

Neither Revolution Nor Inertia: Social Media Activism Under the Constraints of an Authoritarian Regime

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This paper analyzes how various NGOs in China and opposition parties in Singapore navigate social media to shape political attitudes and produce social change as well as the major trends that provide the framework for the emergence of social media activism in the 21st century.

01 Introduction & Background

The increasingly robust discussion on digital authoritarianism demonstrates the interplay of social media, political activism, and government surveillance in the 21st century. The ways in which authoritarian governments control social media have serious implications for political mobilization and opinion shaping in the contemporary context.

The China model relies heavily on "digital authoritarianism," that is, asserting the dominance of the authority of national governments in regulating web content. The Singapore model presents an interesting case. Unlike China, Singapore is a competitive political system in which democratic elections exist in conjunction with authoritarian rule.

Over the last five years, both countries have taken draconian measures to secure the coercive capacity of the government. As a result, opposition parties and activists find it increasingly difficult to carve out a legitimized space for social change.

"Revolution" implies unyielding, uncompromising, intolerant, uncooperative qualities—a radical justice that shows no forgiveness; the more radical, the more extreme; the more absolute, the more revolutionary... an obsession with "revolution" caused us to lose our humanity and rationality, to lose our social conscience and tolerance, to lose the most basic standards of right and wrong... We have been driven mad by "revolution." We have been suffocated by "revolution." - Liu Xiaobo 1992

02 Research Questions

Considering the high degree of censorship in authoritarian countries:

Q1: In what ways do activist groups in China and political parties in Singapore utilize social media platforms to gain influence and promote political reform?

Q2: How successful are their attempts in shaping public opinion and mobilizing grassroots movements?

Q3: What is the government's response and how effective has it been?

03 Methodology

Through the analysis of the contemporary literature surrounding the notion of "nonconfrontational activism" and various case studies, this research investigates the ways in which grassroots NGOs and activists in China have adopted non-confrontational strategies to produce social change, with an analytical view to the evolving relationship between the Chinese state and civil society. Using China as a model, this research looks at how opposition parties in Singapore engaged in social media discourse and how this space has been broadened and narrowed in the context of the 2011 and 2015 general elections.

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04 Tactics of Nonconfrontational Activism: Framing Strategies, Calculated Positioning and "Incrementalism"

Due to the increasingly oppressive nature of the CCP's censorship program, NGOs have learned to adopt nonconfrontational strategies to evade government retaliation.

Framing Strategies: Using Mainstream Policy Discourse

- Involves utilizing the tools of the powerful to subsequently curb the exercise of power (Wang 2019).
- NGOs have the power to tactfully use state laws, mainstream policy discourse, government commitments, and politically neutral terms to legitimize their contention.

Calculated Positioning: Figuring out the Boundaries of the Government

- Strategically navigating between what is deemed acceptable and what viewed as unlawful by the regime.
- With respect to social groups in China, the CCP utilizes a system of positive and negative incentives, or "differentiated controls," which are subject to change based on the type of group to which the organization belongs.
 - Different control mechanisms for groups labelled as "safe," which includes those mainly focused on service delivery, whereas those interested with human rights activism may receive harsher treatment.
- Social groups had to prepare for the fluctuations in policies by determining what position the government has taken at that time and the appropriate way to face it.

"Incrementalism" and Social Media

- With meteoric rise of Tencent's mobile messaging app, Wechat has become the most widely used social media platform in China, with over 1.4 billion active users.
- NGOs utilize Wechat for less politically sensitive objectives (i.e. developing social connections to mobilize resources to bring relief to disadvantaged communities).
- Rather than attempting to enact sweeping revolutionary change, grassroots NGOs have taken an "incremental" approach.
 - Social groups are learning to become agents of behavioural change, incite creative activism, and enhance community leadership

References: Wang, Jing. 2019. *The Other Digital China: Nonconfrontational Activism on the Social Web*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.



05 Changing the Dialogue: Effects of Social Media in the 2011 and 2015 Elections in Singapore

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Social Media Use in 2011 Election:

- Social media played a pivotal role in facilitating political discussions and generating oppositional support.
- Opposition candidates used Facebook to publicize events, mobilize support, and communicate their political views by disseminating information.
- Magnified the influence of online voices and demonstrated the power and reach of minority voices.

Post-2015: Tightening of the Political Opinion Climate

- Increase of executive aggrandizement in the form of media control, the weakening of institutional checks on power, and the stifling of opposition forces to challenge executive leadership
- Self-censorship and curtailment of freedom of speech -> activists and opposition politicians have faced punitive measures.

06 Conclusion

Ultimately, it remains the case that dissenters and advocacy groups will face an increasingly uphill battle against an indomitable power that is the authoritarian regime. However, social change is difficult to achieve in any society, especially in illiberal societies, where social contention is not the norm but the exception. Rather than resorting to a radical means of political change, activists can build a quiet yet powerful coalition to bring incremental progress to their society.