴⁵⁵. They further emphasized that their public relations activities do not constitute IO; instead, they aim to promote knowledge, understanding, good relations, and resilience against disinformation, without targeting any specific group⁴⁵⁶.

The Royal Thai Police also stated that there is no Special Security Working Group or joint military-police operations center, and that no target lists have been compiled⁴⁵⁷. However, they acknowledged that they monitor activities that can threaten national security in accordance with the law⁴⁵⁸.

⁴⁴⁹. "Report 232/2568 – Privacy & Free-Speech Complaint: State Security Agency's Watchlist Targeting Individuals and Organizations." *National Human Rights Commission*, 27 Oct. 2025, www.nhrc.or.th/th/Examination-reports/16196.

⁴⁵⁰. Ibid.

⁴⁵¹. Ibid.

⁴⁵². Ibid.

⁴⁵³. Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴. Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵. Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶. Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷. Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸. Ibid.

The conclusions of the NHRC's report are also reflected in the Administrative Court's ruling in October 2025. The case was filed by Sarinee Achavanuntakul, Winyu Wongsurawat, and Yingcheep Atchanont. Sarinee is an independent academic and a regular critic of government policies; Yingcheep is the director of iLaw; and Winyu is the executive director of SpokeDark.tv, an independent media outlet. All three frequently discuss political issues on their social media channels. The case was filed in 2021 after they found themselves targeted by cyber trolls allegedly linked to military-affiliated IO operations⁴⁵⁹.

Although the Administrative Court dismissed their lawsuit, it found that the documents submitted by the plaintiffs, which instructed the IO on its operations, were authentic⁴⁶⁰. The court did not deny the existence of the operations but ruled that actions taken by accounts believed to be IO—such as liking, sharing, or commenting—could reflect the personal opinions of the individuals behind those accounts⁴⁶¹.

As iLaw examined the URLs provided in the documents used during the March 2025 parliamentary debate, many posts from these URLs, allegedly part of the IO, were found to be targeting the three individuals⁴⁶².

Beyond these matters, the documents presented during the parliamentary debate also provide insight into the military's efforts to produce AI-generated content. They further highlight a digital security dimension, noting that the military attempted to access targeted social media accounts using brute-force attacks. A brute-force attack is a method used by attackers to gain unauthorized access to systems by systematically trying all possible combinations of passwords or encryption keys until the correct one is found. For example, the military reportedly described its attempts to gain access to Sarinee Achavanuntakul's social media account, but did not succeed. The documents also describe tactics such as mass-reporting accounts or posts to prompt suspensions by social media platforms, as well as phishing and spamming campaigns.

Denial-of-service (DoS) attacks and the creation of fake Wi-Fi access points are also highlighted in the documents as techniques the military is learning to deploy against its targets. A DoS attack is a cyberattack designed to make a website, network, or device unavailable to legitimate users by overwhelming it with excessive traffic or malicious requests. This creates a virtual traffic jam that exhausts system resources such as

⁴⁵⁹. "Central Administrative Court Dismisses Lawsuit by Sarinee, Yingcheep, and John Winyu Against the Royal Thai Army for Using "IO" to Attack Dissenters." *BBC News Thai*, 30 Oct. 2025, www.bbc.com/thai/articles/cly91qnv9zjo.

⁴⁶⁰. "Judges Believe the IO Documents Are Authentic, but Notes That Those IO Accounts May Have Posted Personal Opinions on Social Media." *iLaw*, 15 Oct. 2025, www.ilaw.or.th/articles/55512.

⁴⁶¹. "Administrative Court Dismisses IO Case, Finding the Order Exists but Determining Soldiers Not at Fault for Possibly Only Expressing Personal Opinions" *iLaw*, 30 Oct. 2025, www.ilaw.or.th/articles/55744.

⁴⁶². "IO – Part Three: iLaw Remains a Constant Target, Even Wrongly Link to Unrelated Matters." *iLaw*, 28 Aug. 2025, www.ilaw.or.th/articles/54191.

memory and processing power, causing the system to become slow or completely inaccessible. A fake Wi-Fi access point—often called an “evil twin”—is a fraudulent network that imitates a legitimate one to trick users into connecting. Once connected, the attacker can intercept and monitor the user’s online activity, potentially stealing sensitive information such as passwords and personal data.

The documents also reveal that the military knows how to use a social listening tool to analyze topics of interest. Based on information in the documents, the tool is intended to help them plan their operations, as it shows which topics are trending and the social media sentiment toward those topics.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The most concerning digital rights challenge in Thailand is the growing sophistication of state-affiliated information operations (IO), which now involve coordinated agendas across different military and police units. Leaked documents have raised further concerns that these cyber armies are equipped with social listening tools to analyze online sentiment, are learning to generate AI-driven content, and are expanding other surveillance methods targeting individuals and groups.

State-affiliated cyber armies are harmful to human rights and democracy because they seek to manipulate public opinion for political purposes by silencing critical voices and flooding social media platforms with disinformation and propaganda. When these operations are state-affiliated, taxpayers’ money is often used to fund activities that reflect the political interests of those directing them. The erosion of democracy can be severe if these operations succeed, leading to self-censorship among critics and widespread public acceptance of disinformation and propaganda spread by these cyber armies.

The Administrative Court’s October 2025 ruling on the lawsuit filed by three activists against the Royal Thai Army and its affiliates—seeking a court order to end the operations—was a setback for democracy, as the court dismissed the case. It also shows how difficult it is for citizens to obtain justice for state wrongdoing.

However, there are some positive developments. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) investigation and the Administrative Court’s October 2025 ruling, which confirmed the authenticity of documents on IO operations, are important steps forward, as the military had never previously acknowledged the existence of such operations. Still, this does not mean that these operations will cease. Instead, the leaked documents highlight the need to push for the criminalization of such actions, and underline the importance of digital security and digital literacy for dissidents in Thailand.

VIETNAM



A. Political Situations

Under Tô Lâm, who became president in May 2024⁴⁶³ and later General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in August the same year⁴⁶⁴, Vietnam has undertaken major reforms, aimed at modernizing governance, improving state efficiency, and positioning the country for faster economic growth⁴⁶⁵.

The year 2025 marks Lâm's first full year in office as General Secretary of the CPV. His initial period in power was defined by what was called a "streamlining revolution," focused on administrative reform⁴⁶⁶. During this time, he reportedly reduced the number of officials,

⁴⁶³. "To Lam Takes Office as Vietnam's President." *Radio Free Asia*, 22 May 2024, www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/tolam-vietnam-president-05222024031719.html.

⁴⁶⁴. "To Lam Elected as Vietnam's Top Leader." *Radio Free Asia*, 4 Aug. 2024, www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/to-lam-general-secretary-08042024005125.html.

⁴⁶⁵. Viễn, Minh and Đàm Vĩnh Hằng. "One Year of Tô Lâm: Political Choices That Will Echo for Generations." *The Vietnamese*, 13 Aug. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/08/one-year-of-to-lam-political-choices-that-will-echo-for-generations.

⁴⁶⁶. "General Secretary Tô Lâm's Signing and Promulgation of Regulation 294, Will This Lead to Amendments to the Party Charter?" *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 11 June 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/ce82lm5d2jvo.

civil servants, and public employees by more than 150,000 and oversaw mergers of administrative agencies⁴⁶⁷. While these changes were presented as improvements, some observers suggest they may also serve a political purpose by helping Lâm consolidate power⁴⁶⁸.

While these reforms have taken place under Lâm, they continue to protect the interests of the ruling CPV and the state rather than the public. The Vietnamese, an independent online media outlet reporting on Vietnam, has noted that since Lâm assumed leadership, the gap between citizens and the legislative process appears to have widened, with public voices largely absent from major decisions that directly affect daily life⁴⁶⁹.

The Ministry of Public Security (MPS), where Lâm served as minister before becoming president, has expanded its influence under this national leadership. It has become a “super-ministry,” broadening its legal authority and taking over functions ranging from driver testing to cybersecurity, while gaining economic control over firms such as MobiFone. Although Tô Lâm no longer heads the ministry, his position as General Secretary allows him to steer it, closely linking Vietnam’s top political office with a powerful security apparatus.

In December 2025, it was reported that the CPV had decided to nominate Tô Lâm to remain in the top leadership position, effectively securing his continuation as party chief and allowing him to further advance his sweeping reform agenda, which is reshaping the country⁴⁷⁰. This report was confirmed on January 23, 2026, when Lâm was elected to remain in the top position for another five years⁴⁷¹. According to media reports, Lâm may also reassume the presidency while simultaneously serving as General Secretary of the CPV⁴⁷². He briefly held this dual role in 2024 before resigning from the presidency in October 2024 and retaining only the General Secretary position.

⁴⁶⁷. “To Lam Streamlines the Bureaucracy: a Massive ‘Revolution’ and a Power Rearrangement.” *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 7 Aug. 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/ckgexqrgz7go.

⁴⁶⁸. Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹. Viễn, Minh, and Đàm Vĩnh Hằng. “One Year of Tô Lâm: Political Choices That Will Echo for Generations.” *The Vietnamese*, 13 Aug. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/08/one-year-of-to-lam-political-choices-that-will-echo-for-generations.

⁴⁷⁰. Stevens, Francesca. “Vietnam’s Communist Party Said to Back Lam to Remain Chief.” *Bloomberg*, 23 Dec. 2025, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-12-23/vietnam-s-communist-party-said-to-back-lam-to-remain-as-chief.

⁴⁷¹. “Vietnam Communist Party Elects To Lam Chief for 5 More Years.” *Nikkei Asia*, 23 Jan. 2026, asia.nikkei.com/politics/vietnam-communist-party-elects-to-lam-chief-for-5-more-years.

⁴⁷². Ibid.

B. Key Digital Rights Situations in 2025

Under Lâm's leadership, several laws have been passed, including the Personal Data Protection Law, as well as revised versions of the Cybersecurity Law and the Press Law. The Personal Data Protection Law was passed on June 26, 2025. All three laws indicate the expansion of the Ministry of Public Security's (MPS) powers. Under the Personal Data Protection Law, the MPS is designated as the enforcement authority. The law grants the ministry the power to access personal data without consent on grounds of "national security" and to compel businesses to surrender user data without court approval⁴⁷³.

Both the revised Cybersecurity Law and the revised Press Law were adopted on December 10, 2025, and will take effect on July 1, 2026^{474, 475}. The revised Cybersecurity Law amends the 2019 law, incorporating additional provisions reportedly proposed by the MPS. The revised Press Law, drafted under the supervision of the Ministry of Information and Communications, amends the 2016 Press Law⁴⁷⁶.

Among the newly added provisions of the Cybersecurity Law is a requirement for online service providers to identify the IP addresses of their users and provide this information to authorities upon request⁴⁷⁷. The MPS is granted full authority over cybersecurity matters, and state-owned agencies, enterprises, and organizations within the political system are encouraged to use Vietnamese-made cybersecurity products⁴⁷⁸. The law also strictly prohibits a wide range of acts, including spreading anti-state rhetoric, disseminating distorted information about the government, falsifying history, insulting national leaders, and using AI to fabricate videos or voices.

Regarding the revised Press Law, while it still maintains the provision requiring the press outlets operating in Vietnam to serve as the mouthpiece of the CPV, it introduces a highly controversial clause empowering the MPS to require news organizations or journalists

⁴⁷³ An, Trường. "Viet Nam 2025: The Power Expansion of the Ministry of Public Security." *The Vietnamese*, 5 Jan. 2026, www.thevietnamese.org/2026/01/viet-nam-2025-the-power-expansion-of-the-ministry-of-public-security.

⁴⁷⁴ An, Trường. "The Quiet Passing of Việt Nam's 2025 Cybersecurity Law." *The Vietnamese*, 12 Dec. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/12/the-quiet-passing-of-viet-nams-2025-cybersecurity-law.

⁴⁷⁵ An, Trường. "The 'Anti-Journalistic' Nature of the Revised Press Law." *The Vietnamese*, 17 Dec. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/12/the-anti-journalistic-nature-of-the-revised-press-law.

⁴⁷⁶ An, Bình, et al. "Vietnam's Press Law Reform: The Rise of Media Conglomerates." *The Vietnamese*, 5 Mar. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/03/vietnams-press-law-reform-the-rise-of-media-conglomerates.

⁴⁷⁷ An, Trường. "The Quiet Passing of Việt Nam's 2025 Cybersecurity Law." *The Vietnamese*, 12 Dec. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/12/the-quiet-passing-of-viet-nams-2025-cybersecurity-law.

⁴⁷⁸ Hoang, Lien. "Vietnamese Government Plans to Enter Into Security Industry." *Nikkei Asia*, 18 Nov. 2025, asia.nikkei.com/politics/vietnamese-government-plans-to-enter-into-security-industry.

to disclose the identities of their sources in connection with criminal investigations, prosecutions, or trials⁴⁷⁹.

Control of information is the approach adopted by the government to ensure that, in Vietnam at least, the flow of information to users consists only of content that benefits the government and the ruling CPV. Over the years, its strategies have included cracking down on independent media and journalists, ordering social media platforms to comply with state rules or face service disruptions, and operating a cyber army to manipulate online content. These approaches systematically reinforce one another. Under Tô Lâm, the government has also restructured the country's media in a move that observers say allows the CPV to spread propaganda more efficiently^{480, 481}.

In May 2025, the government reportedly moved to block the Telegram messaging application, citing concerns over "national security," the spread of "toxic content," and the platform's impact on the country's "moral standards."^{482, 483} Authorities reportedly claimed that "68 percent of the 9,600 Telegram channels and groups in the country were created by opposition and reactionary elements spreading anti-government documents."⁴⁸⁴

Under Decree 147/2024/ND-CP, which came into force on December 25, 2024, social media companies operating in Vietnam are required to store user data, provide it to authorities upon request, and remove content the government deems "illegal" within 24 hours⁴⁸⁵. As Telegram did not comply with the government's request, the authorities subsequently blocked access to the platform under Article 79(1)(c) of Decree 163/2024/ND-CP. Issued

⁴⁷⁹ Guarascio, Francesco. "Vietnam Set to Make It Harder for Media to Protect Sources, to Expand State Secrets." *Reuters*, 11 Dec. 2025, www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/vietnam-set-make-it-harder-media-protect-sources-expand-state-secrets-2025-12-10.

⁴⁸⁰ "Vietnam's Media Restructuring Will Lead to More Propaganda, Critics Warn." *VOA*, 23 Jan. 2025, www.voanews.com/a/vietnam-s-media-restructuring-will-lead-to-more-propaganda-critics-warn/7947621.html.

⁴⁸¹ Giàu, Ngọc, et al. "Vietnam's State Media in Flux: Government Launches Press-Reform Initiative." *The Vietnamese*, 21 Mar. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/03/vietnams-state-media-in-flux-government-launches-press-reform-initiative.

⁴⁸² Nguyen, Jason. "Telegram Banned in Việt Nam: A New Era of Increased Cyber Censorship?" *The Vietnamese*, 14 Aug. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/08/telegram-banned-in-viet-nam-a-new-era-of-increased-cyber-censorship.

⁴⁸³ "Vietnam to Block Messaging App Telegram Over 'Anti-State' Contents." *Radio Free Asia*, 23 May 2025, www.rfa.org/english/vietnam/2025/05/23/vietnam-telegram-ban.

⁴⁸⁴ Nguyen, Jason. "Telegram Banned in Việt Nam: A New Era of Increased Cyber Censorship?" *The Vietnamese*, 14 Aug. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/08/telegram-banned-in-viet-nam-a-new-era-of-increased-cyber-censorship.

⁴⁸⁵ "Critics Decry Vietnam's 'Draconian' New Internet Law." *The Guardian*, 23 Dec. 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/23/vietnam-identity-verification-internet-law-reactions-decree-147-censorship.

on December 24, 2024, Decree 163/2024/ND-CP provides comprehensive guidance for implementing the 2023 Telecommunications Law, which took effect on July 1, 2024⁴⁸⁶.

Vietnam is a lucrative market for social media platforms, and these platforms—particularly Meta—have long been documented as serving the government’s interests. In January 2025, it was reported that the Facebook page of the U.S.-funded Radio Free Asia (RFA) Vietnamese service suddenly lost content posted in 2024 and 2025⁴⁸⁷. However, the incident reportedly lasted only a few minutes before the missing content reappeared. A similar incident also occurred on the Vietnamese-language Facebook pages of Voice of America (VOA) and the BBC⁴⁸⁸.

In December 2025, Luật Khoa, an independent Vietnamese-language magazine, reported that Meta had blocked access to the accounts of several pro-democracy activists, as well as the pages of Thoibao.de and Việt Tân⁴⁸⁹. Thoibao.de is an independent media outlet, while Việt Tân is a political party that advocates reforms in Vietnam. According to the report, these pages were blocked at the request of the Vietnamese government⁴⁹⁰. The pages reportedly display the message, “This content is not available in Vietnam.”⁴⁹¹

Vietnam is also known for Force 47, a military-affiliated cyber unit tasked with protecting the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) ideology. First publicly unveiled in 2017, it reportedly had 10,000 personnel. There is also Steering Committee 35, composed of CPV members with a similar mandate. Both Force 47 and Steering Committee 35 have reportedly integrated the issue of AI technology into their strategies to target narratives deemed harmful to “national security.”^{492, 493}

⁴⁸⁶. “Does the Ministry of Public Security Want to Ban Telegram to Combat Crime or to Control Information?” *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 4 June 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/c5ykv3j5xrjo.

⁴⁸⁷. “Content on RFA’s Facebook Page Suddenly Disappeared Without a Trace.” *Radio Free Asia*, 30 Jan. 2025, www.rfa.org/vietnamese/trong-nuoc/2025/01/30/noi-dung-tren-facebook-cua-rfa-tieng-viet-tu-nam-2024-den-2025-bien-mat.

⁴⁸⁸. Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹. Trịnh, Long Hữu, and Lê Giang. “Facebook Blocked the Pages of Lê Trung Koa, Nguyễn Văn Đài, and Việt Tân in Vietnam—at the Request of the Government.” *Luật Khoa*, 8 Dec. 2025, luatkhoa.com/2025/12/facebook-chan-trang-cua-le-trung-khoa-nguyen-van-dai-va-viet-tan-o-viet-nam-theo-yeu-cau-cua-chinh-phu.

⁴⁹⁰. Ibid.

⁴⁹¹. Ibid.

⁴⁹². “The Struggles to Protect the Party’s Ideological Foundation Against Challenges From “Color Revolutions” and “Soft Invasion” in the Digital Age and Artificial Intelligence.” *Lam Dong Provincial Police Department*, 11 Sep. 2025, congan.lamdong.gov.vn/thong-bao-cong-khai-noi-dung-ke-hoach-tuan-tra-kiem-soat-tren-tuyen-quoc-lo-1a-N1011.aspx.

⁴⁹³. “The National Defense Academy Conducts Training on the Use of Artificial Intelligence.” *Nhân Dân*, 1 Apr. 2025, nhandan.vn/hoc-vien-quoc-phong-tap-huan-su-dung-tri-tue-nhan-tao-post869237.html.

In Vietnam, individuals can become targets of negative campaigns related to the CPV and national affairs, even without intending to. Vietnamese celebrity Trần Thành was heavily attacked online for a Facebook post in which he expressed condolences to Phạm Đức Thành, a zither artist who passed away on August 22, 2025⁴⁹⁴. When he posted these messages, Vietnam was celebrating National Day on September 2, 2025, the 80th anniversary of independence—a time when most media outlets and public figures were sharing patriotic and festive content. Netizens accused him of being tone-deaf, arguing that his private mourning clashed with the collective mood of national pride.

According to the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (IJAVN), also known as Vietnam Thời Báo (VNTB), an independent media group, the online attacks against Trần Thành are believed to have been orchestrated by Steering Committee 35⁴⁹⁵.

As part of its efforts to control information on social media platforms, the government is also seeking to manage social media influencers, referred to as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). In August 2025, the government launched the “Influencer Trust” program and introduced the “Digital Trust Alliance.”⁴⁹⁶

According to state media outlet Tuổi Trẻ, the Influencer Trust Program is an initiative aimed at promoting “responsible influence” through media campaigns, establishing ethical standards and codes for the KOL community, and evaluating and certifying the credibility, transparency, trustworthiness, and responsibility of KOLs⁴⁹⁷. The Digital Trust Alliance reportedly brought together reputable KOLs, businesses, media outlets, and platforms to spread “positive values, lead trust, and build standards.”⁴⁹⁸

Participating KOLs will be evaluated and awarded “ethical certificates” if they achieve high scores; in return, they will receive media benefits and opportunities to collaborate with major agencies and businesses. This approach is intended to encourage KOLs to comply with state-defined standards.

Observers believe this model closely resembles China’s, where celebrities are “utilized” to promote official messages. Those who cooperate can gain economic and political advantages, while those who refuse may be blacklisted or banned from broadcasting,

⁴⁹⁴. “Is Tran Thanh Really ‘Tone-Deaf’, ‘Out of Tune’, or ‘Dangerous’?” *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 7 Sep. 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/c0lkpzz002xo.

⁴⁹⁵. “Regarding the Tran Thanh Incident: Unveiling the Secrets of People’s War on the Internet.” *VNTB*, 6 Sep. 2025, vietnamthoibao.org/vntb-nhan-vu-tran-thanh-ven-man-bi-mat-chien-tranh-nhan-dan-tren-mang.

⁴⁹⁶. “Vietnam’s Control and Use of KOLs: Following the Chinese Model?” *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 1 Sep. 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/c2dj6p97rexo.

⁴⁹⁷. Hiếu, Chí. “Nearly 300 KOLs Launch the ‘Influencers Trust’ Program.” *Tuổi Trẻ*, 12 Aug. 2025, tuoitre.vn/gan-300-kol-cung-khoi-dong-chuong-trinh-tin-nhiem-nguoi-co-anh-huong-20250812101514018.htm.

⁴⁹⁸. *Ibid.*

although this remains primarily an administrative measure. Several influencers have reportedly supported these programs⁴⁹⁹.

Aside from these developments, the MPS announced a draft resolution titled “Developing Digital Citizens” in December 2025⁵⁰⁰. The initiative would allow the government to rank and score citizens and has been compared to China’s Social Credit System, which controls nearly every aspect of people’s lives. If implemented, it would further expand the government’s surveillance efforts.

As part of Tô Lâm’s streamlining efforts, Vietnam is moving closer to becoming a surveillance state following the transfer of MobiFone—the country’s third-largest telecommunications provider—to the Ministry of Public Security, which became official in February 2025⁵⁰¹. This shift could allow the ministry to obtain personal information more easily⁵⁰². In July 2025, the ministry also acquired a majority stake in one of the country’s largest internet providers, FPT Telecom⁵⁰³.

In Vietnam, Viettel is the largest telecommunications provider, and Vinaphone—operated by the Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group (VNPT)—is the second largest. Viettel and Vinaphone are state-owned. Together with MobiFone, these three providers control more than 90 percent of the Vietnamese telecommunications market⁵⁰⁴.

C. Implications of the Situations on Human Rights and Democracy

The tightening control of the digital space is pushing Vietnam further into a state of pervasive surveillance, driven largely by the expanding role of the Ministry of Public Security, which functions as the national police force.

⁴⁹⁹. “Vietnam’s Control and Use of KOLs: Following the Chinese Model?” *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 1 Sep. 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/c2dj6p97rexo.

⁵⁰⁰. “Why Does the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security Want to ‘Rank Digital Citizens’?” *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, 23 Dec. 2025, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/articles/ce3z7evqwepo.

⁵⁰¹. An, Bình, and Thúc Kháng. “The Revamped Ministry of Public Security Under General Secretary Tô Lâm.” *The Vietnamese*, 19 Mar. 2025, www.thevietnamese.org/2025/03/the-revamped-ministry-of-public-security-under-general-secretary-to-lam.

⁵⁰². “Explained: Why Is Vietnam’s Police Ministry Overseeing a Large Telecom?” *Radio Free Asia*, 17 Jan. 2025, www.rfa.org/english/vietnam/2025/01/17/vietnam-mobifone-takeover.

⁵⁰³. “Vietnam’s Public Security Ministry Takes Stake in Internet Firm FPT Telecom.” *Reuters*, 16 July 2025, www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/vietnams-public-security-ministry-takes-stake-internet-firm-fpt-telecom-2025-07-16.

⁵⁰⁴. An, Bình, and Thúc Kháng. “The Revamped Ministry of Public Security Under General Secretary Tô Lâm.” *The Vietnamese*, 19 Mar. 2025, thevietnamese.org/2025/03/the-revamped-ministry-of-public-security-under-general-secretary-to-lam.

Given that Vietnam is a one-party communist state, this development is not unexpected. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is primarily focused on preserving its own interests and maintaining its grip on power. While Tô Lâm's leadership style may differ from that of his predecessors, it does not alter the CPV's fundamental priorities. Instead, he has pursued these same interests in a different manner, employing enhanced security measures and digital monitoring to reinforce state authority.

Threats to digital rights are likely to intensify as the government further suppresses dissent through new laws and amendments to existing legislation, making the legal environment even more repressive. Information emerging in 2025 also indicates that the country is continuing to evolve into a surveillance state, illustrated by the Digital Citizens initiative and the MPS's growing stake in the telecommunications sector.

Given the current political situation in the country, direct advocacy to the government for human rights and democracy is not feasible. However, there remains scope to explore ways to support groups working to expose human rights violations committed by the Vietnamese communist government. The dissenting voices of these individuals, as well as their safety amid a challenging and hostile environment, need to be protected.

