

Social media and politics

Asian politicians are increasingly relying on social networking sites to win support of young voters

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Asia News Network

Publication Date : 18-04-2011

Everyone was expecting opposition and ruling parties leaders to trade barbs during the debates on vote of no-confidence in Thailand. The same happened when the parliament's floor was opened on March 15 for the final battle to oust the prime minister. But this time the dirty linens were washed not only in parliament but on social media site, Twitter, as well.

The opposition leaders were quick to throw volley of criticisms on the micro-blogging site after Premier Abhisit Vejjajiva said Thailand's public debt was 42.75 per cent of the GDP during the time when Thaksin Shinawatra was the PM, compared with 41.94 per cent under this government.

They said: The PM had compared the highest monthly public debt from the Thaksin government with the lowest monthly public debt of his government. It was distortion of truth, they claimed.

Even former premier Thaksin, who had kept his microblogging account defunct for several months, joined the fray saying the lowest figure under his government—40.48 per cent of the GDP—was lower than Abhisit's lowest public debt of 41.94 per cent.

Like Thaksin and members of the opposition, many Thai politicians are now using the micro-blogging site to express their side of views to the public, and many of them have significant number of followers. For instance, PM Abhisit's Twitter account, @PM_Abhisit, has 170,000 followers. Thai Finance minister Korn Chatikavanij's has 71,000 followers on the same microblogging site, while opposition leader Chaturon Chaisang's Twitter account, @chaturon, has 32,000 followers.

Their participation on the social networking sites have made them more accessible to the public. At least, people don't have to visit coffee or tea shops in the neighbourhood to get an update on or confirm certain situation not covered by the traditional media. Now they can extract information straight from the horse's mouth from these sites.

On the flip side, these sites have also made the public more accessible to politicians. Nowadays, politicians necessarily don't have to look for a venue to speak to the people. They can just type whatever they have in their minds on these sites and their messages can spread like wildfire within minutes. In fact, this was how Malaysia's opposition coalition was able to win more seats in parliament in 2008.

The outstanding performance by the opposition during the last general election also made Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak realise that social media had indeed become an influential mode of information exchange. And in 2009, he started tweeting. He has more than 88,000 followers on Twitter and more than half a million users 'like' his Facebook page.

Even former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad is an active user of social networking sites. He tweets and his blog, **chedet.cc**, is one of the most visited sites in the country, with more than 33 million viewers since it was set up in May 2008.

Now, it looks like, Singaporean politicians will also try to exploit Twitter and Facebook to reach out to people during the elections this year as the government has now eased rules on the use of social media for campaigning purposes.

"There will still be blogs that you will visit for specific views. But this time, the chatter and conversation will be happening on Facebook and Twitter. It's the next phase, as people now can have real-time conversations with each other," *The Straits Times* quoted blogger Lee Kin Mun, 42, better known as Mr

Brown, as saying.

Now even Chinese politicians, who necessarily do not need public votes to get a post, have started using social media to connect with the public.

Earlier this month, Xinjiang party secretary Zhang Chunxian attracted a following of 140,000 within seven days of setting up an account on the Chinese clone of Twitter. Even President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have used the public forums on the Internet to chat with netizens over the past three years.

“Officials are getting more interested in directly communicating with ordinary folk. By using microblogs, they can bypass the middlemen and hear views that they can’t traditionally hear,” *The Straits Times* quoted professor Yu Guoming, an expert in online public opinion from Renmin University, as saying. This is probably why Jia Qinglin, China’s top political adviser, said soliciting public opinion from the Internet should be on the top of the government’s agenda for this year.

Santosh Desai, chief executive of Indian branding consulting firm Future Brands, said social networks are one way for individual politicians to sell their brand.

“Politicians will use it to explain themselves and create a constituency,” he told *The Straits Times*, referring to new media. But he also cautioned: “It’s an intermediary device. Sometimes valuable, sometimes dangerous.”

Already some Asian politicians have gotten into trouble by being too lax on sites such as Twitter.

Former Indian junior foreign minister Shashi Tharoor, known as Mr Twitter, got into trouble when he described economy-class travel as “cattle class”. He had made the comment after the Indian government launched an austerity drive asking all politicians to fly economy class instead of business class.

In Malaysia, Chua Soi Lek, leader of Malaysian Chinese Association, the largest Chinese-based political party in the country, has been rapped by supporters and opposition for hitting his critics with ‘four-letter word’ tweets. And last year, Indonesian information minister was criticised for making anti-gay comments, in which he twitted “behaviours which are potentially carrying the virus must be prevented”, referring to gay film festival being held in Jakarta, which was protested by Islamic hardliners and students.

The bottom line: Tweet but think before you tweet.