ASEANFocus

A BIMONTHLY PUBLICATION PROVIDING CONCISE ANALYSES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ASEAN MATTERS

Social Media in Southeast Asia

Contents

Editorial Notes

The past two months were eventful for ASEAN and its member states. The monsoon season has set in, and we are once again reminded of the grim fact that Southeast Asia is among the world's most disaster-prone regions. Just as northern Philippines was reeling from the havoc wrecked by Super Typhoon Mangkhut, a 7.5-magnitude earthquake and a subsequent tsunami struck Central Sulawesi of Indonesia on 28 September, leaving more than 2000 death toll in its trail. These are the test cases for the "One ASEAN, One Response" platform in coordinating disaster relief and humanitarian assistance from fellow ASEAN member states to the affected communities.

On the economic front, negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are at a critical stage after the adoption of the Package of Year-End Deliverables at the 6th RCEP Ministerial Meeting in August 2018. Intensive discussions among the RCEP members are ongoing towards the target of substantial conclusion of the negotiations by end-2018. If this comes to pass, the RCEP breakthrough would offer a rare beam of light for the regional and global trade environment amidst the long shadow cast by the escalating trade war between the US and China.

In this time of uncertainty and disruption, history can offer insights into how the people in Southeast Asia have managed the influences and changes wrought to them from external forces, and in the process given shape and soul to the region. In this Issue, Professor Wang Gungwu provides an artistic scholarly sketch of the shaping of Southeast Asia as a region by taking us through its diverse "passages and terrains" since pre-16th century to contemporary times. He highlights the "local genius" of Southeast Asians in being open to foreign influences and harnessing them to suit their local needs and way of life.

It was also with this outward-looking mindset that ASEAN took the bold decision to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1993 to engage all the major powers in dialogue on regional security issues in the post-Cold War. As this year marks the ARF's 25th anniversary, the foremost question is how to redefine the forum's relevance in today's regional architecture which has become more cluttered. Dr. Termsak Chalermpalanupap reflected on the achievements and limitations of the ARF while Dr. Alice D. Ba suggests re-conceptualisation of preventive diplomacy in the ARF's staged approach. Dr. Tang Siew Mun meanwhile juxtapositions the ARF with the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) and ponders the way forward for the former.

The internet and social media are transforming the world and Southeast Asia in particular. *ASEAN in Figures* features statistics about ASEAN digital population, many of whom are active social media users. With their rates of internet and social media penetration among the fastest-growing in the world, ASEAN member states are harnessing the potentials of the digital economy while seeking to enhance resilience at both state and citizen levels to deal with many forms of digital disruptions. The most recent example is the establishment of the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre in Bangkok on 14 September 2018.

This Issue hence casts *Spotlight* on the profound and complex impacts of the internet, particularly social media, on the political and security landscapes of the region. Dr. Shobha Avadhani examines how social media has been employed as an instrument of politics in ASEAN member states in three aspects of governance, electoral politics and activism. Dr. Ross Tapsell dwells upon the phenomenon of "echo chambers" in social media with the support of big data analytics, and how it is working to segregate and polarise the region's public sphere, especially around the ethno-religious matter. Ms. Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin shares with us her insights from years of tracking online extremism and terrorism in Southeast Asia. For *Insider's Views*, Ms. Gullnaz Baig from Facebook Asia-Pacific explains the measures that this social media giant has taken to address online terrorism, radicalisation and fake news.

For *Sights and Sounds*, Ms. Nur Aziemah Aziz brings you to Sarawak, Malaysia, to immerse in the Rainforest World Music Festival that has put the region's traditional and folk music on the world map. Ms. Cheryl Teh meanwhile invites you to the magnificent Inle Lake of Myanmar where serene water reflects centuries-old pagodas on its shore and where the indigenous Intha people go about their daily life, fishing and growing vegetables on floating gardens for centuries. On this final note, we would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to Ms. Cheryl Teh for all her valuable contributions to ASEANFocus over the past year. We wish her all the best in her future endeavours.

Before Southeast Asia: Passages and Terrains

Prof. Wang Gungwu traverses through time and space to reconstruct the shaping of Southeast Asia as a region and what it means for ASEAN today.

When the word "Southeast Asia" was used in the 1940s, we were surprised and intrigued by the idea that this part of the world had been recognised as a region. As far as 'the region as a geographic and spatial concept' is concerned, Southeast Asia is a very diverse set of lands with a tremendous range of "passages and terrains": from the highlands and lowlands along the great rivers of mainland Southeast Asia to the Malay archipelago with thousands of islands. Given this space as defined, why was it not given earlier recognition as a region? Why did it take so long to identify the region "Southeast Asia"? Against this backdrop, historians set out to work with linguists, archaeologists and anthropologists, among others, to resolve this intriguing question. Historically, the shaping of Southeast Asia as a region could be discerned through three periods.

Before the 16th century
The first period was before the 16th century. Diversity defined this part of the world from the very beginning, not only in terms of the lands with varied "passages and terrains" but even more so with the peoples scattered throughout the archipelagic and continental spaces. Not unrelated to that diversity was the fragmentation of many kinds of social and cultural units that did not come together to form a major political entity. It was not that these people did not have the capacity to do that, but rather that they did not feel the need for such enlargements.

Deep in their culture from the very beginning, these people, especially those on the Malay archipelago, had a certain openness to influences and relationships that enabled them to move around, reach out and connect with one another, and build subtle and complex relationships without feeling that they had to set up some huge bureaucratic system. Openness is a strong residual characteristic of Southeast Asians from ancient times, enabled by the sea which saw migration flows from the mainland to the islands. On land, people from Southern China, Southwestern China and even from Tibet also migrated down the rivers to the mainland part of Southeast Asia. This openness of the locals was not only to ideas and migration but also to the active trading that helped them create surpluses and build thriving societies. Their "local genius" was the ability to pick and choose what they wanted from external influences, and make the most of it for their own purposes. They

were content with their diverse and fragmented areas, interlocked in one way or another, without having to come together as a region.

There were some exceptions, for example the Angkor Empire on mainland Southeast Asia inspired by ideas from India, but it was not sustained and did not go much beyond the lower reaches of the land between the two river systems of the Mekong and the Menan (Chao Phraya). In the maritime part, a bureaucratic state did emerge on the island of Java. But this development also served to demonstrate the people's openness to new ideas coming from India about the state, religion, art, architecture and

Facsimile from World Atlas of Antonio Millo, by Deuschle, German

literature. The locals combined these external influences with their own ideas and faiths, drawing them together into a set of values which they have more or less preserved for hundreds of years.

Underlying this openness was a sense of self-confidence and assurance that they could always absorb and adapt foreign influences for their purposes without feeling inferior or insecure about it. They were content with the autonomy of each of their units which interacted with one another without fear and without needing to set up a big bureaucratic system. This has been described as the "mandala system" – a set of loose relationships between various units, each being autonomous, confident and capable of looking after itself. In all these places, the people did not feel they needed a region or to be identified as a region.

Compared to the vastness of the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea was smaller, more manageable and well used as the main route of communication throughout the region and to other parts of the globe. There is ample evidence of numerous and robust connections among different units in the region, both at sea and on the mainland. For example, the Chams of the Champa Kingdom were a very mobile people who not only set up maritime connections with the Malay Peninsula, Java and Sumatra but also enabled the trade passages between the region and China.

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It was towards of the end of this period that the Mongol expansion into China in the 13th and 14th century produced some important changes. The invasions led to increased migration from the empire into mainland Southeast Asia. The Mongols represented a new force that was very powerful and consequential. They conquered all of China, took over the Song China's maritime capacity and used its navy against Java, Vietnam and Champa. On land, they moved into southwestern China, destroyed the kingdom of Dali, and threatened both Burma and Vietnam. The Mongol force was overwhelming for some 200 years, and its momentum was maintained by the Ming dynasty in China for another 100 years. During this period, new borders between the Mongol empire (later the Ming) and Vietnam and Burma emerged. These borders were not yet firm but could be seen as indicating a northern edge of a future region.

From the 16th century to 19th century
Things were about to change around 1500 that began to give some shape to the future Southeast Asia. Outside forces from the 16th century onwards exerted pressure on the islands and the mainland alike and some contemporary records noted a region that had much in common.

The arrival of the Europeans from the 16th century presented a new force but it was not sizeable, overwhelming or dominating in the beginning. They came in powerful ships, starting with the Portuguese, that made a difference to the trading patterns. Their primary concern was access to and control of as many ports as possible. At the same time, the Spanish came across the Pacific from the other side, taking over the Philippines and creating a completely new corner of Southeast Asia. There, the border of Southeast Asia started to take shape on the Pacific side although the Philippines remained an outlier to the region for many centuries. Interestingly, the border between the western part of Southeast Asia and the rest of the Indian Ocean countries could not be discerned. Probably because the Indian Ocean was simply so vast that it was in itself a natural border and nobody questioned the western boundary of Southeast Asia beyond the island of Sumatra.

From the 18th century to the end of the 19th, the development of Europe, prompted by the scientific and industrial revolutions and thriving capitalism, completely changed the pattern of European interactions with the world. A series of major wars among the European powers created new weaponry, new powerful instruments of domination. After defeating the French navy in the Indian Ocean, British naval dominance made it possible for them to move into India and take over the whole sub-continent. This was the most revolutionary change: A new kind of colonial power had emerged that could move deeper inland and occupy large territory. The nature of power had changed once naval dominance could enable ventures into the interior of the mainland.

This new capacity of the Europeans also brought their colonisation onto mainland Southeast Asia. They ultimately took over Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Burma, and put pressure on Thailand. The British also

controlled the Malay peninsula and the Dutch advanced deeper into Indonesia. They set up colonial states that had sophisticated bureaucratic structures, and introduced their laws and systems of governance as well as new ways of thinking about how rulers should behave and how people should be ruled. They divided the territories among themselves and marked out borders that did not relate to the earlier borders, especially in the Malay archipelago. By doing so, they created a new and different set of diversity and fragmentation for the region.

From the 20th century onwards

By the end of the 19th century, Britain and France had succeeded in dividing the mainland of Southeast Asia. Thailand barely survived, skillfully maneuvering between the British and the French to keep its independence but being economically dependent on and dominated by both European powers. By the 20th century, the borders between the mainland states had been firmed up: between Thailand and Laos, Thailand and Cambodia, Thailand and Burma, Burma and Laos, and Burma and China. Vietnam's overland border with China had been settled by the 15th century when the last Ming attempt to invade Vietnam failed. It was more or less the same border that was drawn up between China and Vietnam in the 10th century. As regards the sea borders, the Dutch drew borders between their Netherlands East Indies and the Spanish Philippines. The Americans later displaced the Spanish, taking over the Philippines in 1898 and linked it even more strongly with America on the other side of the Pacific.

This was also the time when Japan grew into an economic, naval and colonial power by learning from the West. Japan's take-over of Taiwan in 1895 was the opening of its thrust into the region. Unlike China that had overland access to the region, Taiwan was the key entry point for Japan to invade Southeast Asia from the north. The climax of the shaping of Southeast Asia was when the Japanese invaded the region in 1941. The invasion was the first obvious recognition by Japan that here was a region which was separate from China and could be connected with India.

At the peak of Japan's power in Southeast Asia in 1942, every coast of the South China Sea was under Japanese control, effectively turning the South China Sea into a Japanese lake. This reminds us of the centrality of the South China Sea in the definition of Southeast Asia. However, it is also important to recognise China's historic position with regards to that Sea because its northern coast was China's southern border from the Han dynasty since the 1st century BC. The South China Sea is not a Southeast Asian or Chinese sea. Geographically and historically, it has always been a sea shared between the Malay archipelago, the mainland of Southeast Asia and China.

It was the response of the Allied Powers to the Japanese invasion that firmed up the conceptualisation of Southeast Asia as a region. The British established the South East Asia Command (without the Philippines which was then under the US Far Eastern Command) – a strategic naming that brought the term "Southeast Asia" to life. The period between 1941 and 1945 were the critical years when the shaping of Southeast Asia came to a head. Finally, Southeast Asia became real in the eyes of more and more people. From the 1950s onwards, literature on Southeast Asia flourished with the publication of history and geography books about the region. Numerous universities in the world took up the challenge of defining Southeast Asia – its long history, how it became a region, why it deserved to be recognised as a region with its own identity and character.

Prof. Wang Gungwu delivering the ISEAS 50th Anniversary Lecture

ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

ASEAN and Southeast Asia

The original ASEAN-5 was a product of the Cold War when Southeast Asia remained divided and the Vietnam War was raging. It was established by Thailand and four newly independent Southeast Asian states (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore) in 1967, driven by the fear of a communist take-over of the region. ASEAN-5 was also an extraordinary and unexpected result of the 'coup' in September 1965 in Indonesia that led to the overthrow of Sukarno and saw the coming into power of Suharto. That accident of history, together with the separation of Singapore from Malaysia to become an independent state, made ASEAN-5 possible. These developments from 1963 to 1967 reshaped Southeast Asia. It gave ASEAN-5 a semi-regional role in a region yet to be brought together due to the ideological divide.

The end of the Cold War again changed the regional landscape, and the 1990s served as a turning point: The US became the sole global superpower; China was rising but not yet risen; and ASEAN became a truly regional body with ten member states. With ASEAN-10, one can now confidently say that there is a Southeast Asia that is operating through ASEAN and is capable of developing itself in a self-assured and self-confident manner. It remains however a very difficult undertaking.

Within ASEAN itself, two processes have been taking place at the same time. On the one hand, ASEAN has given Southeast Asia a new reality as a region – a platform on which the member states could band together for a common vision and future. This new reality has been fostered by the globalisation that created borderless economies around the world. On the other hand, every ASEAN member state, over the past 50 years, has made strenuous efforts to build their nation-states that would be separated and clearly distinct from one another. As modern nation-states, they still have to deal with a new set of diversity and fragmentation created by the borders and legacies left behind by the colonial powers. This requires great sensitivity and tremendous care among the leaders in managing differences within their respective countries as well as as those with their neighbours. The juxtaposition of these two processes has created a tension between the modern concept of nation-state and the new idea of a region. This tension has slowed down the possibility of developing regional identity, regional one-ness and regional unity, and it would remain with us for a while yet.

The ASEAN enterprise is definitely work in progress. The officials of the member states have done well thus far to keep it together during the last 50 years. The first generations of ASEAN-5 officials have developed a very good understanding of one another. The new member states that joined ASEAN in the 1990s are also producing this kind of officialdom. They are working together on a daily basis and almost never fail to meet to talk about the future of the region. This has demanded sensitivity, a give-and-take approach and a willingness to compromise and make decisions based on consensus. This so-called ASEAN Way has been described as hampering the development of ASEAN unity. Yet, it is deeply rooted in

all the historical factors mentioned above. It should not be dismissed or taken lightly since it is also part of the nation-building process of the member states.

At the same time, the calls for ASEAN to be united and to speak with one voice have become more frequent and urgent. It is indeed in the region's interest to be united and be able to speak with one voice, so that its big neighbours and external powers would respect and listen to the region whenever it speaks up. And yet, this unity cannot be pushed too far or rushed too fast. There are two aspects of it. The call for unity from inside is legitimate and must be pursued with subtlety and sensitivity among the leaders in the region. On the other hand, the calls for ASEAN unity from outside are growing louder but to the effect that the region would unite to side with one power against another power. The leaders of ASEAN have to constantly weigh all this since the internal calls for unity are based on very different principles from the external calls.

To deal with the above complexity, it helps to go back to the fundamental openness that has defined this region from the very beginning and has lived on for the past two thousand years. It is the capacity of the people in this region to take in new ideas and influences, adapt them for their purposes, and eventually internalise them to be part of their own culture and value systems. That capacity is common to the whole Southeast Asia. These people do not obey one single order or follow one single set of rules. They all have their own diverse and fragmented ways of approaching different problems, and the confidence and assurance of knowing what they want. They all seek autonomy within a large unity. That mixture of national autonomy and ultimate regional unity would probably continue in Southeast Asia for a long time. It should not be regarded as a weakness. In fact, it is a strength, a contribution of the "local genius" that could make the region grow stronger and more confident of itself.

The open outlook of Southeast Asia is echoed across a world that has also become increasingly open. Despite voices calling for protectionism and insularism, ultimately the multilateralism and globalisation that have gained momentum over the last few decades are irreversible and inevitable. The power of technology and the availability of the communication systems today make it impossible for the world to turn inward. The region should take advantage of this openness, absorbing new ideas and internalising them to strengthen the ASEAN body itself. ASEAN member states should reintegrate this openness into their way of thinking to become more unified, and at the same time not to be afraid of being open to the world. As part of Southeast Asia's heritage, this openness should be sustained and built upon for the future of the region. ▨

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State of Play of the ARF@25

Termsak Chalermpalanupap takes stock of the achievements and limitations of the ARF.

As the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, it is time to look back on the past quarter century of this unique regional process initiated by ASEAN in 1993. The ARF was aimed at strengthening peace and security in Southeast Asia. Another important objective was, and still is, to encourage the US to continue its engagement with ASEAN and support for ASEAN member states in national development and security. This was especially pressing in the early 1990s when the US closed down its military bases in Clark and Subic Bay in the Philippines while China began to rise as a new but as yet unpredictable regional power.

In parallel with the imperative to keep the US in the region, the ARF also aimed to engage China and Russia in multilateral dialogue on regional security issues with a hope to integrate them as constructive players in the regional security architecture. China was at first reluctant but quickly learned to advance its positions and interests in the ARF and other ASEAN-led multilateral processes. Russia, on the other hand, has been less active since its

key security concerns remain with Europe and the Middle East. The ARF has also benefited ASEAN in the sense that it has enhanced ASEAN's importance and credibility as the most acceptable or the least objectionable convener of multilateral processes for dialogue and cooperation on regional issues. Instead of trying to keep out major external powers from Southeast Asia, ASEAN turned to engage all of them in the ARF.

With 27 participants, the ARF has become a significant part of the regional security architecture that has attracted worldwide attention. France, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Turkey and Iran have shown interest to join the forum. However, the ARF membership moratorium has been in place since the admission of Sri Lanka in 2007. One notable participant in the ARF is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which joined in 2000. President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea noted in his Singapore Lecture on 13 July 2018 that the ARF represented a "vital channel" for the DPRK to communicate with the world community. Indeed, the ARF offers the unique diplomatic

THE ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM MEMBERSHIP
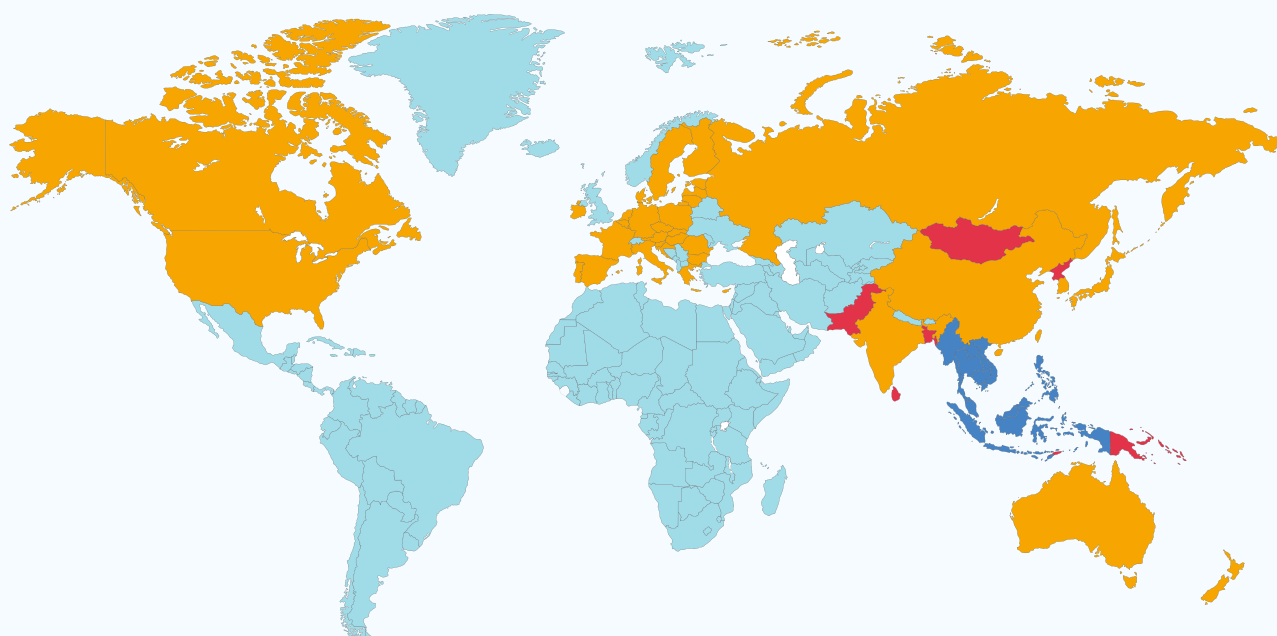
ASEAN Member States: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam

ASEAN Dialogue Partners: Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States

Others: Papua New Guinea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

lifeline outside of the UN system for the DPRK to clarify its positions and listen to views from other ARF participants on the Korean Peninsula.

Horizontal Expansion

This year, the ARF has set up a new Inter-Sessional Meeting on Security of and in the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ISM-ICT). The other four ISMs deal with disaster relief, maritime security, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, and non-proliferation and disarmament.

In the current inter-sessional year of 2017-2018, the ARF calendar of events includes 17 training workshops. These activities are in addition to the regular meetings of ARF mechanisms of all the five ISMs, the Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomatic (ISG-CBM&PD), the ARF Security Policy Conference, the meeting of the ARF Experts and Eminent Persons, the Defence Officials Dialogue, the Heads of Defence Universities/Colleges/Institutions Meeting (HDUCIM), the ARF Senior Officials Meeting, and the annual ARF ministerial conference.

From the beginning, ASEAN member states have resisted setting up too many ARF mechanisms. They prefer *ad hoc* bodies, like the ISMs, and the use of existing ASEAN mechanisms, such as using the ASEAN Secretariat for administrative support. Participation in ARF workshops and ISMs is voluntary on a self-funding basis. Records show that countries with less resources tend to have lower level of participation and rarely volunteer to co-chair ISMs or host ARF workshops, or contribute their inputs to the ARF Annual Security Outlook.

Quite expectedly, ARF participants who are ASEAN Dialogue Partners tend to be more active than others, especially in initiating and hosting capacity building activities. Even ASEAN members have difficulties trying to keep up with all ARF meetings and training workshops. On occasions, some ASEAN members cannot afford to send participants from their capitals to attend ARF activities in faraway places, and were represented by their colleagues from the embassy. This has undermined ASEAN leadership in the ARF as well as the quality of ASEAN participation in ARF activities.

Moving Forward?

According to the ARF Concept Paper which was adopted in 1995, the ARF was envisaged to evolve in three stages: (a) confidence building measures (CBM), (b) preventive diplomacy (PD), and (c) development of conflict resolution mechanisms (CSM). Subsequently, establishing conflict resolution mechanisms was watered down to exploring approaches to conflict resolution.

Since the ARF follows the ASEAN Way of making decisions by consultation and consensus "at a pace comfortable to all," the progress of the ARF against the three-stage benchmark has been slow. After 25 years, ARF participants could merely agree that there is some overlap between Stage I and Stage II, and the ISG-CBM was renamed the Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy (ISG-CMB & PD) in 2005 in recognition of that overlap.

The ARF cannot yet advance into the more sensitive stage of PD because of serious differences among its participants on what PD means and entails. One perspective embraces PD in its fullest sense, including diplomatic, political, military, economic and humanitarian actions undertaken by governments, multilateral organisations (the UN and regional groups) and international agencies (including non-governmental actors) to address disputes and conflicts between states as well as within states. This is exemplified in the operations of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The narrower interpretation of PD excludes from the ARF mandate all domestic political and security issues, and puts more emphasis on strengthening the foundation of peace and security through confidence building first and foremost. Under this more restrictive perspective, the ARF is purely an inter-governmental process, in which non-government actors are excluded.

The slow progress of the ARF has somewhat diminished the shine on ASEAN and undermined its claim of centrality in shepherding the ARF. Now the US, Japan, Australia and India have developed their own respective nascent security arrangement in the form of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) to promote their Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. If this new strategic framework gains traction and produces concrete results, these four major powers may lose interest in the ARF.

A more immediate challenge for the ARF comes from the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). Eighteen (10 ASEAN members and eight Dialogue Partners, not including Canada and the EU) of the 27 ARF participants are in the ADMM-Plus. The ADMM-Plus has created seven experts working groups; four of them addresses the same non-traditional security challenges which the ARF has been handling: disaster relief, maritime security, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, and cyber security. Since the ARF is run by foreign affairs officials and foreign ministers, it would do well to harness its expertise towards preventive diplomacy and phase out from cooperation areas that require tangible resources such as disaster relief and non-traditional security challenges, which would fit better with the ADMM-Plus remit.

After a quarter of a century, the ARF has served ASEAN and Southeast Asia well, by providing a platform for both regional countries and the major powers to engage in dialogue and cooperation on issues that affect regional peace and security, to forge confidence building and develop awareness and capacity in dealing with security issues among the participants. But its relevance stands to diminish if the ARF does not reinvent itself, first and foremost by sharpening its focus on what it does best. ▨

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The ARF's Elusive Pursuit of Preventive Diplomacy

Alice D. Ba suggests a re-think of preventive diplomacy in the ARF agenda.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has come to be closely associated with the challenged pursuit of preventive diplomacy (PD) – so much so that the latter has become a key measure of the ARF's institutional value and shortcomings. Indeed, for an institution known more for its inability to agree, there appears to be considerable agreement about the ARF's challenges in implementing and institutionalising the concept and practice. The longstanding challenges associated with PD suggest that it may be well past time to reconsider – indeed, downgrade – the hold that PD has had over the ARF agenda. Doing so would allow a more realistic conceptualisation of where the ARF fits into the larger regional security picture; adjust expectations; and in so doing, also potentially expand avenues by which to pursue a more robust agenda of activities supportive of PD whether it is called PD or not.

The Problem with Preventive Diplomacy

The ARF's distinct attributes and politics make its pursuit of PD far more fraught compared to other frameworks. This includes ASEAN which similarly operates by consensus but has been able to advance PD in ways that the ARF has not. Partly, the challenge is a function of the ARF's large and especially diverse membership. In addition to varying degrees of trust and sensitivity about the prospect of interference, its 27 members also possess different security conceptions and institutional cultures, resulting in defining divisions over PD's scope, approach, and even what counts as PD: Should PD be inclusive of efforts targeted at the "deeper roots" of conflict and insecurity as reflective of more comprehensive security approaches? Or should it be limited to more operational responses to specific regional security threats? How to advance beyond the most basic agreement about PD's objectives – to prevent the emergence, escalation, and overflow of conflicts – has been a defining task of the ARF's 25-year PD agenda.

PD's challenges in the ARF were built-in at the start. First introduced at ARF's first meeting in 1994 and then given further elaboration in 1995 and 2001, PD was conceived as the second stage between "confidence building" and an "elaboration of approaches to conflicts" in an evolutionary approach to regional security and regional security cooperation. As such, PD offered an important compromise position between the first (confidence building measures) and third (conflict resolution) stages, but this staged approach also institutionalised states' differences and made PD a highly contested benchmark for security cooperation. In particular, the PD debate has focused on the ARF's limits in pursuing more "concrete" operational measures as well as the appropriateness of such efforts.

Such challenges suggest that it may be time to reassess the particular importance attached to the ARF's PD agenda. Indeed, absent agreement about both the security challenges and activities PD should prioritise, PD has become a highly unsatisfactory, even impossible, measure of the ARF's progress and contributions. There is also a particular need to rethink the current conceptualisation of PD as part of a three-stage approach to regional security.

A panaromic view of the ARF Retreat

ASEAN Secretariat

25TH **ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM RETREAT SESSION**
4 AUGUST 2018, SINGAPORE

The ASEAN Regional Forum Foreign Ministers at the ARF Retreat held in Singapore

ASEAN Secretariat

The "timeline" approach associated with PD is misleading in at least two respects. First, it transforms PD into a benchmark of regional security, and in so doing, confuses a method for the objective. As per the ARF's 1995 concept paper, the ARF's "goals and expectations" are to "develop a more predictable and constructive pattern of relations" in support of the region's "peace, prosperity and stability." In service of that objective, PD is but one piece of a larger "method and approach"; it is not the end in and of itself.

Second, the conceptualisation of PD as a distinct and higher stage of security cooperation suggests a progression that belies the mix of security approaches that most challenges require, the situational differences that often will call for different kinds of approaches at different times, and also the fluidity of security measures and their effects. This latter point was in fact acknowledged as early as the 1995 ARF which noted the "overlap" between CBMs and PD. This grey zone additionally challenges the conceptualisation of PD as a measure of the ARF's progress.

Just as important, the preoccupation with the definitional benchmarks tends to detract from the areas that the ARF is arguably best equipped to contribute – namely, confidence building and the introduction, familiarisation, experimentation, and development of shared security management practices. Put another way, especially given the region's major power politics and composition, as well as the varied actor sets associated with different security challenges, the ARF may not be well positioned to coordinate PD – at least, not of the operational variety that many would like to see. Instead, it may be better to accept that the ARF's strengths are in playing a supporting, even if still very important, role in pursuit of PD.

Indeed, while the ARF has been compared unfavorably to more technical and operational frameworks like the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus, as well as maritime operations pursued by Southeast Asian states and in collaboration with partners, it was also through the ARF framework that many of these actors were first given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with counterparts in other countries and their approaches, establish new links, and to probe possible avenues for cooperation. This includes non-traditional security, which has offered a promising area for cooperation with traditional security implications. To be clear, the operational dimensions of PD remain critical to the management of security challenges, small and large. Still, abandoning the paradigmatic preoccupation with PD might help reduce some of its politicisation that has hindered acknowledgement and expansion of activities that serve the larger PD agenda.

Conclusion

In short, for much of its institutional life, the ARF's pursuit of PD has been challenged and an important source of dissatisfaction among key stakeholders. For ASEAN, the stakes and the challenges are especially large – and moreover, larger than they were 25 years ago. Closely associated with ASEAN itself, the ARF's challenged pursuit of PD raises questions about the appropriateness of "ASEAN centrality" as a principle of regional security. How to prove ASEAN's relevance to a range of security challenges is additionally compounded by the region's heightened major power tensions and dissatisfactions that make both unilateral action and competing proposals today a recurrent threat to Southeast Asian interests and voice.

Reconceiving the PD agenda, especially its staged approach, would not completely solve the dissatisfactions with the ARF that have developed and solidified over the last 25 years, but it might at least begin the process of adjusting expectations, lessening the politics of PD, and in so doing, expand alternative pathways to PD. It might also allow for a more realistic picture of the ARF – what it is able to do, where it fits into the larger security picture. And to the extent that satisfaction is also linked to expectations, having a clear-eyed view about where the ARF is best able to contribute would also address some, even if not all, of the questions about the ARF's relevance, including ASEAN's particular role in it. ▨

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Rethinking the ASEAN Regional Forum

Tang Siew Mun proposes that the ARF should create synergies with the ADMM-Plus to stay relevant in the regional security architecture.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) opened a new chapter in the Asian security discourse and ushered in the "golden age" of Asian multilateralism when its establishment was approved at the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and Post-Ministerial Conference held in Singapore from 23-25 July 1993. It was one of the most visible peace dividends in the wake of the Cold War, but detractors argue that it has not lived up to expectations. Indeed, over the past 25 years, the forum has been criticised for being long on speeches while falling short on tangible deliverables.

To be sure, the ARF's record on addressing hard security issues such as nuclear proliferation in the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea disputes was less than stellar. Nevertheless, the ARF has kept to the remit of its twin objectives: (a) to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and (b) to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the 27-member grouping has yet to make a mark in the preventive diplomacy domain, the ARF has been a pillar in fostering regional security dialogue and in engendering confidence-building measures in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

While the ARF is, and will likely be, an important feature in the regional security architecture, it needs to reinvent itself to remain relevant. It was a novelty in its formative years when the region, recently freed from the straightjacket of the Cold War, sought to move away from the traditional and divisive mindset of "security *against*" to "security *with*," envisaging a new mechanism for regional security. On balance, this experiment has not yielded the desired results. Nevertheless, the case for the ARF remains strong as the evolving regional strategic landscape marked by uncertainty and punctuated by various degrees of distrust and signs of animosity requires a neutral and inclusive platform to prevent the further fraying of the delicate peace and stability.

For the past 25 years, the ARF has struggled to balance between its expansive membership, which is undoubtedly one of its strongest points, and forging a consensus on a common actionable agenda. This experience provides a cautionary tale for Indo-Pacific proponents, especially in institutional terms. In essence, the Indo-Pacific concept makes the case for the indivisibility of the Indian and Pacific oceans and recasts the large swathe of space between the two entities into a single strategic construct. The ARF has failed to reconcile the differing regional security complexes and interests of the Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Australasia and South Asia regions, and it is unlikely that any new proposal of an overarching institution would fare any better. In fact, moving from either "East Asia" or "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" would in all likelihood amplify the divergence of existing security outlooks and interests.

Nevertheless, the ARF continues to bring enormous benefits to the region and its members. First, the ARF's "big tent" approach connects Papua New Guinea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, with ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners. These security linkages extends further into the Track 2 level with the DPRK and Mongolia being members of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) which provides recommendations to the ARF. Similarly, the European Union's absence in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) means that the ARF is the only regional security mechanism for the EU to engage the region in security matters. It also bears reminding that multilateral institutions such as the ARF continue to provide the strategic link for the US to the region as the Trump Administration recalibrates Washington's as yet undefined Asia policy.

Second, for all ARF members, the annual meeting provides a venue to engage in security discussions and to flag concerns on extant and emerging challenges, providing for greater transparency and setting the stage for further cooperation. The ARF also speaks to ASEAN's convening power to gather a wide array of nations, powerful and small, in a conducive environment to build trust and craft regional solutions to mitigate security risks.

However, there is a big difference between "talking" and "doing" security. The inability to command the relevant and necessary operational resources to promote regional security has always been the Achilles' heel of the forum. Headed by officials from the ministry of foreign affairs (MFA), the ARF's strength lies in diplomacy. It does not

THE ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF DiREx) 2013 in Cha Am, Thailand

Wikimedia Commons

have the wherewithal, especially when it comes to follow-up at the national level, to translate words into actions, and has to turn to defence establishments and other institutions to implement some of its programmes. For example, the ARF's maritime security agenda covers many maritime issues that fall under the purview of non-MFA sectors, including piracy, transport security against international terrorism, marine and aeronautical search and rescue, prevention of and response to offshore oil spill incidents, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, marine environmental protection and conservation.

The way forward for the ARF is to hive off operational security matters to the ADMM-Plus and relevant sectoral channels, and focus exclusively on strategic matters where its diplomatic strength and expertise could be utilised to better effect. This streamlining of ARF and ADMM-Plus foci and activities will minimise overlaps and avoid over-stretching of the resources of the participants.

Another model could see the ARF and ADMM-Plus joining forces. A prime candidate for such a collaboration is maritime security which is also a priority area under both the ARF and ADMM-Plus, and requires the involvement of diplomacy and security agencies such as the military. The ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security and the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Maritime Security could consider having an interface to work out a modality that enables cross-collaboration without diminishing each other's identity and mandate. Such collaboration requires rounds of trial and error to find an institutional sweet spot that is comfortable to both. It could open the way for a joint ARF-ADMM-Plus mechanism on selected functional cooperation areas. An

added bonus of this idea is opening the door for ARF members who are not party to the ADMM-Plus members to engage the region's military experts.

The case for closer cooperation and synergy between the ARF and ADMM-Plus is self-evident considering that peace and security are only possible and achievable within an enabling eco-system fostered by a positive diplomatic-political climate and tangible security cooperation on the ground. This synergy has become all the more imperative in view of the increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment in the region. In fact, the ARF's dialogue and consultation to reduce the growing strategic distrust and risks of unintended conflicts at sea must be accompanied by practical confidence-building measures that the defence track is focusing on, i.e. joint exercises and guidelines for maritime interactions. In other words, the ARF and ADMM-Plus are effectively two sides of the same coin. Each functions to make the region stable and secure but one cannot stand on its own effectively.

The ARF has to reinvent itself and prove its relevance given that it no longer has the monopoly on regional security discussions as it did in 1993. The establishment of the ADMM in 2006 followed by the ADMM-Plus in 2010 meant that the lion's share of functional security cooperation has shifted to these processes. For the ARF to remain relevant, it needs to sharpen its focus on broader strategic issues, and work towards creating synergies with the ADMM-Plus to ensure that diplomacy runs in tandem with security. ⧗

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Social Media and Politics in Southeast Asia

Shobha Avadhani examines the complexities of social media as an instrument of politics in Southeast Asia.

A novel technology whose political possibilities caught the world's attention with the "Arab Spring" in 2010, social media has now become a default entity in the political landscape of many countries. Along the way, new complexities related to social media have been revealed. Western pundits like Clay Shirky applauded the democratising quality of social media, with its power to disrupt an authoritarian state's control over mass media and to empower activists in the formation of transnational solidarities. Yet, critics like Evgeny Morozov pointed to the ways in which authoritarian regimes were able to use social media platforms to gain more power over their subjects. Certainly, social media has played a significant role in shaping the profound changes in the world's political landscapes over the last decade. In Southeast Asian countries, where the tensions are less between absolute democracy and absolute authoritarianism and more between specific permutations of hybridity, social media may have further intensified that hybridity.

Governance and social media

According to The 2018 Global Digital Report by We are Social and Hootsuite, while average social media penetration in Southeast Asia is about 55%, it has been growing rapidly in the past few years and shows no signs of slowing down. On the higher end of the spectrum, the rate of social media penetration is 95% in Brunei, 83% in Singapore and 75% in Malaysia. At the lower end, the penetration rate is 35% in Laos and 34% in Myanmar. Social media penetration rates are tied to rates of digital access, which are in turn linked to economic development, so these variations are not surprising. What is more significant is the way in which states in the region seek to manage increasing social media activity as part of governance, in the process moving between enabling digital access for economic development and controlling the parameters of that access for political purposes.

This strategic response to the affordances of social media is best understood when viewed against the backdrop of the political hybridity of the region. According to the 2017 report by the Economist's Intelligence Unit (EIU), the democratic spectrum of ASEAN member states ranges from "flawed democracy" to "authoritarian." From the fact that countries with higher social media penetration rates do not necessarily rank higher in the EIU's democracy index, it is clear that the presence of social media in the political landscape does not correlate with democratic development, and in fact can have an adverse effect as states increasingly regulate media spaces

as part of their governance models. This tension between economic development and democratic development is present in most states in the region.

Despite the tensions between the economic and political imperatives, e-governance in many states has evolved to take into account the channels for two-way information flow and citizen participation. The ruling elite in Singapore has extensively used social media to share information, shape the political narrative, and close the affective gap through dialogic communication. Likewise, the Vietnamese government has used social media platforms such as Facebook and the home-grown Zalo to communicate with the public. In Malaysia, the government uses its Facebook page to raise public awareness about various issues.

Electoral politics and social media

In the area of electoral politics, while for some states social media is a leveller between dominant political parties and their opponents, for others, it is a fierce battleground which produces conflicting and often confusing narratives. Social media allows more citizens to participate in the democratic process. At the same time, the quality of democratic discourse and decision-making can be adversely affected by the "cyberwar" between the contending parties online.

For example, social media did play a significant part during Malaysia's 14th General Election in enabling the political coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH) to unseat the Barisan Nasional (BN) party that had been in power for 57 years. The leader of PH, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, strategically used social media throughout the election campaign to reach out to larger numbers of people and forge a common cause with them, using Facebook Live to deliver his final campaign speech on the eve of the polling day. In contrast, social media has not enabled any serious electoral wins for opposition parties in Singapore, although the scope for democratic discourse has been changed by informal political actors through the use of humour and satire on Twitter starting around the time of the 2011 general elections in Singapore.

Indeed the direction and pace of change is by no means assured, especially as state actors become more adept at the use of social media to consolidate their power. During the 2014 Indonesian general election, many tweets fell within the category of propaganda and the use by candidates of mass media celebrities with social media profiles shifted the focus from rational-critical discourse of electoral issues to the emotional attachment of fandom.

In a pattern that matches events in the Western world, another important impact that social media has had on electoral politics in some Southeast Asian states is the creation of echo chambers. For example, in the case of Thailand's general election, selective exposure led to a lack of interaction across ideological divides, and these echo chambers gave rise to the emergence of fascist vigilante groups on Facebook in Thailand.

Activism and social media

While governments within the region seek to leverage on social media to advance economic development even as they simultaneously protect existing power relations, activists have used the same technology to expand the spaces for democratic discourse and, in some cases, to push back against state and corporate interests. For example in Malaysia, social media was successfully used by activists to collaborate with international activist organisations and mobilise public sentiment against an Australian mining company. Similarly, in the case of Indonesia, an anti-mining campaign was conducted against a Chinese company in Bangka, using social media to increase awareness and mobilise support from the public.

The complexity of social media activism is further seen in the example of the movement for LGBT rights in Singapore. While as yet unsuccessful in acquiring these rights, the 10-year-old Pink Dot movement has succeeded in using social media to mobilise increasing numbers of citizens at the annual event organised to create a visually arresting formation for social media circulation.

Perhaps the most striking recent instance of the use of social media by activists is the Bersih movement in Malaysia which called for free and fair elections, and ultimately did pave the way for a regime change in 2018. Facebook was used by the movement to reach out to young people, involve large numbers of people in decision making, and forge temporary solidarities.

Conclusion

Social media is often strategically used by citizens and activists in Southeast Asian states to further democratic politics by negotiating space for democratic engagement. It is also used by governments to consolidate anti-democratic mechanisms. For example, some governments in the region are considering anticipatory social media regulations against online disinformation (or "fake news") that activists fear could stifle the democratic discourse. At the same time, as states move towards governance models based on large-scale data collection enabled by technological corporations, a new external challenge has arisen in the form of cyberterrorism.

In the face of concern about threats to national security such as online disinformation and cyberterrorism that require citizen vigilance and agency, states with hybrid political systems in Southeast Asia contend with a citizenry of their making that may not be equipped to mount the required resistance. In the manner of Nobel Laureate and economist Amartya Sen, the time may be right to consider a more, rather than less, democratic response. The question that now remains is whether the Southeast Asian region can withstand the challenges of social media and big data without democracy.

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Echo Chambers and a Sectarian Public Sphere in Southeast Asia

Ross Tapsell examines how 'echo chambers' online are segregating the public sphere in Southeast Asia.

The term 'echo chamber' has been popularised in recent times to describe the shifting state of news consumption brought about by digitalisation. A media 'echo chamber' is where people tend to migrate towards information and news which they agree with. In practical terms, this is done by clicking on headlines and following news sites and opinion-makers who conform to one's worldview. At the same, 'echo chambers' are exemplified by removing oneself from social media groups or news sites which do not conform to your political, cultural or ideological views. The precise impact of 'echo chambers' is contested by scholars, and indeed highly variable according an individual's willingness to expand or reduce their information flows. It is possible, of course, for someone to have a wide view of the world simply by being on Twitter, for example, by following a range of people and news sites. It is equally possible for someone to be active on Twitter or Facebook but subscribe only to sites which are of the same political persuasion, and therefore their idea of a topic or issue is quite narrow.

In Southeast Asia, 'echo chambers' online can be exploited around religious and ethnic divisions. Just recently, Reuters uncovered "more than 1,000 examples of posts, comments images and videos denigrating and attacking the Rohingya and other Muslims" on Facebook. In Indonesia, there has been much discussion about online 'wars' of 'buzzers' who look to push partisan viewpoints, most notably the so-called Muslim Cyber Army. The group has been accused of spreading "fake news and hate speech to inflame religious and ethnic schisms." These partisan groups are aiming to incite and enrage readers online in order to push their political or ideological agenda, and those audiences who are heavily in their 'bubble' are arguably more likely to be convinced of their views.

As more and more young Southeast Asians get their news solely from social media platforms like Facebook, the greater the power of the platform to play a larger role in influencing their worldviews. In the Philippines, described as 'a Facebook nation,' social media commentators who provide 'alternative' news and views on Facebook are highly popular, and their support for current President Duterte was crucial in his 2016 election campaign.

Big data analytics can exacerbate this situation, particularly around election time. Big data analytics enables us to better understand the nuances of particular groups online. For example, a big data company could ascertain that female workers in Johor, Malaysia would largely vote for a party which has a policy to reduce immigration to the state. The
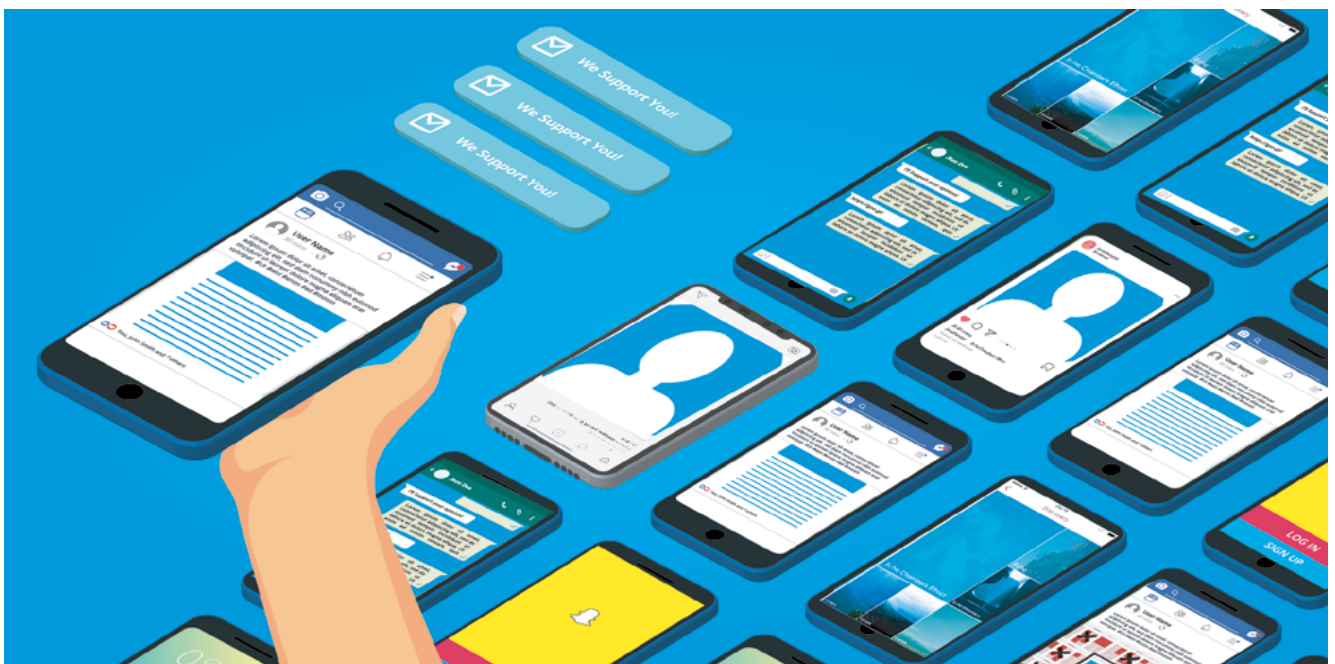
"Greater mainstream media credibility and digital literacy are paramount. Independent organisations such as fact-checkers, investigative journalists, researchers and regulatory bodies who can expose what messages are spread and by whom online is crucial."

problem here is how those who receive such information might respond. Big data companies are being used to take advantage of this segregation and try to appeal to their interests, or exploit their fears and insecurities. Thus, what is more likely today is that a political party could run an unofficial 'scare campaign' of 'rising' immigration levels spread through informal networks like WhatsApp, while at the same time run a different official campaign message on Facebook or Instagram. But it is the unofficial 'scare campaign' messages around ethnicity or religion circulated among friends and family member circles that resonate with voters.

In a more concrete example, one Islamic Party (PAS) candidate in Malaysia said that each year he organises a Chinese New Year event, and he sends out Happy New Year messages on WhatsApp to ethnic Chinese members of his community. But he told me it was dangerous to publicise this practice: "In the Malay community, there are some who are very conservative. For example, even me organising a Chinese New Year event, some Malays will not be able to accept that. You have to be very selective in terms of the information to various groups." It is not difficult to see in this situation how a politician could say one thing to one ethnic group (telling Chinese communities on WhatsApp that they are pluralist and wishing them a happy new year), yet say another thing to another ethnic group on WhatsApp (telling a Muslim group that the Chinese are too powerful and degrading Islam).

Of course, politicians have long been chameleons, and in the pre-digital era, political parties in Malaysia could hypothetically advertise in a Chinese-language newspaper stating they are pro-pluralism, while at the same advertise in Utusan Malaysia in Bahasa Melayu claiming the Chinese are a threat to Bumiputera dominance. However, there seems little evidence that big data is improving the situation of 'echo chambers' of ethnic and religious divisions. Rather, issues of race, religion and ethnicity are further polarising online and social media 'bubbles,' all encouraged by political campaigning which aims to micro-target groups in order to win an election campaign. In short, online segregation makes it is easier to divide and hide online societies by appealing to ethno-nationalism and sectarianism.

It is also true, however, that we have not sufficiently studied how 'echo chambers' in Southeast Asia really work, particularly in semi-rural and rural areas where citizens have only recently bought their first-ever 'smartphone' and are using 'the internet' with only two platforms:

Facebook and WhatsApp. To understand this emerging, shifting 'information society,' we need more extensive studies using methodologies from anthropology and ethnography – asking how people experience social media in everyday life – in their local and regional contexts. Too much research on media 'echo chambers' comes from 'top-down' studies of scholars sitting at computers, examining 'big data scraping' which is a process of extracting large amount of data from websites. An increasing amount of these studies comes from the security or cybercrime sector. As a result, unsurprisingly, much of the output revolves around the internet being 'weaponised,' rather than seeing digitalisation as inextricable from the environments in which everyday life plays out.

So how can we encourage citizens in Southeast Asia to avoid falling into an 'echo chamber' of online information? Security experts would say we need more laws and better monitoring of online flows. Indeed, it is increasingly important that political parties declare what they spend online and on social media, and for there to be limits to this spending, as there already is on television, print or radio campaign advertising. This allows citizens to know why a certain political line is being pushed on a particular online platform, for example. A more difficult challenge is exposing non-official interest groups for creating and spreading hate speech through messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram and WeChat. Southeast Asian citizens with their often ubiquitous usage of social media platforms coupled with low digital literacy rates are going to be regular targets of political party campaigners, social media giants and big data companies in the future. Their practices and methods urgently need to be more transparent.

However, greater monitoring and crack-downs of the online realm may have the opposite effect and in fact encourage people to be more distrustful of official information. The more governments try to limit 'alternative' viewpoints, the more people may be drawn to their conspiracies. Greater mainstream media credibility and digital literacy are paramount. Independent organisations such as fact-checkers, investigative journalists, researchers and regulatory bodies who can expose what messages are spread and by whom online is crucial. To expand the digital public sphere beyond 'echo chambers' of alternative bubbles of hyper-partisan information, people need to see credible, mainstream, independent media which is also able to be critical of the government. This realm is in decline in democratic Indonesia and the Philippines, while in Myanmar and Malaysia the media landscape is shifting rapidly. A more professional media online is critical for undermining the information flows of sectarianism and ethno-nationalism. ⚇

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Terrorists' Exploitation of Cyberspace in Southeast Asia

Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin walks us through the cyber landscape of terrorism in Southeast Asia.

The exploitation of cyberspace has been imperative for terrorist groups in their protracted battle of the hearts and minds in Southeast Asia. Since 1999, this is especially observed in groups misusing Islamic concepts in their ideology and propaganda such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD). The former affiliates itself to the Al Qaeda (AQ) while the latter, led by the imprisoned Aman Abdurrahman, has pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, leader (emir) of the self-styled Islamic State (IS). While terrorist groups have different online and propaganda strategies, all have reaped benefits from their cyber activities.

For JI, its presence in cyberspace has especially assisted in the creation of its support base. Then, it amassed supporters online to partake in real-world demonstrations showing solidarity for terrorists arrested and executed such as Abu Bakar Bashir, Muhammad Jibriel and the Bali bombers. Today, JI's strategy focuses on proselytising (*dakwah*) and its prominent individuals such as the now released Muhammad Jibriel shows strong influence online. They have thousands of followers on multiple social media platforms exposed to their subtle radical ideological messages enclosed within their seemingly mainstream anti-IS messages and humanitarian activities.

For IS, its strategic online campaign, generated by professional IS central media agencies as well as amateur local recruiters and propagandists, remains a challenge for counter-extremism and -terrorism forces. Since its inception in 2014 and until 2017, the IS online campaign was the primary mechanism behind its radicalisation and recruitment activities which had led to the migration (*hijrah*) of thousands globally to IS-controlled areas in mainly Syria and Iraq. Today, IS online presence continues in both public and encrypted platforms in its persistence to recuperate and gain strength in its other satellite states (*wilayah*). In addition to propaganda dissemination, radicalisation and recruitment, other activities such as fundraising, hacking and sharing of operational tactical manuals are also prevalent in cyberspace. This is seen in the online activities of IS Malaysian cell Al Qubro Generations as well as materials written by Bali bomber Imam Samudera and Indonesian Muhammad Bahrunaim Anggih Tamtomo. Imam Samudera and Bahrunaim may have passed on, but their writings continue to be disseminated today.

Tracking Online Extremism and Terrorism
The vivacity of online extremism and terrorism, despite its serious implications, presents a goldmine of information for us to understand our adversary. Public social media accounts of radicalised individuals are like online blogs or diaries that reveal the intentions, root causes, motivations and drivers essential in understanding radicalisation processes. Networks of recruiters and linkages between supporters from one country to the other allow for the mapping of terrorist developments and expansion especially in the case of IS today. In addition, assessments of these online activities have also assisted in detecting and disrupting attack plots.

Furthermore, it shows new trends in more localised settings. For instance, in understanding women's role in terrorism in Indonesia, messages and narratives from local IS terrorists and propagandists such as Rafiqa Hanum (the wife of Bahrunaim, an Indonesian IS operative in Syria and Iraq) show the inclination for women to partake in operational roles. This is in sync with the increasing role of women in terrorism in Indonesia today. For instance, Anggi Kusuma and Dian Yulia Novi were directly involved in bomb plots in Indonesia. Anggi was part of an Indonesian IS bomb making cell while Dian had been slated as a suicide bomber before she was arrested. Both were radicalised online and have shown no sign of repentance in their prison cells. This messaging on the role of women differs from the IS central stance seen in several of its Rumiyah and Dabiq magazines. IS central has defined women to play supporting roles to their husbands and male family members. This signifies how online extremism and terrorism in its entirety allow for a deeper understanding of terrorist developments from both IS strategic and localised vantage points.

However, these online materials and activities seem to be declining today. Regular removal of terrorist materials in social media as well as arrests and deaths of recruiters and main propagandists in Southeast Asia, notably in and from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, are among the factors behind this dip in online activities. More notably, terrorist groups are increasingly utilising encrypted online chat applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp and WeChat which are harder to detect. This represents an eminent challenge for security agencies today. It also illustrates the constant change of online and communication platforms that terrorists are using to efficiently facilitate their myriad activities.
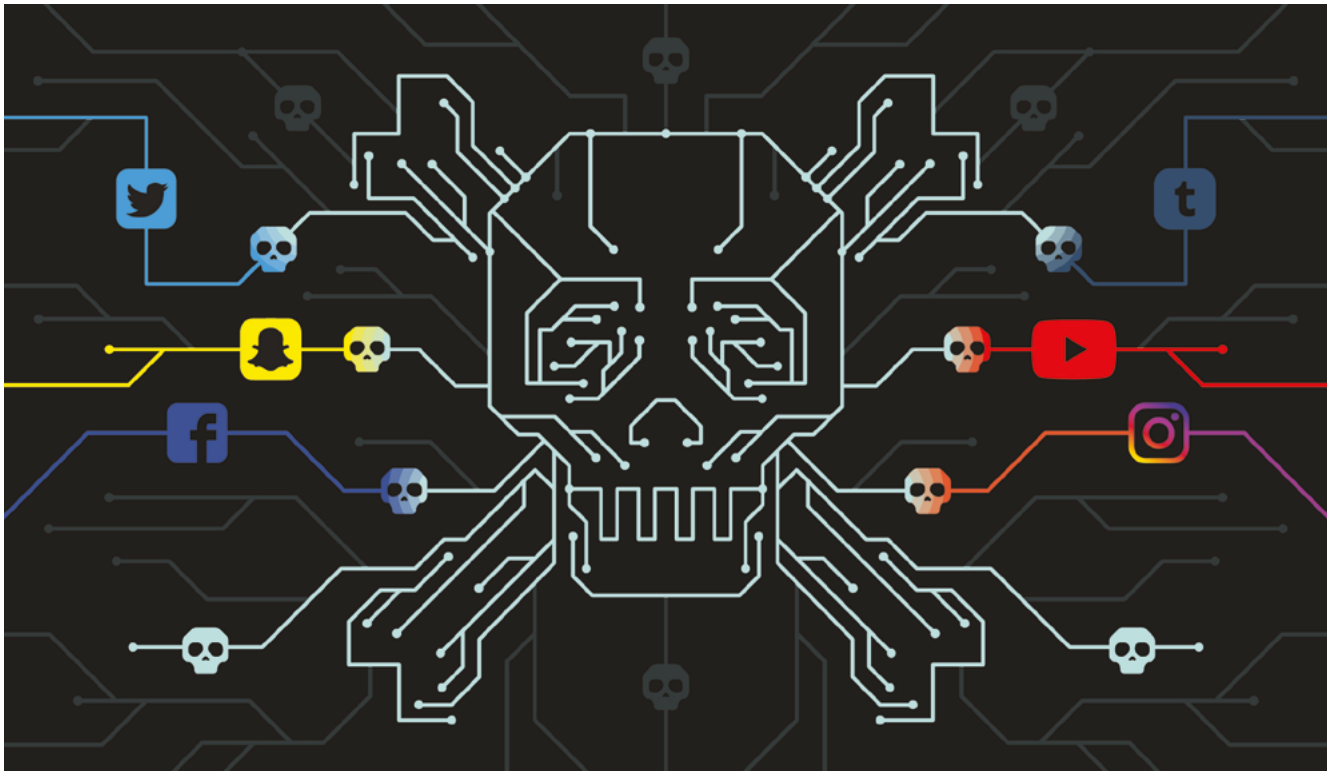
Future Projections and Recommendations

Terrorist groups will persevere, protract and expand their online campaigns and activities. The utilisation of emerging technological platforms and communication technologies will be a constant as they strive to be undetected in recruitment and operational planning. These online platforms would increasingly be encrypted and include other channels such as online gaming programmes. This is worrying, as observed in the phenomenon of family radicalisation that led to the Surabaya bombings in May 2018. Small, closed and personal links in encrypted platforms would be harder to detect.

While encrypted platforms are used at the later stages of recruitment, communication, creation of cell and plotting of attacks, public and open online platforms remain viable for the radicalisation of fresh recruits and maintenance of a support base. Terrorists will continue to use public and open online platforms as the main conduit for propaganda dissemination. Most materials in public channels would be subtle and absent from a terrorist identity at face value. Narratives and symbols will be divorced from the blatant call for violence and shielded with political commentaries and fake news. This is an effort by terrorists to secure their presence in social media. It is difficult to remove such presence since there are no distinctive and clear links to terrorism and incitement to violence.

When it comes to countering terrorism and extremism, a key solution suggested by many security analysts is to strengthen collaboration among a myriad of agencies, companies and institutions. This holds true in the context of tackling online terrorism and extremism too. Companies working in communication and information technology and social media need to continue and expand their cooperation to share insights, knowledge and information on how best to tackle terrorists' exploitation of their technologies. An example of such a collaboration was observed in December 2016 when Google, Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft pledged to work together in creating 'a database of unique fingerprints known as 'hashes.' The four technology giants then went on to create the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) which promises to generate information sharing and best practices. Upcoming technological and communication platforms should also be guided and encouraged to join existing counter-terrorism efforts such as GIFCT before entering the market. Terrorists and their supporters have always shown their dexterity in keeping up with the latest technology. Preventive measures in this regard could help thwart the online extremist landscape.

At its core, countering online extremism and terrorism requires both online and real-world engagements aimed at inoculating individuals from being vulnerable to terrorist ideologies. Such counter ideology, counter or alternative messages and community engagement efforts require not just a whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of society approach. Sectors from the media, education, psychology and security departments, among others, need to collaborate in producing and disseminating counter materials. Community leaders, educators, neighbours, friends and family members play important roles to ensure that these messages are not just understood and tolerated, but accepted and practiced in the real world. ▨

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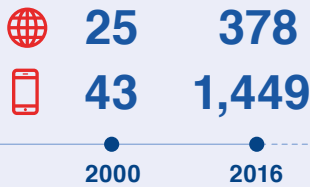
ASEAN in Figures

Social Media in Southeast Asia

ASEAN Digital Population 2018 [1]

- Internet Penetration (%)
- Social Media Penetration (%)
- Annual Growth (%) of Social Media Users

Internet Users and Mobile Phone Users in ASEAN [2]
(per 1000 people)

	2000	2016
🌐	25	378
📱	43	1,449

LAOS 👤 6.91 m — 35 / 35 / 33

MYANMAR 👤 53.61 m — 34 / 34 / 29

THAILAND 👤 69.11 m — 82 / 74 / 11

VIETNAM 👤 96.02 m — 67 / 57 / 20

CAMBODIA 👤 16.13 m — 50 / 43 / 43

SINGAPORE 👤 5.75 m — 84 / 83 / 9

MALAYSIA 👤 31.83 m — 79 / 75 / 9

BRUNEI 👤 0.43 m — 95 / 95 / 11

PHILIPPINES 👤 105.7 m — 63 / 63 / 12

INDONESIA 👤 265.4 m — 50 / 49 / 23

Almost **380 million** people or **58%** of the ASEAN population use the Internet. [1]

141%: the percentage of mobile connectivity in Southeast Asia. [1]

Thais spend **4.2 hours** on their mobile device per day, making them the heaviest internet users. [3]

Southeast Asians spend average **3.6 hrs** per person per day on the internet using a mobile device. This figure is higher than: [3]
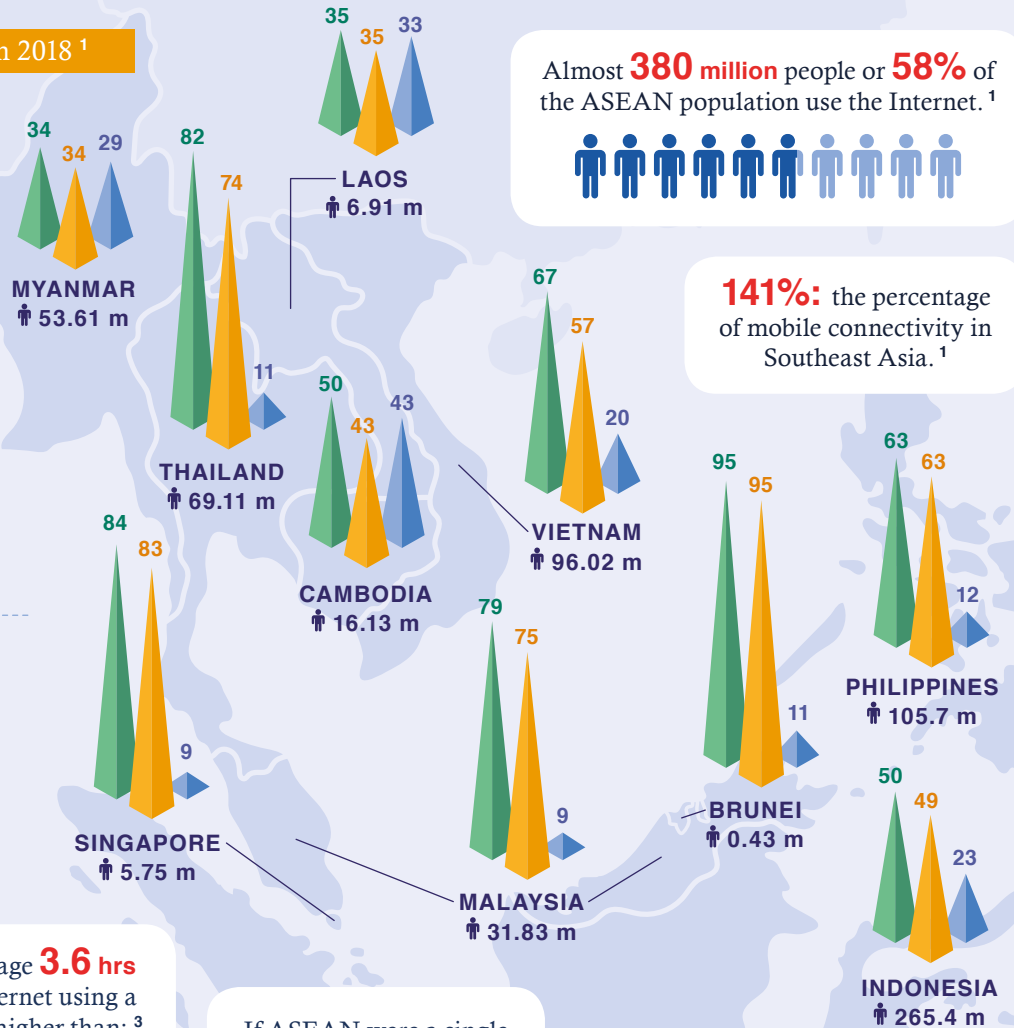
3 hours in China 🇨🇳

2 hours in the UK 🇬🇧

1 hour in Japan 🇯🇵

If ASEAN were a single country, it would rank **2nd** in the world in terms of the number of monthly Facebook users. [5]

Singapore ranks **1st** in the world's Networked Readiness Index, while Malaysia is **31st** and Thailand is **62nd**. [6]

Most Active Social Media Platforms (%) [1]

a Facebook b YouTube c Instagram d WhatsApp e Facebook Messenger

	a	b	c	d	e
Thailand	75	72	50	17	55
Singapore	70	71	44	73	42
Malaysia	70	69	49	68	47
Vietnam	61	59	32	-	47
Indonesia	41	43	38	40	24

Zalo reached **100 million** users in May 2018, most of whom are in Vietnam. It is also used by local authorities of some 20 Vietnamese provinces as the online portal for administrative procedures and interaction with citizens. [10]

Monthly active social media users in ASEAN: [1]

360 mil   97 mil

53 million Indonesians use Instagram, accounting for **55%** of total Instagram users in the region. [1]

ASEAN Social Media Users

92% of **ASEAN** social media users access social media via **mobile phone**. [1]

Highest growth of the active social media users in Southeast Asia from Jan 2017 to Jan 2018: [1]

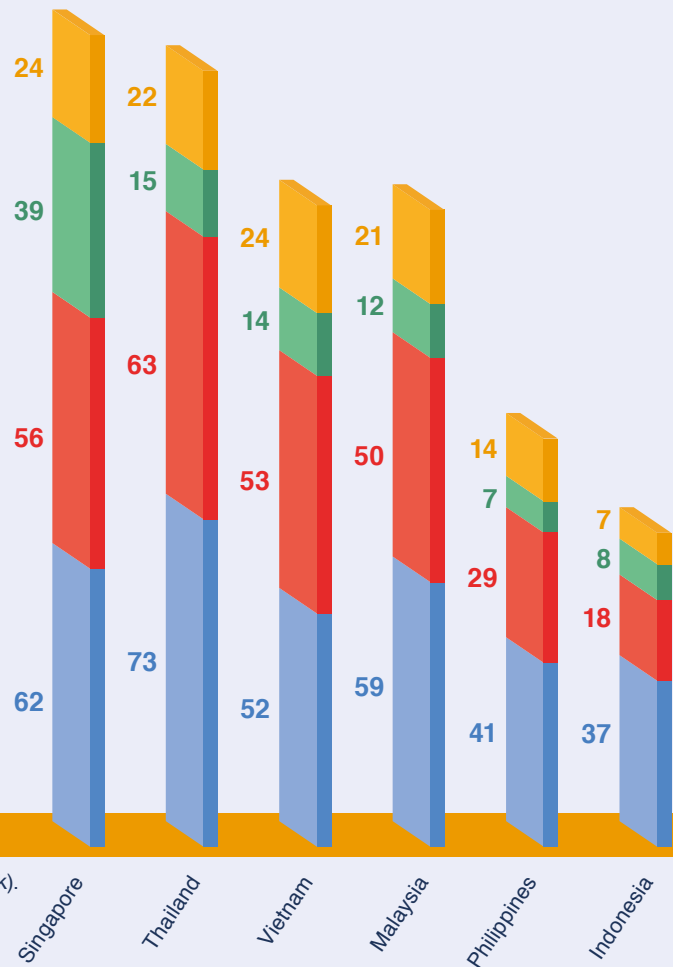|		
1 Cambodia		**43%**
2 Laos		**33%**
3 Myanmar		**29%**

The longest average daily time spent using social media in Southeast Asia: [1]

1 Philippines	**3 hrs 57 mins**
2 Indonesia	**3 hrs 23 mins**
3 Thailand	**3 hrs 10 mins**

55% of the **ASEAN** population are active social media users (360 million) [1]

36% of which are **Indonesian** (130 million)

and almost **19%** are **Philippines** citizens (67 million).

Weekly Online Activities by Smartphones [1]

(% of total population engaging in each activity at least once per week).

- 🟧 Play games
- 🟩 Look for product info
- 🟥 Watch videos
- 🟦 Visit a social network

Singapore: 24, 39, 56, 62

Thailand: 22, 15, 63, 73

Vietnam: 24, 14, 53, 52

Malaysia: 21, 12, 50, 59

Philippines: 14, 7, 29, 41

Indonesia: 7, 8, 18, 37

Activities of Facebook users in Vietnam: [8]

- **73%** to update news
- **54%** to buy items
- **32%** to play games
- **24%** to sell items

Percentage of population above 15 years old that make online purchases and/or pays bill online [1]

HIGHEST 28% Singapore

LOWEST 0.6% Cambodia

90% respondents in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam made a purchase using social media or were influenced by it. [4]

48% respondents in Vietnam use social media sites daily for news. [9]

81% 18-29 y.o.

44% 30-49 y.o.

3% > 50 y.o.

1 We are Social and Hootsuite. *The 2018 Global Digital Report*, 2018. **2** ASEAN Secretariat. *Celebrating ASEAN: 50 Years of Evolution and Progress*, 2017.
3 Google and Temasek. *E-Conomy SEA Spotlight 2017.* **4** Bain & Company. *Digital Acceleration in Southeast Asia: Navigating Tectonic Shifts*, 2017.
5 Economist Intelligence Unit 2014. **6** World Economic Forum 2016. **7** EON. *The Fifth Philippine Trust Index (PTI)*, 2017. **8** Asia Plus Inc. *Online market research Q&Me*, 2017. **9** Pew Research Centre. *Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey 2017.* **10** Vietnamnet, 2018

Countering Terrorism the Facebook Way

Gulnaz Baig shares with us how Facebook has developed technologies and engaged communities to deny terrorists the space to act.

AF: Facebook is a pioneer and leader in social media. Could you give us an overview of Facebook's presence in ASEAN?

BAIG: Facebook has a global community of 2.2 billion people, with more people using Facebook in Asia-Pacific than in any other region. Our community here is vibrant, creative and connected, from Bangkok, which has more monthly Facebook users than any other city in the world, to Indonesia, where more Instagram stories are posted than any other country.

AF: What steps are Facebook taking to combat terrorism and online radicalisation?

BAIG: Our stance on this is clear – we do not allow terrorist individuals or organisations to have a presence on Facebook, as well as any content that praises, supports or represents terrorists and terrorist acts. Our goal is to make Facebook as hostile an environmenta as possible for terrorists. We invest in tools, technology and teams to achieve that goal, while working to strengthen the resilience of communities.

We have systems which can recognise and surface content associated with terrorism. One such example is a tool that bank photos and videos containing terrorist propaganda so that if the same image or video is re-uploaded, it would be detected and removed. This has allowed us to make real progress. Earlier this year, our Community Standards Enforcement Report showed that our automation tools are extremely effective at recognising global terrorist content. In the first quarter of 2018, we removed 1.9 million ISIS and al-Qaeda related content, about twice as much from the previous quarter, 99% of which was detected before anyone reported it to us.

To have a sustainable impact, we collaborate with communities to build resilience, both online and offline, so that they are less vulnerable to terrorist actors who prey on them. We work closely with community leaders to develop positive messages and compelling alternatives to extremist rhetoric. These include the Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian (YPP), a Jakarta-based civil society organisation, and the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group in Singapore which in August conducted outreach to over 300 youth in Singapore on the threats of online radicalisation. Earlier this year, Facebook collaborated with the Lee Kuan Yew

School of Public Public Policy on a Community Resiliency Workshop, drawing on the principles of the 2017 ASEAN Declaration on a Culture of Prevention for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society. Our partners understand the radical influences and tensions on the ground, and their insights help us make a real difference in defending communities from radicalisation.

AF: The fact that Facebook has a counter-terrorism portfolio, which you lead for the Asia Pacific region, is a sign of its seriousness in combating terrorism. What does Facebook's counter-terrorism team look like, and how do you work with law enforcement agencies in this area?

BAIG: Technology cannot catch everything. Context and language are often complex, and algorithms cannot always distinguish praise from condemnation or satire from culturally-specific criticism. We need human knowledge and expertise to help us stay ahead of the evolving ways in which terrorists attempt to abuse Facebook. Therefore, we have grown our counter-terrorism team to over 200 people, comprising counter-terrorism experts, linguists, former prosecutors, former law enforcement agents and analysts, and engineers. Together we speak over 35 languages, and have a deep understanding of not just terrorism but also of the local and regional contexts in which our adversaries operate.

We also have partnerships with several organisations that have expertise in global terrorism or cyber intelligence to help us in our efforts. These partners, such as the SITE Intelligence Group, flag pages, profiles and groups on Facebook potentially associated with terrorist groups for us to review. We are further supported by over 10,000 reviewers who help us review content that violates our terrorism policies.

We also work closely with law enforcement across ASEAN member states and across the world, and have a global team that responds to emergency requests. We have people working 24/7, ready to alert authorities when we see evidence of a threat of imminent harm or a terror attack. Over the past year, we have provided support to authorities around the world that are responding to the threat of terrorism, including in cases where law enforcement has been able to disrupt attacks and prevent harm.

AF: Terrorist groups are turning to encrypted applications and smaller technological platforms for radicalisation and cyber-terrorism. How is Facebook addressing this development?

BAIG: The terrorist threat is a global one, so our efforts need to be global too. As we step up our enforcement efforts, terrorists may well move to other platforms, particularly smaller ones which may not have the capacity to deal with this challenge. To help our community be more effective, we co-founded the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) with Google, Microsoft and Twitter, and established a shared industry database of "hashes" – unique digital "fingerprints" – for violent extremist images. By sharing this information with each other, we can identify terrorist content on our platforms and delete it swiftly before it can spread. The database now contains over 100,000 images and 8,000 videos, meaning that any attempt to upload them will be blocked before it goes live. The GIFCT invites smaller companies to be part of the shared industry database, and has now reached over 100 companies.

AF: Fake news is a big issue in Indonesia and it is a serious factor in the upcoming presidential election in 2019. What is Facebook doing to combat fake news?

BAIG: We do not want Facebook to be a place where people spread misinformation. It is harmful to our community and makes the world less informed, particularly in the context of elections. We cannot combat false news alone – it requires a concerted effort across industry, academics, civil society and government.

A key part of our strategy is around removing fake accounts, which can be a major distributor of misleading content. We block millions of fake accounts at registration every day, and we are continuously working to improve our systems to detect fake accounts more quickly. We are making progress; in the first quarter of this year, we removed nearly 600 million fake accounts globally, 98.5% of which we detected before anyone reported them to us.

Third-Party Fact-Checking is another important part of our fight against misinformation, partnering with Poynter-certified fact-checkers. Once a fact-checker marks something as false, we demote that post and similar posts, reducing future impressions by an average of 80%. We also use these 'false' ratings to inform our technology, to help us better detect future false stories. This means that over time we are getting smarter and faster in determining what articles might be hoaxes and sending them to fact-checkers to review. We now have third-party fact-checking in 17 countries, including in Indonesia with our partner Tirto.id.

We also want to empower people to decide for themselves what to read, trust, and share. Last year we created an educational tool to give people tips to identify false news and provided a founding grant for the News Integrity Initiative to invest in long-term strategies for news literacy.

AF: The "echo-chamber" phenomenon on social media has segregated the supposedly open digital public sphere. Is there any technological answer to address this, or does the solution lie somewhere else?

BAIG: People often talk about social media creating 'echo chambers,' only allowing people to hear one point of view. I believe the opposite may be true. Remember what it used to be like: 20 years ago, we had limited news sources and would rely on just one or two, whether it was your newspaper of choice or the 7 o'clock news bulletin. Today, a person is friends with a diverse network of hundreds of people on Facebook who have different opinions and worldviews. Through this network, we are exposed to a much broader spectrum of content and perspective than we ever had before. Research suggests that people who use social media for news end up using sources from across the political spectrum and viewpoints, far more than people who do not.

But we certainly have a responsibility to ensure that Facebook does not contribute to polarisation. We have developed dedicated features to help. *Related Articles*, for example, is a feature we launched at the end of 2017, which shows additional news articles underneath an article posted in *News Feed*. This is designed to give more context around a particular story – often giving the alternative perspective, or an article by third-party fact-checkers.

AF: There is growing pessimism about the democratising power of social media after all the exposure of its "dark sides." What is your take on this?

BAIG: When talking about the abuse on Facebook, it is easy to forget that the vast majority of our community, both in Asia-Pacific and around the world, uses the platform in positive and constructive ways. I believe strongly in the incredible potential of social media and, in particular, for Facebook's potential to be a positive force for democracy around the world. Facebook gives a voice to people of all ages and political beliefs, it encourages debate and the healthy exchange of ideas, and it makes leaders more accountable to their constituents.

But it is not just about politics. Today, Facebook supports millions of small businesses in Asia-Pacific, the majority of which attribute the growth – or even existence – of their business to Facebook. Take Dea Valencia, a 22-year-old entrepreneur from Central Java, who created Batik Kultur in 2011 to sell her Batik-inspired fashion designs, and now employs nearly 70 people, including a number of disabled employees, to manage the huge demand coming from her 60,000 Facebook fans. Beyond this, we see examples of people using Facebook to do incredible things every single day, whether it is bringing communities together in times of crisis, allowing people to shine a crucial light on events, or helping otherwise isolated people and communities stay in touch. There will always be those who try to abuse our platform, and those people are getting smarter. But we will not give up. We will have to keep working twice as hard to stay one step ahead of those bad actors. ▧

Ms. Gulnaz Baig is Facebook's Asia-Pacific Head on Counter-Terrorism Policy where she oversees cross-functional efforts to counter terrorism and other forms of extremism, particularly for Asia-Pacific.

Floating Dreams – A Day on Inle Lake

Cheryl Teh takes us on a trip around the magnificent Inle Lake of Myanmar.

Fisherman glides over Inle Lake on long boats, conical fishing baskets in hand

ImageEarthTravel

It is morning, and from one's seat in a longboat, the sunlit expanses of Inle Lake stretch as far as the eye can see. Beside the boat, fishermen go past slowly, rowing across the water, their movements seasoned and almost dancelike. While Bagan's famed pagodas might hold their own attraction, there is something special about gliding along the glassy surface of the lake, with a light breeze caressing your skin. There is so much to discover and learn – about the lake's ecological diversity, the people inhabiting it for centuries, their way of life, and their history.

Inle Lake is a freshwater lake located in the mountainous region of Shan state, Myanmar. It is the second largest lake in the country, with an estimated area of almost 50 square miles. The lake's eco-system hosts diverse flora and fauna, including approximately 267 species of birds, and 43 species of freshwater fishes, otters and turtles. The lake also contains species endemic to the region, with over nine species of fish and twenty species of snails that have, to date, not been found elsewhere in the world. Some of these fish, like the silver-blue Sawbwa barb and the Lake Inle danio, are valuable to aquarium aficionados and prized possessions for fish collectors. If you are lucky, you might even be able to spot the endangered Sarus crane, which has been reported to nest in the area.

The lake is placid and serene, ringed by marshes and floating gardens. Pagodas and monasteries rise above the crystalline water, while villages perched on stilts dot the shoreline. These villages are mostly inhabited by the

Intha people who live on stilted houses built over the lake and have forged their traditions and way of life around this body of water.

The Intha make a living primarily from fishing. Traditional Intha fishermen are known for their practice of a distinctive rowing style, which involves wrapping one leg around the oar, using this leg to push the oar through the water, while standing on the stern. This unique style of rowing was necessary, as parts of the lake are covered with floating plants. In order to obtain an unobscured view, the men have developed this unique style of rowing, which some describe as "ballerina-like" or a "dance." Fish caught from the lake are staples of the locals' diet, constituting dishes of *htamin gyin* (boiled fish and potatoes, with tomato paste, kneaded into fresh or fermented rice) or *nga hpein* (Inle carp).

To go with these dishes, the Intha harvest vegetables and fruit from the large floating gardens that they maintain on the surface of the lake. To upkeep these gardens is no easy task, requiring hours of manual labour. Farmers dig up lake-bottom weeds from deeper areas of the Inle Lake, and ferry them back to their farms, creating floating beds anchored by bamboo poles in their garden areas. These gardens are flood-resistant, as they float on the water's surface, and rise and fall with the tide. They are very fertile as the nutrient-laden water nourishes the plants constantly. Rice and other vegetables are grown in these extraordinary gardens. Around 25% of Inle Lake is covered by floating gardens, and one might require a skilled boatman to navigate these channels quickly.

The Hpaung Daw U Pagoda at Inle Lake

Wikipedia Commons

A woman sits at a loom, weaving the unique Inle longyi

Wikipedia Commons

Apart from their ingenious means of subsistence on the lake, the Intha people also take part in the famous "five-day market." At these markets, the Intha people join the local Shan community, as well as villagers from the nearby hills, including the Pa-O and Danu ethnic tribes, to sell their wares and produce. This market provides a perfect occasion for visitors to the lake to see the people of the region gather together, showcasing an interesting slice of Myanmar's ethnic and cultural diversity.

The rotating market remains one of Inle Lake's most popular attractions. It moves from one village to another, travelling to another rustic setting on the circuit on a five-day basis, hence the name. When held on the lake itself, one may purchase directly from the small boats that congregate near the bank. Hand-made products, including food, tools, carvings, and trinkets and ornaments made by traditional silversmiths, are sold at the market. Silk-woven products are also available, especially in the form of the Inle longyi. Although the longyi (a sheet of cloth approximately 6.6ft by 2.6ft, wrapped around the waist) is widely worn in Myanmar, the ethnic and regional weaves and patterns of the Inle longyi are distinctive to the region. Everything, from weaving to dyeing and processing finished silk scarves and longyis, is done here by hand, by women of all ages – and if it interests one, a visit to the workshops of artisans around the lake area is eye-opening.

Of these markets, the In Dein market, at the foot of the hills overlooking Inle Lake, is one of the largest and most popular. One might also take this opportunity of In Dein market tour to visit the spectacular pagodas (or stupas) nearby that date back to the 12th century BC, and were continually added to by Shan princes up until the end of the 18th century. Many ruins of centuries old stupas, built in areas surrounding the lake, were recently reclaimed from overgrown hillsides. They present a breathtaking sight, as their closely-knit spires rise into the distance, delicate and luminescent under the sun. The stupas are easily explored on foot.

Meanwhile, beautiful monasteries are to be found all over the lake. One of them is the Nga Hpe Kyaung monastery, commonly known as the Jumping Cat monastery, due to the dozens of cats that were trained by resident monks to jump through hoops. Though the monastery now remains a place for learning, worship and reflection, the cats no longer do much jumping anymore, but instead roam the grounds at will, stretching out lazily in the sun on the monastery's floors. Apart from the cats, the monastery also houses a collection of ornate Buddhas. The building's architectural structure is, too, a sight to see, with its wooden stilt structure dating back over a century.

As the day comes to a close, the colours of the sunset reflect on the glassy surface of the lake, making for a picture-perfect moment. But as the boatman heads back to shore, oars carving through the water like wings in the air, one might find themselves pondering if one day is enough to spend on the lake. For life on Inle Lake is akin to a fleeting, floating dream – with no shortage of sights to see, a rich history to immerse in, clear skies for miles on end, and seemingly boundless shimmering waters, sparkling in the sun. ▧

Ms. Cheryl Teh was Research Associate at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, and currently writes for a major print media in Singapore.
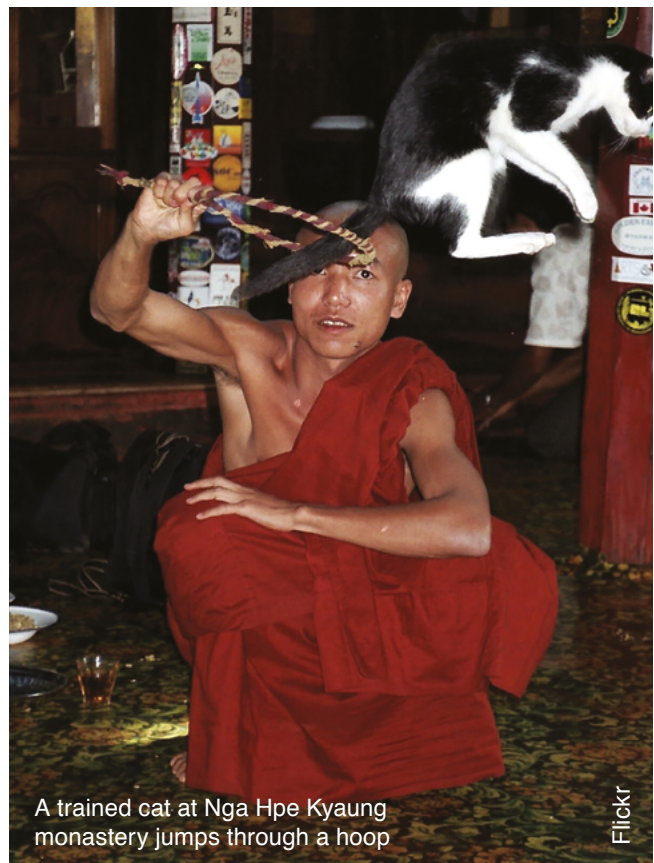
A trained cat at Nga Hpe Kyaung monastery jumps through a hoop

Flickr

Hear the Rainforest Sing

Nur Aziemah Aziz explores the Rainforest World Music Festival that has put Southeast Asian traditional music on the world map.

Nestled in the lush greenery of the Bornean rainforest, a mega stage booming with the tune of the Sape, a musical instrument of the Sarawak traditional tribesmen sets the evening atmosphere. The melodic sounds of other instruments from the various performers begin to send people into a trancelike state. Festival-goers soon raise their hands in the air while their bodies sway from side to side shadowing the gentle wind breezing through the rainforest. The cool air brought some respite from the humidity in the day. The joyful dancing continues on through the night.

For more than two decades, the Rainforest World Music Festival (RWFM) in Sarawak, Malaysia, offers a weekend of music indulgence that has excited visitors from across the world who keep returning for more every year since its inception in 1998. Unlike the many well-known A-list festivals such as Glastonbury, Tomorrowland or Coachella, the RWFM is in a league of its own. Held in the middle of a tropical rainforest, the festival brings together an extensive stellar line-up of musicians representing a diverse range of musical styles of regions and cultures around the globe. These include traditional, ethnic and folk music, genres that are rarely played on your mainstream radio airwaves.

The home ground of the Rainforest World Music Festival – the Sarawak Cultural Village

Youtube

Being present at the festival is a truly immersive experience that seems to transport one to another world, away from the hustle bustle of the city. The festival takes place in the Sarawak Cultural Village, at the foot of Mount Santubong approximately 35 kilometres away from the city centre of Kuching. The Sarawak Cultural Village is a living museum and home to replicas of traditional houses of the Sarawak's ethnic groups such as Bidayuh, Iban, Orang Ulu and Melanau.

A sea of festival-goers dancing the night away at the music festival

RWMF

There are many musical instruments indigenous to Sarawak that are played at the festival, including the *Sape* lute, the *Selingut* (bamboo nose flute), the *Ruding* (a Bornean jaw harp) and the *Bidayuh* long drum. Most famous of all and quintessentially Sarawak, the *Sape* is a plucked string instrument of the Orang Ulu (known as 'upriver people' who are mainly 'Kayan' and 'Kenyah.') It is carved from a block of wood or a tree trunk with two strings for melody and the accompany string acts as rhythmic drones. It is said that the *Sape* is best enjoyed in a quiet evening sans any other noises aside from the little chatter amongst friends. Its gentle melody has the power to touch the heart of even the most hardened. At the festival, one can learn to play the *Sape* from the Orang Ulu or the musicians themselves. One will also realise that each *Sape* is unique in its design since the *Sape* is decorated accordingly to its owner's preference. Some may choose to just have a simple carving; others may incorporate various colors into the design.

The festival also features other Southeast Asian traditional musical instruments, including the *Khaen* (a gourd organ typically played in Northeastern Thailand and Laos), the *Gambus* (an Arab lute that is commonly played in traditional Malay and Indonesian music), the *Genggong* (a type of jaw harp originated from the Riau islands). And from the zither family, there is the *Chakhe* from Thailand as well as the *Kecapi* from Indonesia. Apart from these instruments, Southeast Asian performers enrich festival goers with other music experiences. For instance, the Orang Ulu and people from the different parts of the Philippine archipelago have a strong choral tradition. Led by a soloist, the group will in turn join in and harmonise seamlessly together in the chorus.

One of the many workshops at the Sarawak Cultural Village held during the festival

Beyond the music performances, festival goers are in for a visual treat for all three days from the beginning till the end. The clear blue sky acts as the backdrop to the soothing views of tall trees and shrouded green hills as one enters the Sarawak Cultural Village. Surrounding the lake inside the village are the traditional homes in the different earthy brown hues of the timbre and the dried leaves on the roof that help to break away from the monotony of the large green landscape. Delving deeper into the different houses, more colors emerge from bamboo carvings and painted wooden walls as well as colorful threads at the weaving looms.

A native performer with his Sape on stage at the festival

In the daytime, communal workshops are conducted in various houses to engage festival-goers and further enhance their local experiences. They can partake in group performance with the artistes, learn how to play the different and unique musical instruments, attend lifestyle and wellness classes, or pick up traditional dance lessons and handicraft of the indigenous tribes.

At many workshops, fine arts and crafts from Sarawak are displayed, including carved pottery, Orang Ulu's refined bead works of necklaces, Orang Iban's traditional costume, and the Bidayuh's *Kesah*, a mat known for its durability. On stage, both local and international musical acts adorn their traditional colorful clothes accompanied by their musical instruments. One could not miss the Sarawakians in action in their indigenous tribal wear and their head ornaments made of intricate bead works and bird feathers like pheasant or hornbill. Other than that, the silver headgear worn by many Orang Iban ladies makes them sparkle like a jewel as they move gracefully whilst dancing on stage.

The Rainforest Music Festival recently concluded its 21st edition on 13-15 July 2018 with the attendance of more than 20,000 people, young and old, from all walks of life. Despite bright laser lights and animated multimedia effects that accompanied stage acts, traditional music performances remained the star of the weekend. From At Adau's energetic performance with the *Sape* mashed with drums and electric guitar that got many on their feet screaming and singing together to the Philippines' Grace Nono's melodic yet powerful vocal accompanied by sacred voices and instruments from communities in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. It is a beautiful sight watching young ASEAN musicians on stage playing our traditional music in our native landscape. The Rainforest World Music Festival continues to be the valued venue to preserve the diverse, colourful and unique cultures and traditions not only of Sarawak but Southeast Asia as well.

Ms. Nur Aziemah Aziz is Research Officer at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Irrawaddy Dolphin

Orcaella brevirostris

Estimated numbers remaining in the wild:
300-327

Found in the Mekong River, Mahakam River
(Indonesia), Irrawaddy River (Myanmar) and
Malampaya Sound (Philippines)

The Irrawaddy Dolphins are part of the
freshwater dolphin family found in the shallow
rivers and coastal areas of South and Southeast
Asia. Unlike the typical porpoises with long
snout, they have high rounded forehead with a
short snout and have 12-19 teeth on each side of
their jaws. These shy dark grey dolphins with a
distinctive pale underside can grow up to 9 feet
and weigh up to 198 pounds. The Irrawaddy
Dolphin population is small and is scattered
over wide areas. Unfortunately, its numbers
in Southeast Asia have been dwindling due
to incidental death caused by fishing and
human activities, loss of habitat as a result of
deforestation, mining and dam construction.
(WWF, 2017)