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# 2nd Asian Summer School on Political Parties and Democracy

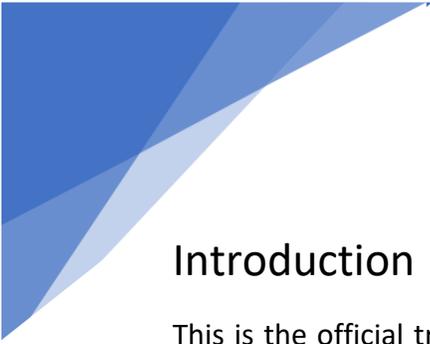
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Elections and Election Campaigning

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Transcript



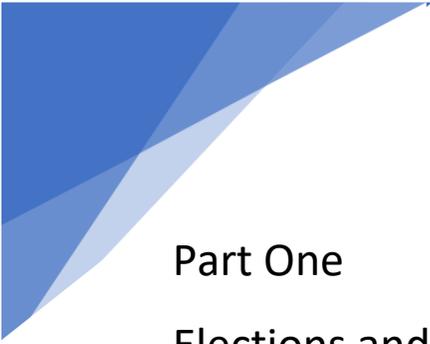
## Introduction

This is the official transcript of my online course material for the 2022 Summer School held in Kyrgyzstan. I have separated my course into two parts. The first one deals with elections and their impact on democratic development. Here I discuss the various roles of elections in different types of regimes. More specifically, I address several key issues raised in contemporary political studies, such as democratization and national identity formation through repeated elections.

The second part looks at electoral campaigns. Here I discuss different campaign modes and their utilization in democratic as well as in non-democratic regimes. I specifically highlight the frequently ignored importance of popular culture in Asian electoral campaigns. As such, I analyse three cases of modern campaigning and how politicians in East Asia utilized popular culture to win elections. More specifically, I look at the electoral campaigns of two former Japanese prime ministers, Koizumi Junichiro and Hatoyama Yukio, and that of former Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian. Unlike many other candidates, the three politicians refrained from using ethnic nationalism or religious fundamentalism in their electoral campaigns. Instead, identity formation predicated on the promotion of the fantastic, the dream of shaping a better world without a scapegoat.

I further discuss three examples of how civil society has made use of popular culture to influence electoral outcomes and to challenge authoritarian regimes in recent years. The first case study deals with a group of Malaysian rap singers (5forty2, Ashtaka and Namewee) who in the run-up to the 2013 national election released the song *Wake Up*. Drawing on images of demonstrations in Malaysia and other parts of the world, the song's video clip urges the public to stand up and fight for democracy. The song epitomized the singers' imagination of a multi-cultural nation and the struggle against corruption and racism.

The second case study focusses on the formation of a transnational pro-democracy movement or a movement against an authoritarian China-led globalization: the *Milk Tea Alliance*. And the more recent love song *Fragile* by Malaysian rapper Namewee and Australian singer Kimberly Chen is cited here as the third example of how civil society challenges authoritarianism and influences political identity through popular culture.



## Part One

### Elections and their impact on political systems

People often treat the terms election and campaign as synonymous. But we may say that they are two different things. The election itself is a process of choosing individuals to perform certain duties. Elections are typically preceded by campaigns. Such campaigns are concerted efforts to win votes in an election.

Having this in mind, I should like to separate my presentation into two parts. The first part deals with elections and their impact on political systems. The second part focuses on electoral campaigns. That is, in the second part I would like to conceptualize electoral campaigns and talk about their implications in terms of democratization.

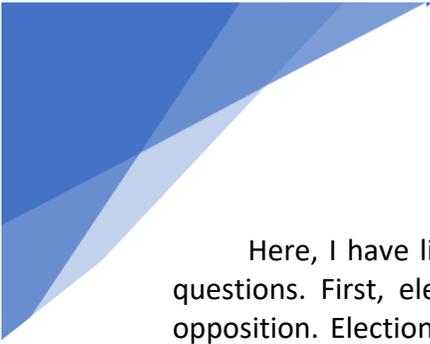
#### **Political systems**

Now let us turn to the first part of my presentation. Elections and their impact on political systems. As suggested by the title, we're talking about political systems. In the literature, scholars usually distinguish between three different types of political systems. The first type is often referred to as closed authoritarianism. In such systems, one political party or a political leader dominates the political scene. There might be elections, but those elections are very restricted. That is, there is little or no competition.

The second type, multi-party authoritarianism or sometimes also called electoral authoritarianism, is somewhat different from the first type in terms of competition. That is, political participation is more open to contestation. There is a strong party – the ruling party – but it allows other parties or individual candidates to take part in elections. It should be noted here that over the last thirty years we have seen a dramatic increase in the relative number of multi-party regimes. That is, among all the world's autocracies, there has been an increase in the share of authoritarian regimes with multiparty elections. This is a very interesting trend and later I will discuss the circumstances leading to this kind of phenomenon. Democracies comprise the third type of political systems discussed here.

#### **Why elections?**

Whenever we talk about elections and their impact under authoritarian systems, we may raise several key questions. The first question that we have here is what functions should elections have? Second, what consequences do elections have for the political system. Third, what motivates voters to participate? Fourth, what consequences does participation have for voters? Fifth, what is the significance of the election process for the candidate? These are all key questions and all these key questions we are going to answer in the following section of the presentation.



Here, I have listed several points that may help us in the attempt to answer the questions. First, elections provide legitimacy to the ruling regime as well as to the opposition. Elections also work as a communication tool. Moreover, elections help to monitor subaltern regimes and opposition candidates. That is, through elections strategically important information about political actors may be obtained and used in planning counter activities in democratic as well as in authoritarian political systems. Elections also help to ascertain citizen preferences. Moreover, they help to channel public demands. As such, they prevent escalating confrontations between the ruling regime and the people. They also have a socialization and learning effect. No matter how rigged or unfair elections may be, it is through them that the people learn about the mechanisms of political participation. Finally, they also function as a reward mechanism for political actors.

### **Election violence**

A related aspect here is the use of violence. We may differentiate between two types: election violence and post-election violence. Both kinds of violence may bring about the collapse of the incumbent regime. Election violence usually occurs when we have political or non-political actors intervening in elections as to prevent the success of certain candidates.

Post-election violence may occur when the opposition believes that the election was rigged and/or unfair. Post-election violence may also occur when the ruling elite declares or attempts to declare the election invalid. Violence as well as elections themselves may bring about the collapse of a political regime.

### **Democracy by elections**

As pointed out earlier in my presentation even non-democratic regimes may opt to hold local and national elections for strategic reasons. Moreover, numerous political scientists have demonstrated the significance of elections in fostering democratization.

Repeated elections sponsored by authoritarian regimes may facilitate the institutionalization and deepening of actual civil liberties in societies. They are thus seen as a causal variable in democratization. More specifically, state-controlled local and national elections work as a catalyst in a country's political development. They help the ruling regime legitimize its rule and serve as a tool to cultivate, reward, and control interest groups and local factions which assist the ruling regime in securing popular support especially in rural areas.

They may unfold as nested games. Here, the game of electoral competition is embedded within the mega game of electoral reform. That is, the elections regulate intra-party competition. They also regulate the competition between the ruling party and the opposition. More importantly, they serve as the starting point of negotiations between



the ruling regime and the opposition about political reforms. They are also instrumental in institutionalizing the opposition, democratic procedures, and norms.

The democratising power of controlled elections is believed to be conditioned by state capacity and *stateness*. State capacity and *stateness* are two concepts that are overlapping. State capacity usually comprises the monopoly on violence and the state's ability to implement policies. *Stateness*, on the other hand, has a third component. That is, the identification with the state. High levels of *stateness* imply that virtually all parts of society accept the state's authority as the sole legitimate authority of the state.

As I have pointed out, state capacity and *stateness*, both condition the democratising power of controlled elections. But in what way? To answer this question, we shall like to look at the state capacity - democracy nexus. Authoritarian regimes with high state capacities have comparatively more power to sanction the activities of the opposition. They are also more likely to deliver economic development and welfare. High-capacity authoritarian states thus tend to have stable political regimes.

We may thus say that state capacity tends to prevent regime transition. However, once it occurs state capacity catalyses democratization, potentially bringing about democratic regime resilience. Why? Because newly elected democratic governments are equipped with the necessary means to implement policy reforms. Public distrust in the new form of governance and authoritarian nostalgia may thus be prevented.

The existence of extensive state capacities will not be a sufficient condition for stabilizing authoritarianism. There are several mediating factors that may bring about democratic transitions even in high-capacity autocracies. In the cases of Taiwan and South Korea, scholars have identified three mediating factors: First, the state social embedding; second, the international context; and third, the extent of elite cohesion. More specifically, we can say that the South Korean and Taiwanese transitions occurred despite of high levels of state capacity because of two crucial developments. First, social economic development brought about an affluent society – a society that was increasingly difficult to control through repression. Second, state capacity was conditioned by international factors as well as by inter-elite divisions. The latter was provoked by the changing social and international environment.

It might be much easier for the opposition to bring about the collapse of an authoritarian regime in states with low to medium levels of *stateness*. However, there is one problem. Such states may become stuck in a predatory trap with informal networks competing to gain control of the state resources through elections while undermining civil liberties and horizontal accountability. The Philippines, Indonesia, and East Timor may be mentioned here as examples.

### **National identity and elections**

Elections may not only lead to democratization but may also consolidate processes of national identification. More specifically, there have been several cases in which contested states utilize claims to free and fair elections to obtain legitimacy and



international recognition. Caspersen (2011) in her study on the complex dynamics of democratisation in unrecognised states asserts that claims to independence were in the past based primarily on ethnic/national identity or grievances whereas in more recent history there has been an increasing emphasis on “proclaimed processes of democratization” (ibid., 338). Breakaway states such as Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Northern Cyprus, and Somaliland believe that de-jure recognition might be awarded to entities building democratic institutions and granting extensive political rights to their citizens. Governments of such states thus not only highlight their democratic achievements in their narrated messages to the world, but also substantiate their call for recognition by claiming to be more democratic than their ‘parent states’ (ibid.) Elections play a crucial role in their quest for recognition.

The strategic emphasis on ‘democraticness’ has within the last two decades led to multi-party elections and even to a peaceful transfer of power in several unrecognised states. Moreover, in Taiwan, Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh, and Somaliland democratic development has indeed gone further than in their ‘parent states.’ However, unrecognised states are confronted with a paradox situation. On the one hand, external threats produce democratic desires and institutions. Democratic development may, on the other hand, as well be perceived as a threat to unity. Therefore, unrecognised states are likely to become trapped in what is referred to in the literature as ‘ethnic democracy.’ Ethnic democracy restricts citizenship to the ‘in group’ and thus most likely prevents further democratic advances.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we may say that elections fulfil a vast variety of functions in different political systems. More importantly, we may also say that in most cases they have a positive impact on human development.



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## Part Two

# Conceptualising electoral campaigns and their implications

Now let's turn to the second part of my presentation: Conceptualising electoral campaigns and their implications. Here we have five topics. First, I would like to talk a little bit about normative considerations. Second, I shall like to elaborate a bit on the different modes of campaigning. Third, we will look at the phenomenon of campaigns as popular culture, and of course we must investigate the role of social media in modern campaigning. Finally, I try to answer the question of whether campaigns are conducive to democracy or whether they hamper democratic development.

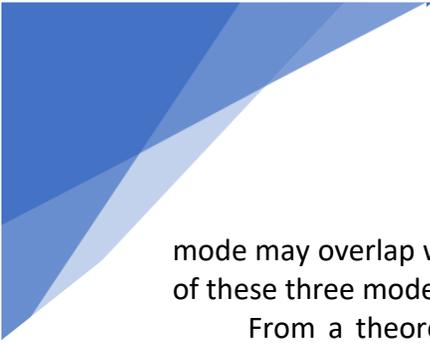
### **Normative roles**

Let's turn to the first point here – the normative roles or normative considerations. There is much talk about the normative framework of campaigning in the theoretical literature. That is, there is emphasis on how electoral campaigns should be conducted and what functions they should fulfil under ideal conditions. First, they should help citizens formulate their preferences. Second, they should function as a forum for debate. Third, they should promote citizen participation. And fourth, they should allow outsiders an opportunity to voice their opinions. But, as we will see soon, these normative assumptions are compromised in the real world of electoral campaigning.

### **Modes of campaigning**

When we are talking about conceptualising electoral campaigns we must talk about different modes of campaigning. Generally speaking, we have three different types of electoral campaign modes. The first is pre-modern campaigning, second modern campaigning and the last form, post-modern campaigning. So, what's the difference between them? We may say that in pre-modern campaigning the political party dominates the modes of political communications systems. Campaigns are short-term and run at low cost. Voting behaviour is quite stable. Modern campaigning, on the other hand, is mass-media centred, long term, and expensive. It involves external specialists and focuses on a volatile electorate. Finally, the post-modern mode of campaigning utilises targeted ads, exploits social media, and extensively hires special political consultants. Post-modern campaigns are permanent, cost intensive and designed to attract a highly volatile electorate.

The application of the three different modes usually depends on the given socio-economic environment of the electorate. In principle, the application of one specific



mode may overlap with another. That is, political actors may simultaneously apply a mix of these three modes to influence the voting behaviour of different segments of society.

From a theoretical perspective, pre-modern campaigning applies the traditional selling concept whereas modern campaigning draws on the principles of the more sophisticated marketing concept. The figure here illustrates the differences between the two concepts originally applied to the domain of consumer marketing.

The starting point in the case of the selling concept is the factory, which may be a political party. The focus of the marketing process lies in selling something probably nobody really wants. But since the political regime wants to stay in power it is obliged to promote its candidates by all possible means to the electorate as the ultimate solution to all problems.

The modern marketing concept has a different starting point: the political market. The final product in the form of candidates and policies is created according to market demands. Electoral successes are made through customer satisfaction. At the core of the concept is a multidimensional integrated marketing strategy engaging a large variety of campaign specialists from different professions.

### **Popular culture**

But no matter how sophisticated a country and its campaigns may be, campaigns usually tend to be part of popular culture. This is where we further compromise our normative assumptions. We may like to distinguish between pre-modern popular culture and modernized popular culture.

Elections as pre-modern popular culture can usually be found in less developed authoritarian states, especially in rural areas where elections are turned into festivities - into some sort of ritual. The modernized form, on the other hand, can be seen as the result of commodification politics. Commodification politics turns the voter into a consumer and the candidate into an entrepreneur. Politics is gradually reduced to a mere process of exchanging goods, services, and experiences for votes. Instead of festivities and rituals we have staged events and campaign merchandise.

We may also say that the difference between the pre-modern and modernized form of campaigns as popular culture has to do with variations in individual needs. Societies in less developed socio-economic environments place greater emphasis on physiological and safety needs, whereas advanced capitalist societies tend to seek fulfilment in terms of self-esteem and self-actualization. Thus, routinized events like festivities in pre-modern political cultures help to satisfy the very basic human demand for food and drinks as well as basic psychological needs, such as intimacy and sense of belonging. Individuals taking part in modernized forms of political culture, on the other hand, look for more authentic expressions or narcissistic expressions – expressions that are part of the human compulsion for self-dramatization.

When talking about campaigns as modern popular culture, we tend to have four interrelated aspects in mind. First, the consumption of politics. Second, the decay of the traditional aura. More specifically, in old fashioned campaigns the candidate is regarded



an untouchable personality, whereas in modern political culture campaigns the politician is presented as being one of us. This decay is achieved by a permanent process of identification – the third aspect here. The permanent identification process is triggered and reinforced through the consumption of campaign merchandise, the participation in staged events and so forth.

An important factor in this process is the libidinal force – the fourth aspect listed here. By libidinal force we mean the utilization of emotions in electoral campaigns. Normatively speaking, elections should be free of emotions. Everything should be presented and discussed in a rational way. But this is impossible since we are human beings. Yet, we must find the right balance between being rational and expressing emotions as libidinal force may take control over the whole campaign process. That is, emotions may make any rational discourse impossible, eventually leading to democratic regression. Donald Trump may be cited here as an example.

### **Popular culture and elections in East Asia**

But using popular culture and thus emotions in elections is not necessarily something that threatens democratic development. It may also act as a catalyst for democratic citizenship as numerous examples in East Asia have demonstrated.

#### *Koizumi and his campaign*

For example, former Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's use of popular culture and libidinal forces indeed revitalized Japanese politics. Here we can see a screenshot of his 2005 e-magazine, a predecessor of Twitter and Facebook.

His e-magazine was very popular with the electorate because he talked about himself as an individual. He spoke about his hobbies, reading habits, childhood dreams and so forth. As such, ordinary citizens could identify with him – first as an individual and later as the politician they prefer over others because of his being authentic and close to the people. Koizumi's e-magazine was just part of his sophisticated popular culture campaign to decay the traditional aura and reinforce the audience's identification with the Koizumi brand. Personal appearances on mass media outlets and campaign merchandise (like the one we can see here in the picture) were part of the overall attempt to enhance the public appeal of Koizumi as the hero next door.

Political messages are mingled with popular culture, eventually submerging into it. Koizumi's 15 sec spot featuring X Japan, one of the Japan's most successful rock bands, not only encapsulates the amalgamation of politics and popular culture but also serves as an example of commodification politics and its ability to attract the masses.

#### *Hatoyama Yukio and heroic narratives*

A few years later, Hatoyama Yukio of the Democratic Party successfully utilized popular culture to secure his victory at the polls. Dressed in an oversized red T-shirt and Bermudas he would show up at shopping centres, introducing himself as spaceman Yuki while his wife would tell media outlets her story about her once being abducted by aliens.



Apart from the rather boring standardized political ads common in Japanese electoral campaigns, the Democratic Party produced several ads which presented the candidate either as an alien conveying messages about political reforms or as a hero determined to complete two missions. First, to break with Japan's passivity in international affairs by becoming a global peace maker. Second, to implement several important domestic reforms, bringing relieve and prosperity to the people of Japan.

The fantastic, the illusionary, played a key role in the electoral campaign of Hatoyama. Contrary to political leaders abroad, he used the fantastic to portray his ideas of a world living in peace and prosperity. As such, the formation of a common identity does not ground here on the creation of an enemy. There is no scapegoat. There is just the request to believe in the fantastic, in the power of the illusionary. More importantly, the electorate could identify with the messages conveyed in the advertisements. Hatoyama could thus – through the fantastic - create a bond between him and the electorate.

#### *Chen Shui-bian and national identity*

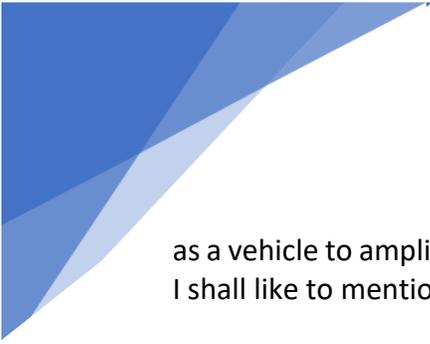
A further East Asian example of popular culture revitalizing politics certainly is the electoral campaign of Chen Shui-bian, the former president of Taiwan. Again, campaign merchandise and staged events played an important role in the attempt to merge politics with political culture.

So-called political fashion shows were organized as live events in popular places featuring the politician together with well-known entertainers, bringing the protagonist closer to the masses – effectuating the decay of the traditional aura. Here in this picture, we can see none other than the political candidate himself wearing one of his campaign merchandises while entertaining a crowd of youngsters late at night.

Chen Shui-bian's popular political culture campaign benefitted from Taiwan's highly developed consumer society as it offers ample opportunities to political entrepreneurs to "sell" politics. Cultural aspects, such as the love for baseball and the Japanese concept of *kawaii* (that is, juvenility, sweetness, and innocence), are packed into and expressed through campaign merchandises. In the case of Taiwan, they are tangible items that amalgamate material consumption and democratic values, reinforcing a unique Taiwanese identity. Popular culture here engages the masses into an open, public political discourse.

#### **Popular culture and civil society**

Not only politicians may utilize the concept of campaigning as popular culture in attempts to attract the masses, but civil society may also use popular culture to counteract government propoganda and intimidation. Although such initiatives may not necessarily be part of a specific electoral campaign, they naturally become part of the permanent political campaign process and may eventually even be picked up by political candidates



as a vehicle to amplify their own political messages. There are three such initiatives which I shall like to mention here as examples.

### *Wake Up!*

The first has to do with a group of Malaysian rap singers, who in the run-up to the 2013 Malaysian parliamentary election released a song entitled *Wake Up*. The video went viral and became popular with young Malaysians. Popular culture is used here by individual artists to express their anger at the corrupt and autocratic government and to urge society to wake up and fight for democracy. The song was used again by political activists in the 2018 parliamentary election, which brought about the first regime change in Malaysian history.

### *#MilkTeaAlliance*

The second example here is the formation of a transnational pro-democracy movement or a movement against an authoritarian China-led globalization. The movement not only has its roots in popular culture, but it also utilizes popular culture as a means of communication and attack. More specifically, the movement originated in attempts to counter Chinese bloggers and trolls attacking a Thai boy-love (BL) series star for his remarks regarding the status of Hong Kong and his real-life girlfriend's statement on social media saying that she looks more Taiwanese than Chinese.

It did not take long for the Chinese Embassy in Thailand to respond. In a statement released on social media the Embassy emphasised the One China Principle and asserted that the notion of being a family "is a genuine epitome" of the bilateral relationship between Thailand and China. The authoritarian mindset of the Chinese Embassy and its often-cited notion of a blood relationship were however rejected by the young fan community. Instead, milk tea emerged as a counter concept.

Unlike 'blood' relations, which are intrinsically exclusive, the consumption of milk tea is not restricted to a specific group of people. Over the last two decades, milk tea has become part of popular culture preferably consumed by the young urban population in many East and Southeast Asian countries. Through the consumption of commodities such as milk tea a natural bond has been formed between youngsters across borders – an identity beyond primordialism.

But it was China's increasing assertiveness that transcended the consumption of milk tea from naïve enjoyment into common expressions of freedom and rebelliousness across the region.

As such, an alliance of Twitter users from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan emerged. Under the Thai hashtag #ชาหนข้นกว่าเลือด (milk tea is thicker than blood), the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance, as well as the Chinese hashtag #奶茶聯盟, a series of issues such as the question of Taiwan's and Hong Kong's sovereignty, a Chinese hydropower dam project at the Mekong River, the crackdown of the Tiananmen protests of 1989, and the negative



impact of the Thai monarchy and government on Thailand's democratic development have been highlighted in a satirical way.

The process of politicising milk tea consumption roots in the orchestrated government attempts to turn it into an intangible culture heritage of post-colonial Hong Kong, representing the tolerant, pragmatic, and harmonious character of its people, while promoting political stability at the same time. However, the growing uncertainties surrounding the Chinese takeover created a mood for nostalgia, ambivalence, and discontent – a mood that is most evident in the romantic storylines and nostalgic images of several of Wong Kar-wai's movies, such as *Days of Being Wild*, *2046*, and *In the Mood for Love*. Set in local tea places, the movies typically centre around the themes of unattainable love and the endless search of identity – themes that resonated with the people of Hong Kong. Soon, nostalgia and cultural consumption became part of a counter narrative rejecting the official government's notion of the Hong Kong spirit. Instead of being submissive, the counter identity emphasises the freedom of speech, cultural autonomy, and resistance to the encroachment of the nation that has occurred since the Chinese takeover in 1997.

A further popular culture aspect of the movement is the utilization of memes as the preferred communication style. Here we see one example that fully captures the nature of the alliance. The meme shown here derives from a drawing showing Batman slapping Robin, which was first published in a 1965 comic book. In the meme, Batman represents Thai bloggers, whereas Robin Chinese bloggers or trolls. Robin attacks Batman verbally by using a vulgar Chinese expression represented by the acronym NMSL and by insinuating that the Thai king is trash. With Batman slapping Robin while affirming that the King is indeed trash, the Thai bloggers leave the Chinese completely puzzled – for the Thai reaction entirely contradicts the very Chinese understanding of citizenship.

The alliance has become an important asset of cross-country efforts to defy ethnic nationalism and authoritarian governance in Asia. After the military detention of Myanmar's state councillor and president in February 2021, the protesters in Myanmar turned to the Alliance for help. The Alliance responded by providing equipment, such as SIM cards for mobile phones, and by holding joint protests. In an article for the Diplomat, Jasmine Chia and Scott Singer consider the Alliance "a central force in shaping the way Myanmar's youth understand the current battle between pro-democracy protesters and their vastly better armed opponents."

### *Fragile – the little pinks*

As a third example of popular culture as an effective tool in political campaigns, the satirical love song "Fragile" by Malaysian rapper Namewee and Australian singer Kimberly Chen may be mentioned. In the song, the artists pour out their frustrations about their unreasonable partners. More specifically, the song mocks Chinese online patriots, the little pinks, for accusing others of "hurting their feelings" whenever there is criticism of Chinese authoritarianism and irredentism, while constantly picking fights with others by claiming that everything belongs to them. It satirizes a whole range of social and political



issues, such as the Xinjiang cotton dispute, the conflict with Thai netizens, the political status of Taiwan, censorship in Hong Kong, and the systemic rent-seeking behaviour of China's ruling elites.

The song was released in mid-October 2021 and received 25 million views on *YouTube* within three weeks. Although the song was in Chinese and most viewers were from Taiwan (37%) and Hong Kong (13.2%), a great bulk of the audience was spread all over Asia and other parts of the world.

From a theoretical perspective, Namewee's song *Fragile* and the memes used by the Milk Tea Alliance are excellent approaches in terms of dealing with authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism. Instead of viciously attacking the opponent and eventually being drawn into a direct conflict with the opponent, the activists, perhaps unwittingly, escaped the "subjectifying" dimension of power by refusing to play the game of ethnic nationalism. More specifically, I mean here that the subject who struggles against power is already caught up in power. In other words, by engaging in a dialog, opponents run the risk of playing into the hands of autocrats.

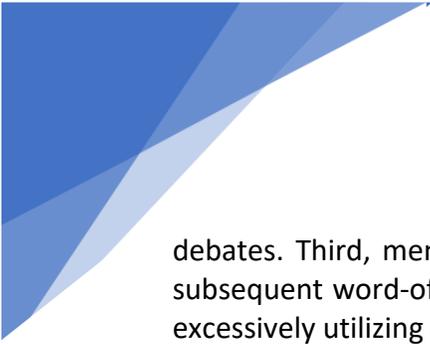
Notwithstanding, supporters of ethnic nationalism or any other ideological concept attempt to sustain the underlying psychological constructs. As for the Chinese nationalist bloggers that means that they not only defend their country against foreign criticism, but also expect foreign opponents to share the same patriotism for their respective countries. By attacking their own king, the Thai bloggers however refused to play the game of nationalism, consequently causing a 'short circuit' in the Chinese nationalist logic that rendered the concept of ethnic nationalism ineffective in attacking the Thai opponents.

In the case of the satirical love song *Fragile*, the expressed complaints by the two lovers effectively attack the inverse logic of nationalism by operating at the surface level. Two issues play a role here. First, ideology only prohibits on the surface, while secretly inciting its own transgression. Second, by thoroughly identifying with Chinese nationalism as disappointed lovers, the two singers refuse to play the game of ideology and thus avoid the trap of false transgression.

## **Social media**

Let us now turn to a related topic – the social media involvement in politics. Social media is another means of mass engagement in politics. Social media applications have become an important part of daily life, changing not only the way of interpersonal interactions but also challenging conventional forms of customer relationship management. Social media platforms have become indispensable for a growing number of political campaigns around the world.

There are several issues that should be mentioned when discussing social media involvement in political campaigns: First, social media offers alternative means of communication. It bypasses the gatekeepers of traditional media outlets. As such, different narratives may be broadcast to large and diversified audiences. Second, unlike traditional media it operates as a two-way communication network, stimulating political



debates. Third, memorable encounters with real people in real-life situations and the subsequent word-of-mouth on social media platforms have proven more effective than excessively utilizing conventional advertising tools.

But social media has also several drawbacks, such as the spread of so-called fake news discrediting political opponents. Posts on social media may also instigate or even glorify hate crimes. We also frequently hear news headlines about professional Internet trolls disrupting a rival's Internet campaign or manipulating public opinion. Recent research indicates that social media campaigning has become a prominent feature in politics not only in advanced democratic societies but also in transitional societies in Southeast Asia. Ross Tapsell of Australian National University, for example, asserts that social media campaigning in Southeast Asia has brought about a dual mode of campaigning. There is a formal, mainstream-driven discourse, and a rather different one on social media platforms that is subversive, underground, and based on identity politics and disinformation.

### **Impact on democratic development**

Which takes us to final part of this presentation, namely to the more general question of whether electoral campaigns are conducive or harmful to democratic development. In short, we may say that campaigns may revitalize politics, but may as well undermine democracy or even bring about the collapse of democratic systems. More specifically, electoral campaigns draw on the emancipating power of the fantastic – the illusionary. The fantastic is any departure from consensus reality – the reversal of the ground rules. In other words, one of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world are diametrically contradicted – campaigns create alternative discourses.

Let us first look at two possible negative developments of electoral campaigns. One possible development may be that the promotion of the fantastic through modern marketing techniques fosters political consumerism and subsequently leads to post-democratic societies. A second – a more frightening development may be that it leads to hate politics, eroding democratic institutions and finally bringing about neo-authoritarianism.

But let us now look at a third, more positive scenario. As I mentioned previously, several campaigns in East Asia emphasize the fantastic – the illusionary. The fantastic is seen here as a counter-discourse to the modern. But the fantastic is not so much an escape from reality as it is an escape from uncertainties. That is, seeking refuge in the fantastic is not a withdrawal from reality but a political statement that encourages an alternative discourse. Ordinary citizens see in the fantastic an opportunity to take part in politics – in something that previously seemed restricted to a group of privileged people. The marketization of politics accelerates this process because it offers new avenues of political communication.



What is at play here is what Chantal Mouffe termed agonistic politics. Agonistic politics accepts the existence of conflicts within society and believes that the aim of democratic politics is not to eliminate antagonism but to transform it into struggles between adversaries (agonism).

Since different narratives are publicly contested instead of being forcefully marginalized, the discourse on popular issues, such as national identity, repoliticize the political realm – thus encouraging further democratic development. As such, the fantastic in agonistic politics is a political statement that is open to a public discourse.

However, once the fantastic centres around concepts of white supremacy or religious fundamentalism, it constitutes a subversion of modernity. It not only denies the very existence of consensus reality but also questions its legitimacy. It thus forecloses any public discourse on popular issues, such as national identity, and most likely leads to democratic regression.

### **Conclusion**

We may therefore conclude that electoral campaigns have different trajectories, and that the ultimate outcome in terms of democratic development depends on the nature of the narratives put forward in the campaign's political messages.

Thank you very much for your interest in this brief introduction to elections, election campaigning and their implications for democratization.



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