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PERSPECTIVE

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How Means for Digital Repression in Southeast Asia Have Unfolded in Recent Times

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A man watches a video on misinformation on the social media platform TikTok on his mobile phone in Hanoi, Vietnam, on 6 October 2023. (Photo by Nhac NGUYEN/AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Many Southeast Asian countries have made significant strides in developing their digital infrastructure and rolling out e-government services. However, along with these advances have been signs of regression in terms of internet freedom, in line with global trends.

- This Perspective provides a deeper analysis of the current state of digital repression in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it examines the various states' capabilities to exercise digital repression and their actual practice of it.

- In terms of the capacity to control digital infrastructure, most Southeast Asian countries seem to have bolstered their capabilities in the past decade; and there seems to be no discernible divide between high-income and low-income countries, or even regime types.

- This corroborates findings that digital repression is ubiquitous as well as reinforcing the "need-based" logic of state repression – i.e., that political control and survival drive states to repress their people, or, in this case, build capacity in anticipation of security threats.

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INTRODUCTION

Many Southeast Asian countries have made significant strides in developing their digital infrastructure and rolling out e-government services. The region's E-government Development Index (EDGI) in 2022[1] was higher than the world average. Furthermore, over half of the region saw an improvement in its EDGI score in this round of the survey. However, along with these advances, there have been signs of regression in terms of internet freedom, in line with global trends. Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net (FOTN)*[2] reported in 2023 that global internet freedom has been on a downward trend for 13 consecutive years, coinciding with the observable democratic erosion worldwide.[3] Countries were rated based on three key aspects of digital development: obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights. Countries that score between 100-70 are considered to be "Free"; whereas those that score between 69-40 are "Partly Free" and scores of 39-0 are categorised as "Not Free" countries. Based on the report, the bulk of Southeast Asian countries were classified as "Partly Free". Among the eight ASEAN countries listed in the data, Malaysia and the Philippines scored the highest while Myanmar scored the lowest.

It appears that while states have improved their digital architecture to provide better public services and develop their digital economy, the bolstered digital capacity can also be used as an instrument of state repression to infringe on citizens' rights. While the literature, markedly by works of Davenport,[4] highlights the use of violence as a central feature of state repression, defining it as "the threat or use of physical violence by state actors against civilians in response to perceived challenges to the ruling regime", its contemporary iterations emphasise the broader repertoire of state actions, including non-violent methods such as surveillance, censorship, and control of information flows. The term digital repression thus encompasses a range of actions and policies employed by governments to suppress opposition, including the use of digital technologies.

Table 1 below further explores the state of digital freedom in Southeast Asia. Most Southeast Asian countries either saw a drop in FOTN scores from 2022 to 2023 or no progress, except for Malaysia and Cambodia. There also seems to be variations in how countries perform in different aspects of digital freedom once we look at the composite indexes. For instance, Malaysia has seen a 2-point improvement in its FOTN score and now ties with the Philippines as the best-performing countries in the region due to its ability to reduce the obstacles to online access by expanding 4G mobile connection and ensuring access to stable internet connection nationwide.[5] The number of individuals given prison terms or held in pretrial detention for online activities has decreased, leading to an improvement in the parameter measuring violations of user rights.[6]

Table 1: FOTN Score and its Composites in Southeast Asia, by Country[7]

Country Name	FOTN Total Score		Obstacles to Access		Limits on Content		Violations of User Rights	
	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
Cambodia	43	44	13	13	18	17	12	14
Indonesia	49	47	14	14	17	17	18	16
Laos								
Malaysia	59	61	18	19	22	22	19	20
Myanmar	12	10	2	2	6	5	4	3
Philippines	65	61	17	16	26	23	22	22
Singapore	54	54	19	19	17	17	18	18
Thailand	39	39	16	16	14	14	9	9
Timor-Leste								
Vietnam	22	22	12	12	6	6	4	4

Source: Raw data from Freedom House excluded Laos and Timor-Leste; table compiled by the author

Note: Green shading means a year-over-year (YoY) improvement; red means regression; and yellow means no change

This Perspective provides a deeper analysis of the current state of digital repression in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it examines the various states' capabilities to exercise digital repression and their actual practice of it.

DIGITAL REPRESSION: TYPES AND MEASURES

According to *The Rise of Digital Repression*, digital repression tactics can be grouped into five categories: surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecutions of online users.[8] This article draws on data from the *Digital Society Project (DSP)*[9] to discuss developments pertaining to digital repression for all ASEAN member states plus Timor Leste between 2010-2023. (Note: The data set excludes Brunei Darussalam.) However, for the purpose of this paper, these tactics have been regrouped bi-dimensionally based on the level at which the manipulation takes place. Furthermore, the indicators of DSP also distinguish capacity from actual actions, which is particularly useful; just because a certain state has a high digital repression capacity does not mean that it will practice such tactics more frequently than its lower-capacity counterparts, and vice versa. The measurements[10] used to benchmark the trend of digital repression in this paper are laid out on Table 2.

Table 2: Types and Measures of Digital Repression

	Level of Manipulation	
	Infrastructural	*Informational*
Capacity	• Internet filtering capability • Internet shutdown capability	• Social media monitoring capability
Practice	• Internet filtering practice • Internet shutdown practice • Social media monitoring practice	• Domestic dis/misinformation campaigns by state

Source: data from the Digital Society Project; categorisation modified from Feldstein[11]

In brief, infrastructural manipulation as a tactic of digital repression refers to states attempting to capture the digital infrastructure in order to control the information/communication grid of the nation. On the other hand, informational manipulation—commonly known as information operations (IOs)—is a method used to alter the information architecture with dis/misinformation. So, while informational manipulations influence *what kind* of information individuals get, infrastructural tactics aim to control *how/whether* they get that information.

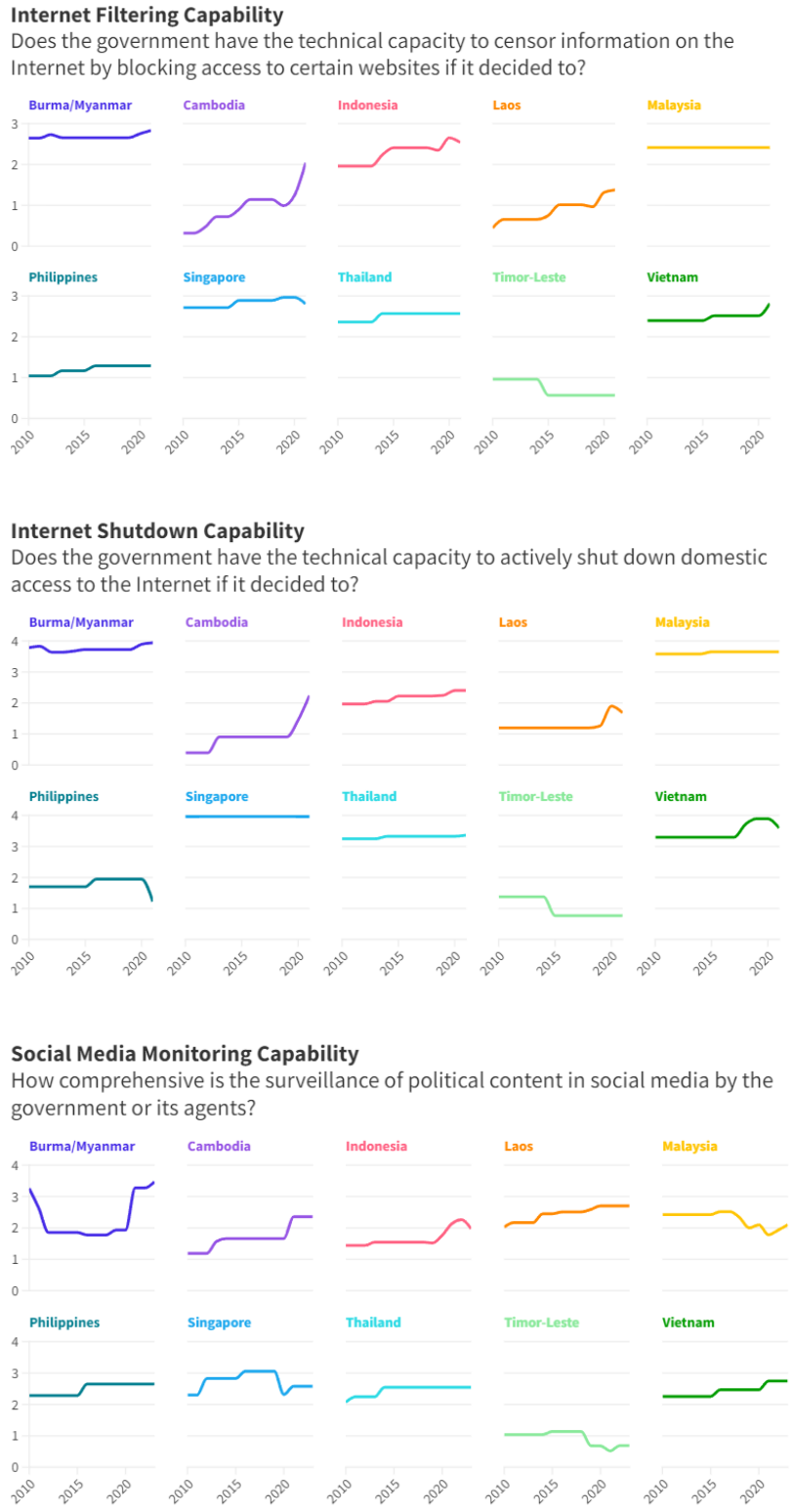

Figure 2: Infrastructural Repressive Capability Metrics

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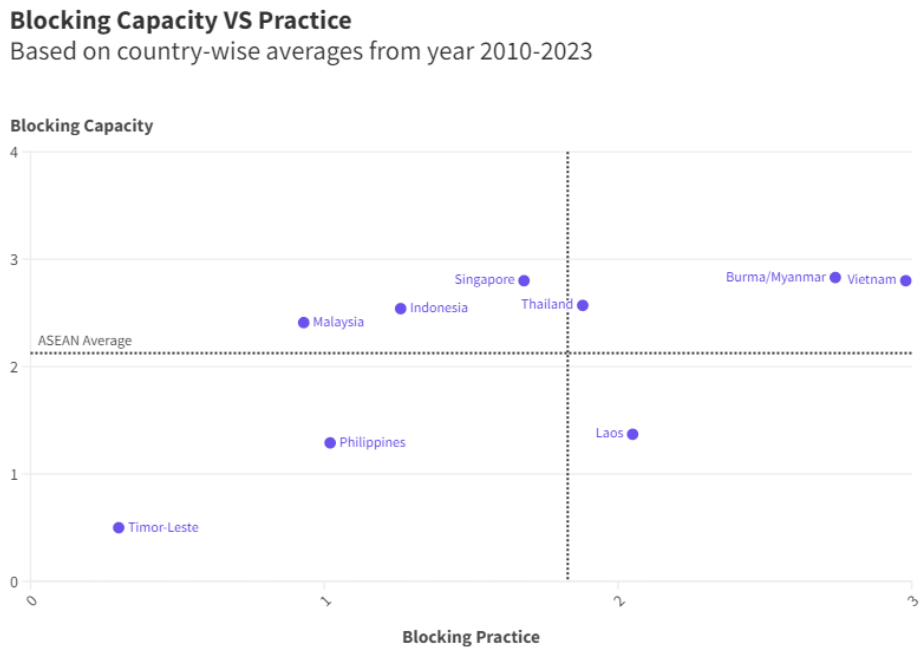
In terms of the capacity to control digital infrastructure through internet shutdowns, filtering and social media monitoring, most Southeast Asian countries seem to have bolstered their capabilities in the past decade; especially since 2015. While different countries may experience digital development differently, one of the global phenomena of that decade was the emergence of social media in the political arena, particularly as a tool for social movements. The Arab Spring that saw the overthrow of some dictators in 2010 serves as an archetypal example of digital activism. For a region-specific case, one can look to the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) protest in Thailand in 2013 to see how social media was used to mobilise and coordinate collective actions against the sitting government.[12] As we know, governments are quick learners when it comes to what concerns their survival. Therefore, it is plausible that the empowering potential of the internet and social media for ordinary citizens to go up against their government incentivised the enhancement of infrastructural controls in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, data shown in Figure 2 does not illustrate a discernible divide between high-income versus low-income countries, or even regime types. Myanmar, the poorest ASEAN country in 2023,[13] has almost the same capability of internet filtering and shutdown as Singapore, the region's richest country; and even surpasses it in social media monitoring capability. This corroborates existing studies showing that digital repression is ubiquitous as well as reinforcing of the "need-based" logic of state repression that political control and survival can drive states to repress their people, or in this case, build their capacity in anticipation of security threats.[14]

However, having high capacity does not ascertain action. Particularly, having the ability to block access to websites or shutting down the internet entirely does not mean that a government would act accordingly. Figure 3 below compares the repressive capacities with the breadth of practices.



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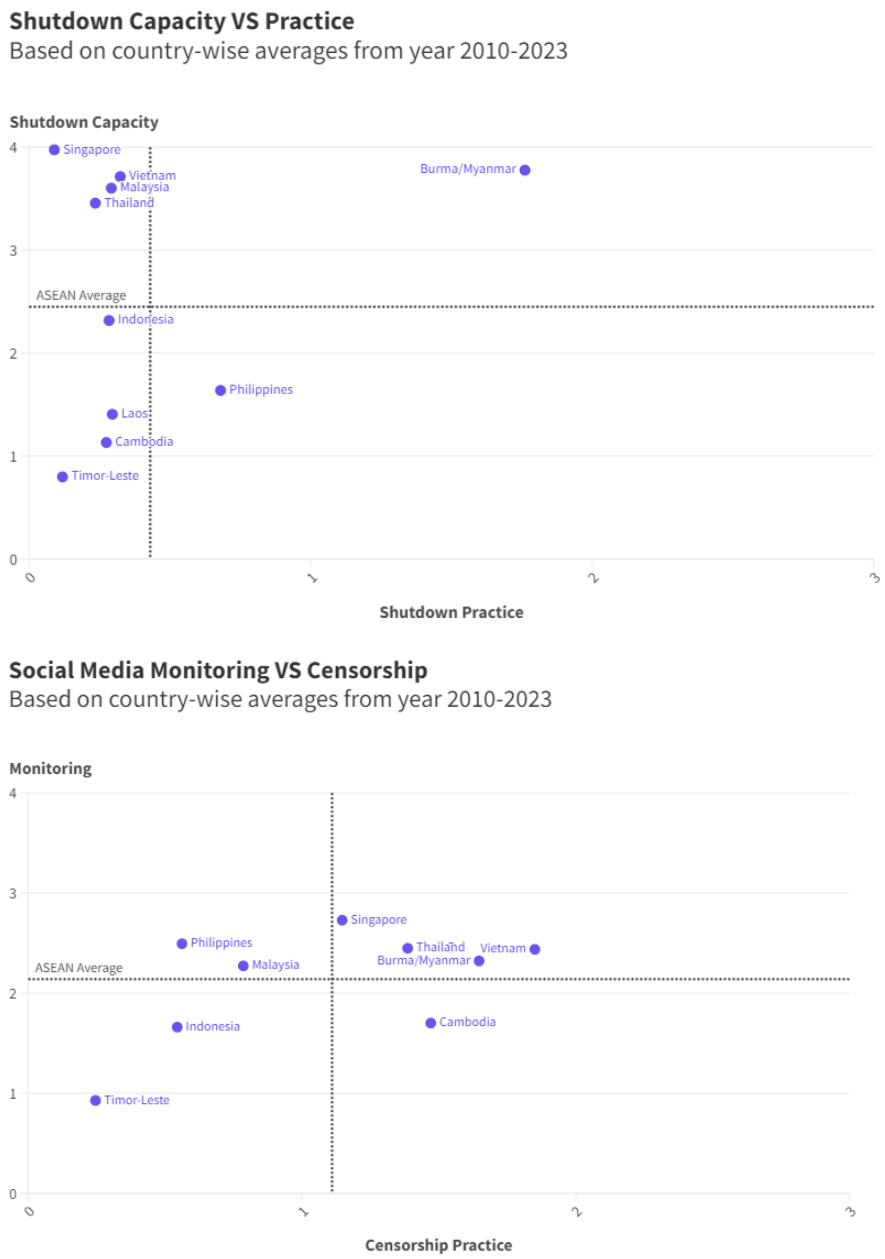

Figure 3: Comparison between capacity metrics and practice metrics

Overall, most countries tend to avoid internet shutdowns and blocking of websites despite having the capacity to do so. Once again, the data confirm that states make a cost-benefit calculation when employing digital repression tactics. Particularly, there are socioeconomic tradeoffs to be considered when using overt and broad-based tactics like shutting down the internet or blocking access to certain websites, such as the risk of losing economic productivity and raising social tension. Table 3 below used calculations from Internet Society's *NetLoss Calculator*[15] to model the loss in GDP(PPP) and FDI for all ASEAN countries should they decide to shut down their internet or blocking services for just one single day.

Table 3: Calculation of Economic Losses from a Day of Internet Shutdown/Blocking of Services

Country	**Internet Shutdown**			**Service Blocking**		
	GDP Loss	FDI Loss	Unemployment	GDP Loss	FDI Loss	Unemployment
Myanmar	1,586,741	196,114	4	423,131	52,297	1
Cambodia	528,344	330,569	0	140,892	88,152	0
Indonesia	23,742,542	2,008,655	119	6,331,344	535,641	31
Laos	426,141	101,721	0	113,638	27,126	0
Malaysia	6,466,296	1,764,668	15	1,724,346	470,578	4
Philippines	6,742,179	998,128	11	1,797,914	266,168	3
Singapore	4,229,311	10,010,731	1	1,127,816	2,669,528	0
Thailand	8,943,008	1,153,586	3	2,384,802	307,623	0
Timor-Leste	48,620	8,097	0	12,965	2,159	0
Vietnam	7,576,592	1,486,084	11	2,020,424	396,289	3
ASEAN Average	**6,028,977**	**1,805,835**	**16.4**	**1,607,727**	**481,556**	**4**

Note: currency in US Dollar and unemployment counts in person(s)

With socioeconomic risks substantiated, it is intuitive for states to resort to an internet shutdown only when necessary. Such necessity, from a state's perspective, can be seen in post-coup Myanmar. The Myanmar junta has been facing harsh criticisms and fierce resistance from the public. As such, shutdowns are needed not only to cut the information channels from within and outside of Myanmar but also to make it more difficult for the revolutionary forces to communicate and coordinate against the junta. Myanmar citizens have been experiencing vast, intermittent internet shutdowns since the coup in 2021. The longest complete shutdown lasted for a total of 72 days and service blockage (e.g., blocking access to social media, VPNs, some websites, etc.) has been ongoing for 1,091 days since the coup.[16] Consequently, the country has foregone US$953,631,077 on GDP(PPP) and US$117,864,732 on FDI since the beginning of the coup in shutting down the internet. Other SEA governments seem to prefer softer, more imperceptible approaches such as social media surveillance and censorship for infrastructural control.

As for informational manipulation, as shown in Figure 4, all states appear to engage in some level of disinformation campaigns or information operations, though the magnitude varies. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the reasons or incidents in each country that drive the selection of such a tactic from the data alone. On aggregate, state-sponsored information operations are more prevalent in countries in which the situation requires the government to seek approval and support or convince the populace of something—usually of its legitimacy or performance. It is also imperative to note that one of the factors contributing to the popularity of dis/misinformation campaigns is that it is relatively more affordable compared to other types of digital repression. Therefore, a "cybertroopers" phenomenon has become rampant in the past few years.[17] Furthermore, it can be further supplemented by regulatory frameworks and laws that aim to suppress dissent. For instance, someone who posts on social media criticising the

government in Thailand runs the risk of being charged under the Computer-Related Crime Act B.E. 2550 (2007); and if they criticise the royal family, the prosecutor can add Article 112—known as lèse-majesté law—on top of that, too.

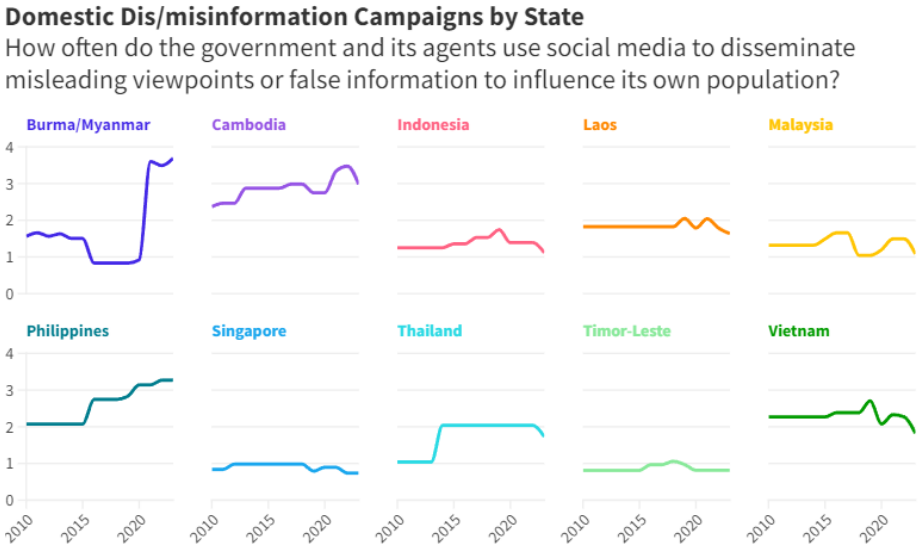

Figure 4: Domestic Dis/misinformation Campaigns

This Perspective has presented an overview of the digital repression landscape in Southeast Asia over the past decade. Evidently, the region has followed the global trend towards the narrowing of digital space; and, ultimately the global erosion of democracy. It is crucial for the citizenry to view digital repression as the alter-ego of digital development; after all, states tend to justify the need to bolster digital capabilities by citing national security interests, repackaging it as cybersecurity measures. However, it is equally important to understand that states do make a cost-benefit calculus before engaging in digital repression, just like they do with traditional repressive measures. Most governments prefer to quietly monitor social media activities or use information operations before they block access to websites or go off-grid entirely, since the ensuing socioeconomic costs can be considerable.

Finally, the findings reported here are not without limitations. First, the *Digital Society Project* dataset relies on an expert-rating method of indexing—which means that the indicators might be intrinsically biased due to the individual expert's subjective worldviews. However, this is the dataset with the best cross-sectional time series coverage and is widely used by scholars in the field. Secondly, since this paper focuses on regional trends of digital repression, some country-specific nuances might have been overlooked, albeit that the clear anomalies are mentioned. Particularly, it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss in detail why country X engages in more/less digital repressive tactics than the rest of the region. As such, it relies on the "need-based" logic as a catch-all explanation. Future research is indeed required to deepen the understanding of any country-specific digital repression.

ENDNOTES

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[6] Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2023: Malaysia," 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-net/2023#footnote6_87dz7hu.
[7] Brunei is excluded from both EDGI and FOTN while Laos and Timor-Leste are not included in FOTN dataset.
[8] Steven Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression* (Oxford University Press, 2021).
[9] Valeriya Mechkova et al., "DSP Dataset V6" (Digital Society Project (DSP), 2024), https://digitalsocietyproject.org/.
[10] DSP data used here have been rescaled by the author for more straightforward interpretations and comparison; a higher number now means relatively higher scores for both capacity and practice.
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[15] Internet Society, "Netloss Calculator — Pulse," 2024, https://pulse.internetsociety.org/en/netloss/.
[16] Internet Society, "Global Internet Shutdowns," 2024, https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns.
[17] Used here as a catch-all term though different country may refer to the state-sponsored/paid social media agents differently; such as "cybertroopers" in Thailand; "paid buzzers" in Indonesia, etc.

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