

## Digital Transformation in Southeast Asia

With its comparatively young and tech-savvy population, Southeast Asia is by now one of the fastest growing markets in terms of digital enterprises. Singapore is considered as a global pioneer for digitalization, particularly in the application of modern technology in the financial sector and public administration, but also in the control and surveillance of its citizens.

Other states and companies in the region are also developing strategies for digital transformation. Massive investments in the technical infrastructure and the promotion of companies are intended to ensure competitiveness. Governments associate digitalization with the hope of catch-up 'development' and repositioning on the global market, the transition from supplier industries to higher value creation at home. Indonesia, for instance, introduced the initiative *Making Indonesia 4.0* in 2018. The country – a member state of the G20 – wants to increase its competitiveness and to consolidate its place among the major economies. The government hopes to create up to 10 million jobs thanks to this initiative. Other Southeast Asian countries have developed similar strategies.

Whether this transformation in the region will actually succeed is by no means certain. The economy of many Southeast Asian countries is still driven by small and medium-sized enterprises. They lack of capital to fundamentally modernize their production and to participate in the digital transformation. The availability of cheap labour does not create an immediate need for this either. Conversely, the lack of qualified labour to operate complex production facilities is an obstacle for a fundamental modernisation. Whether the transformation associated with digitization will ultimately generate more jobs than are lost through automation and increased efficiency is also not a foregone conclusion.

Undeniable is the central role the region will play in the worldwide transformation through its reserves of raw materials such as Nickel. However, it remains to be seen how much added value will remain in its countries and at what social and ecological costs these raw materials will be extracted.

The starting conditions for a digital transformation vary greatly among the different countries of Southeast Asia. Whereas 95% of Brunei Darussalam's population has access to the internet, this applies only to a quarter of the population in Laos. However, digitalisation threatens to worsen already persistent inequality not only between, but also, within countries, both between urban centres and rural areas, and between rich and poor. This is no longer only about the availability of digital services, like the services of big platforms like *Uber* or *Grab*. Apart from transportation and delivery services they offer a wide range of other services, which in the past were often provided by small individual companies, which now have to submit themselves to the rules and work conditions of platform providers.

The accessibility or inaccessibility to digital technologies also has an ever increasing influence on how people can participate in public debates and decision-making processes. This touches upon the question how they make their own demands heard. Offline and online, the space for civil society is shrinking. This is about much more than access to digital media. The recently published *Facebook Files*, as well as earlier scandals involving major social-media platforms show that individuals, social groups, and governments can be influenced by the targeting of content on social media. In times of authoritarian regimes (see *südostasien* issue 03/2019) and loose legal regulation, it is crucial what responsibility major digital platforms take to ensure a free and critical civil society.

For the forthcoming issue of *südostasien*, we are looking for articles, background reports, analysis, interviews or photo essays, which discuss the following questions:

- How will the position of Southeast Asian countries within the global competition change as a result of digitalisation? Will the countries succeed in 'catching up' with their 'development' or will existing inequalities and dependencies in global capitalism become more entrenched? What role will Southeast Asia play here as an important supplier of raw materials?
- What changes does the digital transformation and the increasing presence of platforms such as *Uber*, *Grab* or *Gojek* bring to the world of work and what strategies are workers and trade unions pursuing to assert their interests?

- Which other companies/entrepreneurs are among the driving forces in the digitalization sector? In whose hands are these companies? What overlaps of interest exist – especially in the case of corporations that are active in various business areas - in relation to other economic fields, and what political influence is exerted?
- What happens to small businesses/employees in the informal sector that do not have access to the large platforms and do not have the same technical and logistical capabilities as large companies?
- Social media platforms are fundamentally changing the forms of social interaction and the way debates and conflicts are conducted in society. This offers new opportunities to mobilize supporters and make civil society demands heard. But governments, as well as economic, cultural, and religious actors, are also using new media to further their interests. What does this mean for civil society and what responses are there to counter the negative effects (e.g. fake news, hate messages, intimidation)?
- How prepared are state institutions for the digital transformation – also to ensure the protection of their citizens' data? To what extent are the existing laws/legal frameworks sufficient to protect personal information and safeguard it against misuse?
- What opportunities does digitalization offer, apart from the challenges and dangers mentioned above? Have there been any positive developments for civil society actors, especially in light of the Covid 19 pandemic?

We would like to address these issues in various forms – commentaries, background reports, photo essays, portrait essays, interviews, and reviews of films, books or music on the subject. We look forward to your contributions!

**Editorial information:**

- Media: Please send us photographs of good quality matching the article (at least 1000 px width, at least 300 dpi).
- Copyright & Copyleft: Copyright questions should be clarified in advance and the pictures should be labelled (photographer and picture title). Principally, all content is published under a Creative Commons License Attribution (CC-BY-SA 4.0).
- Deadline: Deadline for articles (max. 10,000 characters) is August 15th 2022 (in individual cases and after consultation with the editors, a later deadline may be possible). Please submit a short abstract (max. 1,000 characters) to the editors in advance.

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**About *südostasien*:**

*südostasien* gathers voices on and from Southeast Asia on current developments in politics, economy, ecology, society, and culture. Each year through four different thematic focuses, articles on the region and its respective countries as well as their international relations are published on our website. *südostasien* sees itself as a pluralistic forum for solidary and critical dialogue – as a space for discussions between actors in Southeast Asia and Germany with knowledge of and proximity to social movements. *südostasien* deals with the possibilities of transnational solidarity work in the face of unequal power relations between the Global South and North. *südostasien* wants to provide food for thought for action in Germany and Europe.