

DIGITALIZATION AND POWER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: RETHINKING DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. Digitalization has become an inevitable driver of Southeast Asia's economic development, simultaneously reshaping policy frameworks and reconfiguring regional power dynamics. Control over and access to digital infrastructure not only influence the distribution of power but also determine the extent to which digital transformation contributes to equitable and sustainable growth. This study, grounded in the theoretical lens of power relations, explores how digitalization initiatives intersect with political agendas and economic trajectories in the region. Methodologically, the research employs a literature-based analysis that conceptualizes digitalization as a non-human actor interacting with human agency in shaping development outcomes. The findings highlight that technological adoption by itself is inadequate to ensure long-term progress. Sustainable outcomes are contingent upon the architecture of digital policies and the extent to which political will, regulatory frameworks, and economic interests foster inclusivity and accountability. Power relations are decisive not only in setting the pace of digitalization but also in shaping democratic participation within policymaking processes. Where participation is weak, asymmetrical structures emerge that privilege actors controlling digital infrastructure and data, thereby reinforcing dependency and inequality. The study argues that digitalization cannot be regarded as a neutral technological advancement. Instead, it represents a contested arena where political power, economic imperatives, and technological dominance converge. It calls for a critical reassessment of digital governance to ensure that digitalization becomes an instrument of inclusive and sustainable economic development in Southeast Asia, rather than a mechanism that entrenches structural disparities.

Keywords: Digitalization; Power Relation; Democracy; Economic Development; SouthEast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of economic development, digitalization has emerged as an inevitability. It constitutes an integral component of economic and political transformation across nations, including those within the Southeast Asian region. The mainstreaming of digital technology has increasingly become a central element in global competitiveness, wherein technologically advanced countries are positioned more strategically within the global economy. Mok and Leung contend that global developments have created structural conditions that marginalize those unable to adapt to digital transformations. Those who are failing to engage with the digital paradigm are likely to be excluded from the benefits of global competition (Mok & Leung, 2012). Kurantin and Osei-Hwedie highlight that the current global economic transformation aligns with the expansion of digital platforms geared toward economic growth. The processes of digitalization and the integration of economic sectors are increasingly being reconfigured, with the capacity for innovation in digital technologies regarded as a critical success factor (Kurantin & Osei-Hwedie, 2019). In the Southeast Asian context, several countries have adopted digitalization strategies aimed at enhancing economic competitiveness. Examples include Singapore's Smart Nation Initiative, Malaysia's

MyDigital strategy, and Vietnam's target for the digital economy to contribute 30% to its GDP by 2030. This digital development is also driven by the region's position as the world's fourth-largest internet market and the rapid growth of the e-Commerce sector (Street, 1992).

However, behind this optimism lies a critical question: to what extent can digitalization address the challenges of contributing to inclusive and sustainable economic development? While several Southeast Asian countries have demonstrated that digitalization can serve as a driving force for economic growth, others continue to face significant barriers in harnessing its potential benefits. In Indonesia, for instance, the regency of Sumedang stands out as a model for digital governance, recognized nationally for its digital transformation (Widi, 2024). Yet, the region still grapples with extreme poverty, indicating that digitalization does not automatically translate into improved economic outcomes for local communities (Putri, 2024). Moreover, the persistent digital divide in Southeast Asia-particularly in countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, which have been identified as having the lowest levels of digital accessibility in the region-poses a major obstacle to achieving meaningful economic transformation through digital means. Despite regional ambitions to build a digitally connected economic community, the rapid pace of technological advancement has yet

to ensure equitable access for all segments of society (Mubah et al., 2017).

Numerous studies have examined the role of digitalization in promoting economic development. Spulbar, for instance, found a positive correlation between increased digital technology adoption and enhanced economic performance (Spulbar et al., 2022). However, there remains a critical gap in understanding how digitalization is deeply embedded in power relations. Can it serve as a tool to mitigate power asymmetries, or does it, in fact, reinforce the dominance of certain actors within political and economic structures?

This article fills this gap by examining digitalization not solely as a technological driver of economic growth, but as a contested political arena where asymmetries of power are reproduced, negotiated, or potentially challenged within Southeast Asia.

In the Southeast Asian context, much of the existing literature tends to treat digitalization primarily as a neutral instrument for economic advancement, often overlooking its potential to empower dominant actors while marginalizing others with less political or economic influence. From a power relations perspective, Schaupp asserts that digital technologies are not merely “tools” or technical innovations, they also embody complex political dimensions. Digitalization constitutes a power arena wherein competing interests converge and contend (Schaupp, 2021).

Robert Dahl’s pluralist theory views power as dispersed among multiple actors capable of influencing policy (Dahl, 1957). In the increasingly complex digital landscape, Steven Lukes’ “Three Dimensions of Power” offers a pertinent analytical framework for understanding how power functions in digital systems, particularly in terms of data ownership and control over information distribution (Lukes, 2021). These dimensions are especially relevant when assessing the impact of digitalization on the dynamic processes of economic development across Southeast Asian nations. This leads to a key question: does digital technology inherently possess the power to shape economic development, or is its effectiveness contingent upon the influence of other political and institutional actors? In light of this, how do power relations operate within the implementation of digitalization in Southeast Asia’s economic development?

This study aims to explore the dynamics of power relations within the digitalization processes in Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to economic development. The novelty of this study lies in its

approach of reframing digitalization as a political process rather than merely a technical or economic one, thereby extending the discussion beyond issues of access and infrastructure. It offers a new perspective by positioning digitalization not merely as a technical instrument but as a political arena that significantly influences the success and inclusivity of digital-led development efforts. The key contribution of this study is to demonstrate how both human (state, private sector, communities) and non-human (digital infrastructures, platforms) actors interact in shaping economic trajectories, while uncovering how power asymmetries influence the realization of democratic and inclusive development outcomes.

METHOD

This study employs a literature review method to explore and map existing academic literature on digitalization and politics within the framework of power relations in economic development across Southeast Asia. Specifically, it adopts the Scoping Literature Review (SLR) approach as developed by Verdejo et al. in 2021, based on the foundational work of Arksey and O’Malley (2005). The review follows several key stages: identification of the research question, identification of relevant literature, selection and screening of sources, data extraction and synthesis, and finally, reporting of findings. The selected documents serve as primary data, which are further explored and categorized to identify emerging patterns and trends in the literature (Verdejo et al., 2021).

Literature searches were conducted using databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Mendeley using combinations of Boolean strings such as:

- TITLE-ABS-KEY (“digitalization” OR “digitalisation”) AND (“politic” OR “politics”) AND (“Southeast Asia”)
- TITLE-ABS-KEY (“digitalization”) AND (“politic” OR “politics”)

These queries initially yielded 475–507 articles from Scopus, while complementary searches on other platforms identified approximately 743 sources. The results were refined by restricting publication years to 2015–2025, limiting to peer-reviewed journal articles, and focusing on Southeast Asian cases. After removing duplicates, a total of 21 documents were selected for in-depth analysis. To strengthen the review, policy reports, government documents, online articles, and conference proceedings were also included as supplementary materials.

For analysis, each document was coded according to bibliographic identity, thematic focus, and key findings. A coding matrix was developed to categorize the literature into major themes such as:

1. Digitalization and governance,
2. Economic competitiveness and growth,
3. Digital divide and inclusivity,
4. Technopolitics and power relations,
5. Regional/Geopolitical Dimensions, and
6. Policy and regulatory frameworks.

The coding process combined deductive categories (derived from theoretical frameworks such as Dahl's pluralism and Lukes' three dimensions of power) with inductive themes that emerged from the literature. This dual approach ensured that both established theories and context-specific insights were captured.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Digitalization for Economic Development in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is among the fastest-growing regions in terms of digital economic development, making it an important case for analyzing the intersection of digital transformation and economic growth (Li, 2022). Despite the global economic instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the region witnessed a significant surge in digital technology adoption. Discussions surrounding digital technology in Southeast Asia have been evolving since the 1990s, coinciding with a structural shift from resource-based economies to manufacturing industries (Tahalele et al., 2023). In line with this transformation, Southeast Asian countries began to integrate digital technologies into their broader strategy for ASEAN economic integration. Notably, regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Digital Integration Framework Action Plan (DIFAP) have been developed to accelerate economic recovery and promote digital integration across the region.

Digital transformation in Southeast Asia not only encompasses technological and industrial development but also reshapes institutional mechanisms and the involvement of diverse actors in its governance. The growing prominence of e-commerce, digital media, financial technology (fintech), app-based transportation services, e-government, and artificial intelligence (AI) illustrates the complexity and dynamism of the region's digital landscape. Furthermore, Southeast Asia holds a demographic advantage, with over 670 million people, most of whom are young and digitally literate and more

than 400 million internet users. This demographic shift highlights the essential role of multiple actors in digitalization, including states, multinational corporations, and subnational players such as micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Previously, digital governance was dominated by states and major corporations, including China's growing role as a technological investor actively engaging with digital platforms. With rising internet penetration, the region's digital economy is projected to exceed USD 300 billion by 2025 (Tahalele et al., 2023).

A prominent example of successful digital adoption in the region is Singapore's Smart Nation Initiative, underpinned by the development of robust Infocomm infrastructure. This initiative demonstrates how governments can leverage digital technologies to enhance economic competitiveness and foster a more interconnected society (Seng, 2016). Since the launch of the Infocomm Media (ICM) strategy and related technological projects in 2015, the contribution of the digital sector to Singapore's GDP increased from 7.4% in 2011 to 8.3% in 2015 (Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2017). The Smart Nation Initiative is not a standalone policy but a culmination of successive strategies dating back to the 1980s, including the Civil Service Computerization Program, IT 2000 Strategic Plan (1992), e-Government Action Plans (2000), iGov 2010 (2006), and the e-Gov Masterplan (2015). The initiative is led by the Smart Nation Program Office (SNPO) under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and institutionalized within the Government Technology Agency (GovTech). This case underscores the necessity of a long-term strategy, policy continuity, and multi-stakeholder engagement, including the private sector and civil society, for successful digitalization (Sipahi & Saayi, 2024).

Vietnam has also demonstrated similar ambitions by aiming for a 30% contribution from the digital economy to its GDP by 2030. The government has heavily invested in AI and developed strategic partnerships, such as VinBrain's collaboration with NVIDIA, to foster technological growth and national economic development (*NVIDIA and The Transformation of Vietnam's Tech Landscape*, 2025). In Malaysia, the MyDigital initiative (Malaysia Digital Economy) launched by the government attracted RM 16.5 billion in digital investment in 2021 (MyDigital, 2022), strengthening its position as a high-value digital investment hub (Economic Planning Unit, 2016). These trends highlight the role of digital technology as a strategic instrument of state power and a key driver of economic development

across Southeast Asia. As Spulbar emphasize, there is a positive correlation between access to digital technology and improved economic performance, reinforcing the imperative for governments to adopt and support digital technologies in development planning (Spulbar et al., 2022).

However, despite the promising digital growth, Southeast Asian countries still face multiple challenges. In Indonesia, digitalization has become a national agenda, with Sumedang Regency serving as a model for e-government implementation. Nonetheless, digital success does not automatically translate into improved welfare. Although it boasts an advanced digital governance system, Sumedang still struggles with extreme poverty, affecting 0.53% of its population, or around 6,370 individuals as of 2023 (Putri, 2024).

Regulatory issues remain a critical concern. ASEAN, as the region's intergovernmental body, still lacks a comprehensive legal framework to govern the digital economy and ensure that digitalization contributes directly to economic growth. Meanwhile, internet penetration continues to rise by approximately 10% every five years. ASEAN's digital infrastructure has become increasingly sophisticated, with average internet speeds in Singapore (118 Mbps) surpassing those in the United States (36.6 Mbps) (Wibowo, 2018). Nevertheless, digital governance gaps persist, particularly in countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. These countries face regulatory weaknesses that hinder the development of their telecommunications sectors, limiting their economic potential. In Myanmar, for instance, political instability has obstructed major digital projects and foreign investment. Moreover, the low quality of human capital in information and communication technologies (ICT) exacerbates the digital divide in these nations (Mubah et al., 2017). Indonesia also faces regulatory barriers in the startup ecosystem, including cumbersome and prolonged licensing processes (Rohendi et al., 2023).

On the other hand, digital investment from Chinese technology companies has surged in recent years, positioning Southeast Asia as a prime target, particularly in the fintech sector. China's growing dominance in digital investment has, in turn, influenced disparities across the region. Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have received substantial investments from companies like Tencent and Ant Financial (Alibaba). However, approval rates for these investments vary: Malaysia's approval rate stands at 58%, while Indonesia and the Philippines trail at 52% and 50%, respectively (Rabe

& Kostka, 2023). Interestingly, countries with higher approval rates, such as Malaysia, tend to have better digital literacy and stronger development potential, suggesting a correlation between digital openness and socio-economic advancement.

Digitalization as a Power Arena

In today's technology-driven world, digitalization is often understood as a tool to enhance the effectiveness of various forms of work, particularly in the context of development. Numerous studies have framed technology as an integral component within a network of both human and non-human actors, suggesting that technology and human practices are mutually constitutive in a continuous process of interaction (Schaupp, 2021). In many cases, digital technologies appear to possess a form of "agency" seemingly dictating their own trajectories. This perception is reinforced by the widespread belief that technological advancement drives societal change—an idea echoed by Robert Heilbroner, who emphasized the determinative role of technical change in shaping social transformations (Street, 1992).

Nevertheless, it is critical to recognize that behind every digital innovation lies a series of political decisions made by human actors, ranging from regulatory frameworks and system designs to the interests being pursued. As Street (1992) points out, the emergence of technology cannot be separated from discussions about how politics is enacted, the agendas it sets, and the interests at stake. From a broader historical perspective, even Marx argued that technology constructs specific relations of power (Street, 1992). This underscores the notion that digitalization should not be perceived merely as a neutral tool within the developmental agenda, rather, it must be acknowledged as a site of power contestation where various actors seek to assert their interests.

Rather than portraying digitalization as a deterministic battleground between human and non-human actors, Robert Dahl offers a pluralist perspective on power relations through his "*pluralist model of democracy*" (Dahl, 1957). Based on his studies of decision-making processes in democratic societies, Dahl argued that power is diffused and contested among multiple actors within a political system. No single entity holds absolute control, instead, power is continuously negotiated among various interest groups. In the context of digitalization, this pluralism is reflected in the complex interactions between governments, tech corporations, investment actors, internet users, and civil society stakeholders influencing digital policy.

Digital algorithms evidently draw human actors into active engagement. In countries like Indonesia, digital service providers compete to enter public sector digital projects, often collaborating with the government, PLN ICON Plus, Telkomsel, and other providers. The most affordable and efficient providers gain a greater share of control over digital service users (Putri, 2024). In other contexts, like Singapore's "Smart Nation," the role of both citizens and the government in managing personal data use is explicitly emphasized (Seng, 2016). Similarly, economic systems, acceptance and pressure, alongside the strategic interests of actors seeking to maintain privileged access to user data for professional advantage. Dahl contends that in democratic societies, political power is distributed among competing groups that influence public policy. While these groups ostensibly have equal rights and opportunities to participate in the political process, Dahl acknowledges the reality that not all interest groups possess equal access or influence, those with greater resources and organizational capacity are often better positioned to shape policy outcomes (Dahl, 1957).

Norris, Keniston, and Kumar (Mubah et al., 2017) observe persistent inequalities in access to digital technologies, particularly between those with power and those marginalized within social or political structures. As such, the success of digitalization in driving economic development cannot be separated from questions of power and political will. China's dominance in tech investment, for instance, creates economic benefits for countries with higher approval rates. Approval percentages vary by country, with Malaysia at 58%, compared to Indonesia's 52% and the Philippines at 50% (Rabe & Kostka, 2023). Notably, countries with higher acceptance of Chinese investment, such as Malaysia, also exhibit stronger digital literacy and development potential. Singapore exemplifies how digitalization, when supported by coherent policy and political stability, can generate sustained economic growth. Conversely, countries like Myanmar and Cambodia illustrate the risks of digitalization in the absence of effective governance, often failing to translate digital initiatives into meaningful economic welfare. State support thus remains vital in advancing the digitalization agenda (Zaman, 2022). This reflects the distributed nature of power in the role of digitalization within economic development.

Steven Lukes' theory of power relations offers a deeper analytical lens for understanding digitalization, positing three dimensions of power: visible power (one-dimensional), hidden power (two-dimensional),

and power within consciousness (three-dimensional) (Whitt & Lukes, 1980). In the visible dimension, power operates through observable decision making processes. Here, digitalization facilitates transparent policymaking, particularly evident in regulatory frameworks surrounding economic development. States act as regulators, while tech corporations navigate and influence these frameworks to maintain their dominance in the digital economy.

In the second, hidden dimension, digitalization becomes an instrument for controlling the agenda and limiting the scope of public discourse. Power extends beyond overt decisions or agenda-setting to shaping how the public thinks and what issues gain visibility. Dominant tech firms, or even governments, can subtly influence public opinion through their control over information flows. Singapore's Smart Nation and Digital Government Group (SNDGG), which has merged with the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), is a case in point: supporting narratives that align with digitalization goals while marginalizing dissenting perspectives (Hirdaramani, 2023).

The third, most profound dimension, power within consciousness, positions digitalization as a mechanism that shapes cognitive frameworks and social norms. It does not merely control information. It molds the very way society understands and interprets reality, often leading to the unconscious acceptance of the status quo. In Southeast Asia, societies are not only compelled to comply with digital demands but also internalize and optimize them in everyday life to pursue economic stability. Workers are increasingly expected to engage with and adapt to digital platforms. This creates a significant digital divide, with dominant actors capable of shaping public discourse and social perception, thus widening the gap between the powerful and the powerless. Nevertheless, the involvement of human actors in digital governance in Southeast Asia also opens up opportunities for participatory democracy, which provides a corrective approach to such inequalities. By fostering active citizen engagement in policymaking, participatory democracy can broaden public deliberation and accountability. Digitalization, therefore, should not be understood as a neutral or purely technical phenomenon, rather, it is an inherently political process with far-reaching implications for power distribution. The state, corporations, and society continually engage in negotiation and adaptation within the dynamics of digital power, where infrastructure, algorithms, and regulations serve as core instruments of influence. Digitalization can reinforce power structures, reshape

social relations, and establish new mechanisms of control through automation and algorithmic governance. As Schaupp notes, labor discipline and economic discipline increasingly depend on such mechanisms. In this context, digitalization emerges as a potent source of power, demonstrating how human and non-human actors interact to shape policies and societal engagement with economic development. This reinforces the view that digitalization must be understood as a deeply political process, rather than a mere technical solution.

Democracy as a safeguard against power asymmetry

Digital technology plays an active role in shaping democracy, both as a tool of empowerment and as a mechanism of social control. It promises broader political participation and greater public engagement in decision-making processes. Digital platforms have enabled citizens to become more actively involved, for instance, through social media, e-government initiatives, and other participatory models. Within deliberative or participatory democratic frameworks, citizens exposed to information through digital technologies interact with a diversity of ideas and contribute meaningfully to public discourse (Gray et al., 2023). The power of digitalization not only accelerates technological transformation but also sustains democracy through inclusive participation in development processes. Digitalisation has been perceived as a stimulus towards a more participative society or as support to decision making. Yet, it is not immune to critique; the political will of key actors remains the determining factor in whether digitalization serves as an instrument of democratization or, conversely, deepens power asymmetries (Parycek et al., 2017). In the Southeast Asia, the digital divide risks reinforcing disparities between those who control digital infrastructures and those who lack equitable access.

Without strong political commitment to uphold participatory democracy through inclusive digital policies, digitalization risks becoming a vehicle for political and economic domination by a handful of actors with control over technology and data. In this context, participatory democracy serves as a critical mechanism for maintaining a balance of power. When public participation in digital policymaking weakens, asymmetrical power structures increasingly favor those with control over digital infrastructures, leading to an exclusive digital ecosystem that inhibits equitable distribution of technological benefits. Political commitment to participatory democracy is reflected in various policy measures, such as

ensuring universal internet access, improving digital literacy, and leveraging technology for transparency and government accountability.

However, these ideals are often challenged by the reality that society is, both consciously and subtly, swept along by the tides of digital technology use. Nur and Kayano describe this as algorithmic manipulation, where dominant political narratives are shaped by opaque systems of computation. Participatory democracy, however, offers a pathway to resist such algorithmic dominance. If citizens possess critical awareness of how algorithms operate, they can engage with technology more autonomously, contribute to the creation of more open digital systems, and advocate for policies that protect freedom of information and digital rights (Nur & Kayano, 2020). Through a robust participatory democracy, power disparities induced by digitalization can be mitigated, ensuring that technology functions as a means of empowerment for the broader society rather than merely a tool of dominance for elite actors.

CONCLUSION

Digitalization in Southeast Asia is not merely about technological adoption or economic modernization; it is a contested arena where power relations, both human and non-human, interact, negotiate, and shape development outcomes. This study shows that digital infrastructures and platforms are deeply political spaces where authority and interests converge. Drawing on Dahl's pluralist model and Lukes' three dimensions of power, the analysis highlights how digital power in the region operates through decision-making, non-decision-making, and the shaping of dominant social narratives and consciousness. Cross-country comparisons reveal varied trajectories: Singapore demonstrates long-term policy continuity and robust infrastructure; Vietnam pursues catch-up growth through AI partnerships; Malaysia leverages digital investment with stronger literacy; Indonesia highlights welfare gaps despite advanced governance; while Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar face structural and regulatory weaknesses.

These findings underscore that technological adoption alone is insufficient to secure inclusive and sustainable economic growth. What matters equally are the design of digital policies, the control of infrastructures, and the degree of democratic participation embedded in governance. Democratic processes, particularly participatory and inclusive ones, act as safeguards against asymmetrical power and ensure that digitalization benefits extend beyond

elite actors. Thus, digitalization should be critically understood as a political process, not a neutral technical pathway. Its success depends on deliberate, power-sensitive governance that redistributes digital power and fosters equity, participation, and sustainability across Southeast Asia.

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