ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 22 June 2020

Social Media and Thailand's Struggle over Public Space

Supalak Ganjanakhundee*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Political divisions, the economic downturn after 2006, and technological disruptions have enabled Thai authorities to limit public space for political discussion and expression.

- People in Thailand have turned to social media instead. At present, the hashtag (#) is a growing tool for all kinds of political expression, intruding even into the taboo issue of the monarchy.

- Facebook, YouTube, Line and Twitter are popular platforms for netizens to publicize their political views. Authorities under Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha have moved aggressively to put restrictions on these channels.

- Netizens in the country are now seeking new platforms for political expression.

* Supalak Ganjanakhundee is Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS –Yusof Ishak Institute, and was formerly editor of The Nation *(Bangkok).*

INTRODUCTION

When Twitter opened an official account in Thailand on 13 May, it caught flak with the hashtag #maiaotwitterthailand (#rejectTwitterThailand). Millions of users in Thailand feared losing the freedom of expression that they had enjoyed on the social media platform in recent years. The company said that the dual-language account @TwitterThailand was launched to keep users and partners in the country updated about its marketing and situations such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The move received negative reaction for being linked to previous moves on the part of the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha to interfere in media content. Some Twitter users also noted that the TwitterThailand logo, a circle in the three colours of the Thai national flag, was similar to the logo of the ruling Phalang Pracharat party.[1]

There was a back-story to these reactions. On 12 February, Minister of Digital Economy and Society Buddhipongse Punnakantahad had tweeted that he was seeking cooperation from Twitter executives in Singapore to combat fake news after misinformation had emerged about shootings in the Northeastern city of Khorat and about the coronavirus outbreak in Thailand.[2] Exasperating netizens, the minister later said that he was not aware of the launch of the official Twitter account in Thailand, and felt no obligation to explain any linkages between the social media firm and the Thai government.

The Prayut government's move to tackle fake news and Twitter's policy to engage with its users both sounded rational. However, social media users in the country have little trust in either the authorities or social media networks mainly because the two sides seem increasingly to be cooperating with each other to restrict users' freedom, notably in the realm of political expression.

This paper looks into social media as a public sphere, where people individually or collectively express, discuss, share and deliberate on information, ideas, views and opinions. The concept of the public sphere as advanced by the German intellectual Jürgen Habermas refers to a utopia in which people can address public issues without the interference of state or capital. In his own words, Habermas said, "*Les hommes*, private gentlemen or *die Privatleute* made up the public not just in the sense that power and prestige of public office were held in suspense; economic dependencies also in principle had no influence. Laws of the market were suspended as were laws of the state."[3] For Habermas, the mass media, and notably the press, were a public sphere in appearance only.[4] They were more or less influenced, interfered with and restricted by the state and their owners. While the concept of the public sphere has been modified and applied in different ways to explain social movements and the mass media, this paper puts it into the Thai context to examine the interplay between the government of Prime Minister Prayut and media users, in a situation where the former wants to restrict if not fully control that sphere, and where the latter try to expand it for their own reasons.

A CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Factors that have diminished the role of traditional mainstream media in the political public sphere in this century include political division, the economic downturn after 2006, and

various technological disruptions. This climate has permitted authorities to tighten control over the media.

Mainstream media — defined here as outlets operated by professional journalists who report via print or broadcast or online for a living — can be divided into two groups. One favours the established elite, and the other is oppositional. Duncan McCargo was correct in saying that in the early 2000s media outlets sympathetic to then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra enjoyed insider status, but that after the 2006 military coup that removed Thaksin from power, positions were reverse. "Newspapers were forced to make their political orientation more explicit rather than the studied fence-sitting of the polyvalence era. *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* moved gradually into the pro-Thaksin camp, whereas English-language *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* followed *Phujatkan* over to the anti-Thaksin side."[5] A similar divide was also seen among the broadcast outlets owned by these respective media groups. Media personnel from the Manager Media Group, the Nation Multimedia Group and Post Publishing, as well as many other individual journalists, actively participated in protests against Thaksin and his allies during the political battles after the 2006 coup—in 2007-2008, 2009-2010 and 2013-2014. Some of them received positions in the National Assembly, as constitution drafters and members of various committees under the governments installed after the coups of 2006 and 2014. A majority of mainstream media outlets have today been effectively co-opted by or aligned themselves with the authorities and Prayut's government. Self-censorship is a common practice among them. Meanwhile, the hard-core pro-Thaksin, pro-poor, pro-Red Shirt movement created its own media outlets such as Voice TV, Asia Update, UDDTV, Peace TV and People's TV. Such outlets — like Bluesky TV, backed by the conservative Democrat Party — functioned as propaganda machines for those that they supported, rather than as mass media. The authorities imposed restrictions mostly on social and new media, and of course also on media in the so-called pro-Thaksin camp.

The economic downturn experienced since that camp's political setback in 2006 also contributed to the decline in the number of mainstream media outlets in Thailand, notably in the press and broadcast spheres. A few dozen print-media outlets, including daily newspapers, have ceased publication since the 2014 coup because of drastically diminished revenues from advertising and sharply shrinking circulations. Advertising revenues for print media dramatically declined from 13 billion baht in 2014 to 3.7 billion for newspapers and 816 million baht for journals and magazines in 2019.[6] The private broadcast industry was also subject to the same trend. A total of seven digital television networks were forced to shut down in the second half of 2019 after suffering big operating losses since early 2014. Investing in digital television was regarded as a big mistake in the Thai media industry, as the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission (NBTC) set very expensive license fees and allowed operators to bid for many licenses in areas with no business viability. The Nation Multimedia Group, for example, committed to pay for two licenses: 2.2 billion baht for a high definition channel and 1.3 billion baht for a standard definition channel. Finally, when these businesses went into the red, many operators decided to return their licenses to the government. They managed to recover the sums that they had paid in previous years after long negotiations with the powerful NBTC, which fully controlled their business licenses and content.

Media operators mostly blamed technological disruptions for the decline of mainstream outlets, as advertising revenues, audiences and readers rapidly migrated to Internet-based new media since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and notably over the past decade to social media. Consumer behaviour has changed very swiftly, and people are now glued to their smart phones, rather than to the newspaper or to their television sets. Many media operators attempted to adapt to the new situation by launching websites and later by going onto social media, but perhaps it was too late or their approach was wrong; most of them simply moved old-fashioned content and style to the new platforms. Newspapers and television networks uploaded the same content onto the internet, albeit sometimes in greater volume and more speedily than was possible in the case of their original outlets. While they reached more readers and audiences, advertising revenues from their websites were considerably lower than what newspapers or on-air television had generated. Advertisers spend only a few thousand baht for a strip of banner on a website to reach a larger number of target readers, compared to the 100,000 baht and more which they had had to pay for a full-colour page in a newspaper. Click-based income went to Facebook and YouTube more than to Thai media companies, which were struggling to survive.

NEW MEDIA, NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

The advanced technology of new media has already changed the nature of mass communications from the passive transmission of information provided by journalists to something interactive that enables people to exercise their right of expression in areas related to their own interests. While the websites of mainstream print and broadcast media did feel it necessary to provide space for comment on their columns or news reports, this space remained limited as all media outlets had to operate under certain rules and regulations. Many topics such as the monarchy and religion to some extent were taboo in mainstream media. For this reason, stand-alone bulletin boards or Web boards on the Internet such as pantip.com, sanook.com, MThai.com, Fa Diaokan and Prachatai.com were more popular in the era prior to the emergence of social media in the second decade of this century. The popularity of Web boards did not last long, however. Many topics were subject to censorship, and some web administrators were arrested for allowing discussions of sensitive issues or taboo matters.

Initially, social media – and particularly the most popular platform in the country, Facebook — was an ideal platform for the egocentric, as they allowed users to publicize their private lives, personal ideas, views and emotions in various forms, be it in text or in visual and audio material, with much fewer restrictions than in the old-fashioned mainstream media. It took an individual only a few minutes to create an account, in order to express her- or himself – even using a pretentious or fake name as her or his pseudonym in order to act as journalist, writer, activist, politician, expert, guru, public figure — about things in the so-called virtual public sphere.

Of 52 million social media users on all major platforms in Thailand, or about 75 per cent of the total population of nearly 70 million, 94 per cent use Facebook. These people have about 47 million accounts, roughly the same number as YouTube accounts. Also, 85 per cent of Thai social media users use Line, and 55 per cent are on Twitter, according to Digital 2020 Global Digital Overview, as of January 2020.

Most Active Social Media Platforms (Percentage of Internet Users).
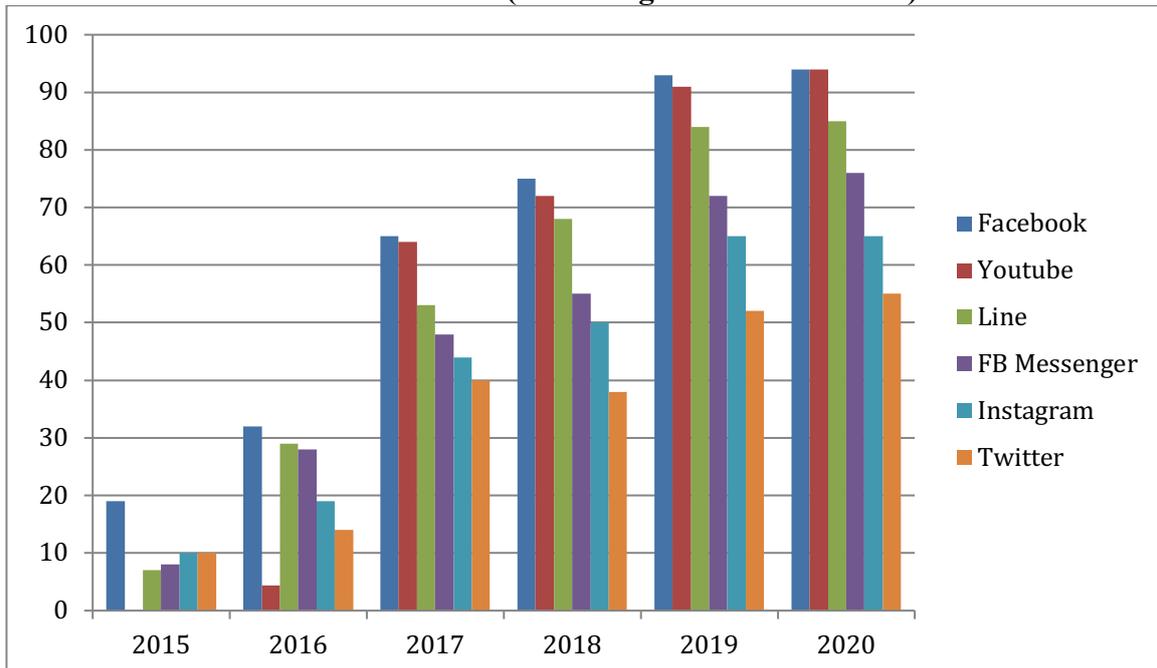
Source: Author's compilation from Global Digital Overview reports, 2015-2020 (https://datareportal.com/digital-in-thailand?rq=Thailand, last accessed 3 June 2020).

New media technology — notably Facebook and Twitter in the Thai context — provide what McCargo has called "a surrogate political space or mode of political participation".[7] While activists and politicians use social media in various ways, mostly for publicity and political participation, the public space for politics created by social media is virtual, not real. Aim Sinpeng found that social media were popular among members of the younger generation, who used them to participate in political protests before the 2014 military coup. Both then-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and protest leader Suthep Thuagsuban had a large number of followers for their respective Facebook pages. But, Aim concluded, active street protestors aligned with the anti-Thaksin People's Democratic Reform Committee and Yingluck's supporters in United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship were inactive on social media.[8]

Studying the campaigning for the March 2019 general elections, Anyarat Chattharakul reported that the now-dissolved Future Forward Party led by billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit used Facebook as its key platform in communicating with voters, while Twitter provided a platform for its candidates and voters to build a sense of collective identity and to establish virtual relationships. While Instagram was used largely for personal communications, first-time voters mainly turned to Twitter to speak their minds and to react to social and political issues trending at the time.[9] While the Future Forward Party was not the top vote-winner in the elections, Anyarat pointed out that its campaign demonstrated that social media had become a significant transformative factor in Thai electoral politics.

Social media are a powerful instrument particularly for those aged 18-44. The users have a certain degree of liberty to address, express and discuss issues, including taboo subjects — something that could never happen in the mainstream media. A series of student protests

known as "flash mobs" in late February and early March, although physically limited to campuses, had a much broader presence online.

Since the 2014 military coup, people have increasingly been using features and functions provided by social media applications to react to restrictions on free expression. The hashtag has been a popular instrument of protest in recent years, as people realized that long message postings on Facebook were easily blocked and no longer safe for account owners who posted political messages. The hash (#) symbol was a type of tag used in social media, notably on Twitter, to help other users find messages on the platforms easily. Movements and trends in hashtag use in different languages around the world may be monitored via the 'trends24.in' website. While Twitter is usually intertwined with pop culture, hashtags linked to political messages have often made headlines in traditional mainstream media in recent years. For example, the hashtag #prathetkumi (#mycountrygot) hit the top of the charts and was in the headlines in Thailand in October 2018, when Deputy National Police chief Police General Srivara Ransibrahmanakul threatened to investigate whether the lyrics of the rap song "Prathetkumi" composed by the Rap Against Dictatorship group and uploaded on YouTube were critical of the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta.[10] Many messages protesting against the junta and Prayut's government have hit the charts and headlines since then. These include #lueanmaemeungsi (#delayyourmom) in January 2019 when Prayut was about to delay general election and #farakpho (#Falovessugardaddy) as Thanathorn's supporters used wording from a soap opera as a metaphor to support the politician in the general elections. The hashtags #RIPThailand and #PrayutGetOut were hot when Prayut was picked to serve as premier again in June last year. The hashtag #ratthabanhengsuai (#crappygovernment) hit a total of 400,000 appearances on Twitter as an expression of anger against the government's mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020.

The monarchy is a highly sensitive and taboo issue in Thailand, but public expression relating to it has appeared through hashtags in social media in recent years. The hashtag #khabuansadet (#royalmotorcade) hit the top of the charts on 2 October 2019 after unusual traffic congestion in Bangkok which people understood to have resulted from roads being blocked to facilitate a royal motorcade.[11] The hashtag #pitko (#closetheisland) hit the charts in January 2020, when authorities responsible for the Hat Noppharat Thara - Mu Koh Phi Phi National Park in the South urged people to refrain from travelling to the island as Princess Sirivannavari was diving there. [12] The hashtag #kasatmiwaithammai (#whydoweneedaking) was used more than 1.2 million times in 24 hours on 22 March 2020, after people learned that King Vejiralongkorn was spending his time mostly in Germany during the deadly virus pandemic.[13]

RESTRICTIONS

No authoritarian regime tolerates such challenges for long. Following the 2014 coup, the NCPO junta revamped the governance of digital communications and the prosecution of media users to suppress undesirable freedom.

Set up in June 2016, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (MDES) replaced the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology. It was authorized to enforce the

draconian Computer Crimes Act, amended in 2017 to permit severe punishment of those who transmit improper messages via computer networks. The group Thai Lawyers for Human Rights has documented at least 197 cases of people charged under the computer act since the coup. "From July 2019 to April 2020, at least 42 people have been charged with the Computer Crimes Act for expressing their opinions or publishing certain information online. Out of the 42, 37 were accused of sharing misinformation or 'fake news'".[14]

The MDES set up an Anti-Fake News Center in November 2019 to tackle the spread of misinformation and to correct what it deems 'fake news', as well as to prosecute wrong-doers. However, the centre in fact sought to play a role in monopolizing truth, sometimes creating confusion as it labelled some claims that were true but premature; that had yet to be verified; or that were overly critical; as fake news. For example, media reports on 23 January 2020 that the public health ministry had ordered the removal of thermoscan equipment from Suvarnanbhumi Airport after the last flight from the epidemic centre of Wuhan in China were marked by the centre as fake news on its website on 25 January. This was despite the fact that the reports were filed from the airport and quoted a senior official of the public health ministry as their source. Observers said this happened because of a weakness in government communication.[15] In another case, the Anti-Fake News Center had to offer an apology to the public after labelling as fake news a report that an African plague had killed dozens of horses. The report, widely shared on social media was later confirmed to be true.[16] In early May, activist Srisuwan Janya lodged a complaint with the national anti-graft body, accusing the centre of fabricating fake news in favour of the government, rather than combating it.[17] Thai Lawyers for Human Rights reported that many people were charged with spreading misinformation for sharing unverified information that contained criticism of the government or mentioned the monarchy ungraciously.[18]

The NTBC, which was restructured in June 2017 to regulate broadcasting and Internet-based new media, has played a significant role in blocking unwanted URLs. Freedom House reported that in May 2017 members of the Thai Internet Service Providers Association blocked access to over 6,300 URLs pursuant to NBTC orders. The sites were deemed to be threats to national security, a category that can include *lèse majesté*.[19]

Security agencies also do their part. Opposition member of parliament Wiroj Lakkhana-adisorn accused the Internal Security Operations Command during a censure debate in February of misusing the national budget and resources to conduct information operations on social media against activists and social influencers. The operations were conducted via three Line chat groups, members of which created two accounts on Facebook to tackle the government's critics.[20]

Social media giant Facebook indicated in its transparency report that it would meet Thai government requests to preserve account information pending the "formal legal process". There were 107 requests between January 2013 and December 2019.[21] As of the end of May 2020, the popular platforms Line and Twitter had received no requests from Thai authorities to suspend or remove content from an account. However, ambiguous statements from the government and the operator after the launch of Twitter's official account in Thailand served to create more mistrust among netizens. This resulted in their migration to other crypto-networks such as Minds, in their search for a new public sphere. The chief executive officer of Minds, Bill Ottman, said in his account on 20 May, after the creation of 100,000

new accounts in one day that "we are experiencing a surge of Thai people seeking internet freedom. Welcome #mindsth".[22]

CONCLUSION

Traditional mainstream media have lost their role in providing space for people to exercise freedom of expression on political matters. This has resulted from the fact that media owners and working journalists have been adopting the stance of the authorities and operating under increasing restrictions. The economic downturn after 2006, along with various technological disruptions, also figured in the decline of mainstream media outlets. These forces paved the way for social media to function as a new forum for people seeking alternative platforms for political expression.

However, this new public sphere is still far from a Habermasian utopia. Prime Minister Prayut's government has used all possible means to restrict and limit, if not fully control, the new public domain. In addition to technological instruments that regulate the platforms, prosecution is employed to suppress freedom of expression. Since Facebook is restricted and Twitter tends to comply with the authorities, people in Thailand are looking for other least restricted and decentralized platforms for political expression.

---

[1] "Thawittoe prap nayobai khwampensuantua songphon hai phu chai bang suan chuankan plian plaetfom" [Twitter adjusts privacy policy, users move to other platforms] *BBC Thai*, 21 May 2020 (https://www.bbc.com/thai/52663959 accessed 3 June 2020).

[2] See the minister's Twitter account at https://twitter.com/BeePunnakanta.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p.36.

[4] Ibid., p.171.

[5] Duncan J. McCargo, "New Media, New Partnership: Divided Virtual Politics In and Beyond Thailand", *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 4138-4157, p.4140.

[6] "Utsahakam khosana pi 63 ding 'thiwi' so satsuan tam 50 % khrang raek" [Advertizing industry dramatically shrinks in 2020, TV's share lower than 50 per cent for the first time], *Krungthep thurakit*, 18 December 2019 (https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/858728, accessed 26 May 2020).

[7] McCargo, p. 4150.

[8] Aim Sinpeng, "Participatory Inequality in Online and Offline Political Engagement in Thailand", *Pacific Affairs* 90, 2 (June 2017): pp.253-274, p. 267.

[9] Anyarat Chattharakul, "Social Media: Hashtag #Futurista", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, 2 (August 2019, roundtable on the March 2019 Thai elections):170-175, p.172.

[10] "Titchat! Haehaetthaek #prathetkumi lang Srivara huem! Phlengni at khat khamsang kho so cho" [Hashtag #Prathetkumi hits the chart as Srivara threatens it might violate NCPO order], *Khaosod Online*, 26 October 2013 (https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_1738228, accessed 28 May 2020).

[11] "Chak #khabuansadet thueng #SaveTwitterTH koet arai khuen kap thawittaphop thai nai rop 24 chuamong" [From #RoyalMotorcade to #SaveTwittterTH, what happened in the Thai

Twittersphere in 24 hours?], *BBC Thai*, 2 October 2019 (https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-49904528, accessed 28 May 2020).

[12] "#Pitko khuen andap nueng thren nai thawittoe khon khut khao kao chao farangset nap saen long chue tan phaen pi tha trap chao sa-u" [#closeisland trends at number one on Twitter, people dig up news archives from when hundreds of thousands of French people opposed plan to close beach for Saudi prince], *Prachatai*, 1 January 2020 (https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/01/85743, accessed 28 May 2020).

[13] "Coronavirus Pandemic Prompts Rare Questioning of Thai Monarchy", *Straits Times*, 23 March 2020 (https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/coronavirus-pandemic-prompts-rare-questioning-of-thai-monarchy, accessed 28 May 2020).

[14] Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, "As if the NCPO Never Left: Six Years after the Coup and the Persistence of Human Rights Violations", 22 May 2020 (https://www.tlhr2014.com/?p=17808&lang=en accessed 28 May 2020).

[15] "Sarup praden ron yokloek chai 'khrueang truat unhaphum' khatkrong phu tit chuea khorona khao luang rue ratthaban rai thitthang khao" [Hot issue of removal of thermoscan, fake news or government with no direction on providing information], *Voice TV*, 25 January 2020 (https://voicetv.co.th/read/M6AykbliO, accessed 28 May 2020).

[16] "Sun tan khao plom kho aphai lang fant hong 'kanlarok ma' khao plom sutthai khao ching" [Anti Fake News Center apologises after African horse sickness confirmed true], *Matichon*, 4 April 2020 (https://www.matichon.co.th/local/news_2123428, accessed 29 March 2020).

[17] "'Srisuwan' lui rong po po cho sop sun feknio bitbuean khao plom sia eng" ["Srisuwan" lodges complaint with National Anti-Corruption Commission over Anti Fake News Center manipulation], *Khom chat luek*, 8 May 2020 (https://www.komchadluek.net/news/politic/430170, accessed 29 May 2020).

[18] Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, *op.cit.*

[19] Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2019" (https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-net/2019, accessed 28 May 2020).

[20] "PM denies roles in Army 'cyber-war' on critics", *The Nation Thailand*, 27 February 2020 (https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30382956, accessed 28 May 2020).

[21] Facebook, "Thailand, July-December 2019", *Facebook Transparency*, n.d. (https://transparency.facebook.com/government-data-requests/country/TH, accessed 28 May 2020).

[22] Bill Ottman's message appeared on the site https://www.minds.com/ottman/ (accessed 2 June 2020). It was quoted by online media, including Kanop Sophonvijit, "Freedom Rating: How Free are the Social Media Platforms?", *This Rupt*, 26 May 2020 (https://thisrupt.co/tech/freedom-rating-social-media/, accessed 2 June 2020).

****

To read earlier issues of ISEAS Perspective please click here:
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective

Preceding three issues of ISEAS Perspective:

2020/66 "Urgent Need to Strengthen State Capacity: Learning from Indonesia's COVID-19 Crisis" by Yanuar Nugroho and Siwage Dharma Negara
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_66.pdf

2020/65 "Unemployment among Malaysia's Youth: Structural Trends and Current Challenges" by Lee Hwok Aun
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_65.pdf

2020/64 "COVID-19: Balancing the Infection and the Misery Curves" by Jayant Menon
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_64.pdf