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**USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO FOSTER
DEMOCRACY: THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF CIVIL
SOCIETY ADVOCACY IN ASIA**

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Using Information Technology to Foster Democracy: The Promise and Perils of Civil Society Advocacy in Asia

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Considerable debate exists about the potential contribution that the global information revolution offers the independent or nonprofit sector, especially in the developing world, for strengthening civil society and fostering democracy. Innovations in information technologies such as satellite broadcasting, mobile phones, computers and the Internet connect people around the world and offer a means for addressing important societal problems (Gore 1995). Civil society organizations – comprised of community, nongovernmental, public interest and philanthropic organizations – are now using these information technologies to educate and mobilize citizens, shape public debate about the common good, and improve their advocacy for environmental protection, human rights, political liberalization and democratic governance (Everard 1999; Calame 2000; Falk 2000; Ferdinand 2000). Yet, the transformative potential and promise of the global information revolution remains elusive to most of the world's people as access to these new information technologies are limited to relatively few organizations who may or may not be "legitimate" voices for civil society and the public good.

The Internet played a pivotal role in mobilizing citizens and civil society organizations for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which grew from an idea to the signing of an international treaty signed by more than 120 countries and over 1,000 organizations in over 60 countries, and culminating in the Nobel Peace Prize in less than six years (Price 1998; Florini 2000; Rutherford 2000). The Internet enabled effective civil society advocacy by a global network of NGOs and citizen's groups, which leaked and publicized a proposed agreement to expand the rules for foreign direct investment and economic globalization, ultimately stopping

international action by governments on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) (Kobrin 1998; Deibert 2000). At the same time, *cyber-advocacy* has raised important concerns and perils for civil society organizations as well. Only the larger, well-funded few organizations, often based in developing country capitals, possess the technology to engage in advocacy and assume the (self-appointed) role of defining the common good. Due to the inroads achieved to date by civil society organizations in Asia, for example, authoritarian governments in the region have monitored and even banned civil society advocacy via the Internet in China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (UNESCO 1997; Anonymous 2000; Dalpino 2000; Hartford 2000).

These differing perspectives shape the debate about information technology's role in enhancing civil society organizations efforts to foster democracy. This paper offers insights and lessons about information technologies in informing and transforming nonprofit advocacy strategies and practices in promoting democratic governance in the developing world, with a particular attention to Asia. Drawing directly on the experience of civil society organizations in using information technologies in Asia, especially the Internet, it examines how they have promoted democratic debate and organized effective advocacy efforts at the national and regional levels. The paper also looks at how technology may be used to strengthen civil society and promote democracy in other authoritarian contexts in Asia such as China, Myanmar and Singapore. Specifically, the paper examines how civil society organizations can use information technologies to spur public debate about the common good, define the public policy agenda, and promote innovative citizen initiatives that foster democracy.

Internet politics have taken many new forms, from *cyber-nationalism*, where groups halfway around the globe advocate for self-determination for their brothers and sisters (Anderson 1992), to *cyber-democracy* where various forms of direct representation and advocacy of

people's interests can occur (Hill and Hughes 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Ryan 1998). By strategically using the Internet to target international lobbying efforts, growing networks of private citizens, researchers and nongovernmental leaders both within and beyond Asia have emerged on issues ranging from human rights throughout the region, to opposition to the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and independence for East Timor (CCPJ and ISAI 1997; Bello 2000). New cyberspace communities are emerging linking people and NGO engaged in effective issue advocacy on issues of promoting electoral reform in Indonesia and Thailand and publicizing (Basuki 1998; Eng 1998), and opposing corruption in the Philippines (Chandrasekaran 2000).

The Case of Asia: Civil Society Advocacy and Internet Politics

The Asian region, due to its level of economic and technological development and large middle class, has a fairly well developed Internet infrastructure and large number of users compared to Latin America and Africa (UNESCO 1997; Long and Hoon 1999). In addition, civil society organizations in Asia are more numerous and have exhibited a strong organizational capacity relative to their counterparts elsewhere in the developing world (Riker 1995b,c).

Freedom of expression has become an issue around the world, but especially in the Asian region where sensitivities over political issues (and domestic as well as foreign advocacy efforts) are of concern to government leaders (Human Rights Watch 1996; 2000a). Some governments in Asia, such as China, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), and Singapore, have sought to regulate access to and to monitor the content of the Internet (UNESCO 1997; 1999; Koehane and Nye 1998; Human Rights Watch 2000b).

Regulating the Internet in Asia: Stifling or Silencing Dissent?

The regulatory approach adopted by governments varies across the Asian region. Governments differ in their efforts to regulate universal access to the Internet, to protect citizen's rights of citizens to freedom of expression (and communication) and to maintain control over disclosure of public information. In Freedom House's worldwide study of the Internet, Sussman found that: "In Burma, owners must report computers to the government or face a 15-year prison term. The Burmese government's 'cyberspace warfare center' counterattacks against possible dissent by hacking the computers that receive or send forbidden messages" (Sussman 2000:2).

The means of government regulation take several forms:

1. *Controlling access to the Internet* (e.g., registration of all users, both individuals and businesses in China, by the police; use of approved Internet service providers (ISPs) only; licensing of all ISPs; control of modem lines and blocking access to international Internet connections and web sites; government-imposed economic barriers limiting international access; screening, blocking, or shutting down sites);
2. *Monitoring and surveillance of the Internet* (e.g., government monitoring and interception of e-mail communications for "security" purposes);

3. *Restricting the approved content of the Internet* (e.g., using software filters to censor politically sensitive e-mail and the content of web sites; requiring government approval for news postings) (Human Rights Watch 2000a); and
4. *Punishing perpetrators and “dissidents” who use the Internet for (nonviolent) political purposes* (e.g., targeting groups that circulate “disinformation” and promote anti-government propaganda).

In the latter case, for example, China has detained and prosecuted pro-democracy leaders who have used the Internet (Dobson 1998; Human Rights Watch 2000b). The Government of Malaysia has issued threats to cut scholarships for students abroad who criticize the government on the Internet (CCPJ/ISAI 1997). In July 2000, the Government of Malaysia announced that it would fine and imprison anyone spreading lies or making threats on the Internet. The focus has been on radical Islamic groups and nongovernmental activists opposed to the policies of the Mahathir government (Associated Press 2000).

Civil Society Advocacy in Asia: Establishing A Counter-Discourse to Government

Despite government efforts to regulate them, civil society organizations in Asia engaged in advocacy have created networks of resistance to government policies and practices and used information technologies as a means to promote a counter-discourse on human rights, economic development and democracy. The issue of civil society advocacy for democracy should be framed within the context of *political space*, a process whereby government and civil society seek to define the terms of debate. Political space refers to the arena in which civil society actors may undertake initiatives independently vis-à-vis government (Riker 1995a:23). When civil society actors successfully engage in advocacy, they are “expanding the boundaries of acceptable political discourse, and redefining state-civil society relations in new ways” (Riker 1995c:191).

The modes of successful civil society advocacy (and resistance to government regulation) include:

1. *Providing alternative sources of information counter to government position* (e.g., using international sites to avoid domestic control; serving as a watchdog over government policies, practices and corruption);
2. *Mobilizing citizens for collective action* (e.g., protest of government policies Korea in and the Philippines; cell phone and e-mail campaigns to get action or change conduct of government officials; overwhelming government web sites with high volume of messages or users to protest government policies);
3. *Protecting the privacy and anonymity of citizens or “dissidents”* (e.g., encryption of communications; providing alternate safe sites for anonymous advocacy)

Mobilizing Democracy in Indonesia

In Indonesia, government-banned newspapers sprouted sites on the Internet to report critically on the Suharto government (Neumann 2000). Interviews carried on the Internet with leading human rights and democratic advocates provided people with an alternative perspective and counter-discourse to the government. Leading NGOs established Internet networks to keep each other and citizens informed of developments and citizen protests across the country (Basuki 1998). During the spring of 1998, thousands of students organized peaceful demonstrations at over 80 universities calling for political reform and for President Suharto to step down. What had started as campus-based demonstrations culminated in sustained public protests throughout the country by early May. In the capital city of Jakarta, students were emboldened to take to the streets in active displays of “people power” demanding *reformasi* or political reform. Despite government attempts to silence news accounts of these events, independent journalists, NGO leaders and students used the Internet to inform and to mobilize the growing public opposition throughout the country, ultimately leading to President Suharto’s decision to resign (Eng

1998:20-1). Subsequent government actions to remove restrictions on the press have led to strengthening civil society organizations advocating for democratic reforms throughout Indonesia.

“Instant Protests” in the Philippines

In the Philippines, political activists have strategically used cell phones with text messaging capacities to mobilize “instant protests” against former President Estrada over allegations that he accepted \$12 million in bribes. Alex Magno, a professor of political science at the University of Philippines “It’s like pizza delivery. You get a rally in 30 minutes – delivered to you” (Chandrasekaran 2000). Text messaging via cell phones has surpassed e-mail as the primary mode of daily communication for “many Filipinos who do not have computers with Internet connections either at home or at work” (Ibid). The impact of this technology for mobilizing collective action is considerable as the initial message is forwarded to one’s network of friends, thus often creating a high level of credibility for the information and proposed action.

Policy Implications

The new information technologies offer both promise and peril for civil society organizations engaged in advocating for democracy in Asia. These technologies offer the promise for new advocacy and organizational strategies to influence political leaders and government policies at multiple levels. Special efforts are required to provide more civil society organizations with access to these technologies and to train them in their potential uses for effective advocacy in fostering democracy, especially at the community, provincial and national levels. Both domestic and international actors in civil society need to be vigilant to ensure that any government attempts to regulate the Internet do not put in peril these groups’ (and their leaders’) freedom of expression for non-violent advocacy. Throughout Asia, many civil society

organizations are hammering out a democratic discourse daily through ongoing debates and struggles to ensure sufficient political space for their activities. Information technologies offer an important means to advance democratic reforms and to serve the public good.

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