Supinya Klangnarong: Amplifying Silenced Voices

by Anna M. Dinglasan

In April 7, 2010, amidst escalating anti-government protests in Thailand, Prime Minister Ahbisit Vejjajiva declared a state of emergency in Bangkok and other neighbouring areas resulting in the censoring of media in terms of content and the imposition of heavier restrictions in terms of media operations. Since then, more than forty-seven community radio stations were shut down, and forty nine persons in relation to the operation of these stations were arrested without warrants.[1] The state of emergency also resulted in the blocking of at least thirty six websites the same month it was declared. Figures rose to about 612 blocked websites ninety days after.[2]

Isis International spoke with Supinya Klangnarong of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform and the Thai Netizen Network in Thailand to talk about the situation in Thailand more than six months after the state of emergency was declared.

Isis International: Please describe the context in Thailand right now -- how are different forms of media, for example, the radio and internet are being censored.

Supinya Klangnarong (SK): In Thailand, the internet is now being used widely. Thailand has a population of 66 million and about 25 percent use the internet, that's around 20 million people, mostly middle class and educated people. According to a survey, most users go on the internet to seek information they used to get from mainstream media like newspapers and television. Now, majority of the internet users use it to keep updated in news and current affairs.

Since the political crises, after the military coup in 2006, even more people use the internet to seek information and express their ideas. Yet as people have begun to exercise their freedom of expression in relation to the serious or controversial political issues, the government has also started to dramatically censor websites. In fact most of the dissidents websites in Thailand have been blocked. Before the crisis, blocked websites were mostly related to pornography but the problem is that there is no criteria as to what they mean by pornographic websites. And now, they have become stricter so that political websites that are related to controversial issues, especially those related to the monarchy or royal family have also been blocked.

In addition, a number of internet dissidents or users who log on to the internet to say something controversial have also been detained or arrested. They may be convicted through the Computer Crime Act which not only looks at users as perpetrators but also Internet Service Providers (ISPs), webmasters or the owner of websites if they are found guilty of publishing any information that is against national security and public order.

The problem with Thailand and with this law is that we don't really know the criteria or qualifications — what does national security mean? What does public order mean? Normally it is generalised or politicised, especially during the crisis and it is even worse now that the government has declared a state of emergency on April 7 of 2010 because of the demonstrations. The state of emergency is still being implemented

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Computer Crime Act

Computer Crime Act: Took effect on August 2007. The Computer Crime Act is Thailand's first serious attempt at dealing with crimes in cyberspace. The goal of the act is to plug the loopholes in existing laws in order to empower law-enforcement agencies to more effectively deal with crimes committed via the computer or Internet. Such crimes include hacking, unlawfully accessing computers or network resources, and the unauthorised interception of emails or data transmission with the aim to commit theft or do harm to others. Without this law, law-enforcement officials would be unable to apply the Criminal Code and criminal procedures in order to go after cyber-criminals.

Editorial: New law takes aim at cyber-criminals

The Computer Crime Act will finally enable authorities to protect "netizens" and enhance e-commerce.

in Bangkok now and its allowed the government to block any website without accountability.

Earlier, according to the Computer Crime Act, when the government wants to block a website, they have to get a court order. But since we are in a state of emergency, they don't have to do so. The government can now block any website immediately. Up until now it is still a big issue, a lot of political websites are being blocked and a number of internet users are being arrested.

Isis: You said that initially, the censoring of the website had a lot to do with pornographic materials and later on, particularly during the crises, it has become more political in nature. How does this duality – the cultural or political censoring of the internet affect women in Thailand? For example, greater restriction on the internet in terms of pornography would be advantageous to women and has probably helped alleviate cybercrimes. Yet there is a lack of criteria when censoring such websites. So what have been the particular effect on women?

SK: Women have been targeted by the authorities. A number of internet users are women because it has allowed them to openly participate in politics because in the communities and other contexts women are reluctant to talk about or express their

concern over political issues. So in this sense, the internet has encouraged women to speak up and be heard. For instance, you can say that the number of Thai women using social media like Facebook and Twitter is increasing. Almost 70% of women are using the internet, especially the social media. Through the internet, specifically through social media, Thai women are better able to express their political point of view. In essence, the internet has allowed and encouraged women to participate in politics and express themselves more freely than ever before in other platforms.

If you follow some of the women in their Facebook wall, especially during the political crises, you will observe that before they never say anything or never talk about politics but now they engage and talk about it more. Of course some of them may be too liberal, aggressive, some of them may be too conservative, others moderate, it doesn't matter. Somehow the internet has created a space for them to talk about politics. But this happened only during the political turmoil – they have used the internet a lot for information, to chat with their friends about what's been happening, even to sign petitions not matter which side they are on. Social media has allowed women in Thailand to express their concern and ideas in politics, especially during the turmoil.

Isis: In a huge way, the internet has allowed women to participate more in politics especially to express their own concerns and opinions.

SK: The internet has allowed women to be themselves and to express themselves more. It may allow women to become more open than they were through interpersonal communications. It has allowed them to express their inner feelings in every matter. On the other hand, there may be negative effects too. Many young females do not know how to handle the situation when they open themselves too much and receive negative criticism or feedback form Thai society which is still quite conservative. There are different levels or degrees of how the internet has allowed women to be more open. And this can be applied to political situations as well.

Isis: While the internet has allowed women to be more open and expressive, the same openness has also resulted in criticism from Thai society just because these are not acceptable in Thai culture. What does this imply for Thai women?

SK: I think it is quite a contradiction. For example, when you are talking about sexuality. Thai people do not talk about sexuality openly but in reality you will see sex workers everywhere even if it is illegal. Thailand is considered one of the biggest sexual industry destinations in the world. People come here because of the sex industry or sex workers but Thai people or media never talk about it openly. Even in schools where young people are not encouraged to talk about sex and contraceptives because these are controversial issues.

This is why the internet has become a new platform for young people to seek information on things that they want to know more about – sex, sexuality, contraceptives. Many young women can't talk to their parents so they search in Google – how they can find out whether they are pregnant or not, where to find contraceptives, or if they have sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Some of the websites that are being blocked now are about the morning after pill. It is illegal and young women buy it online. Thailand has a high rate of unwanted and teenage pregnancies and this is because young people don't know how to protect themselves. There is a high rate of illegal abortion too. The internet allows them to get the information they need but we know this is not enough. It should be supported by other means of education – in the school and also openness in the family.

What I'm trying to say is that internet is not enough. The culture in Thailand needs to be changed and should be able to accommodate changes outside of our country.

Isis: How has civil society responded to this kind of censorship?

SK: People are becoming more disturbed by the increasing degree of censorship. We are quite an open society but people will draw the lines when national security or public order becomes at risk. We are under a Constitutional Monarchy our King has been revered and respected by the people so even if the government does not censor a particular website that speaks negatively about the King, the people will still react. Thai society is under deep paralysis and conflict.

So when the internet has become a platform where people can talk about sensitive issues, and when government doesn't try to block the websites, some of the people who are not happy with this pressure the government and even encourage them to use legal action, especially when it comes to sensitive issues pertaining to the royal family. According to the lese-majeste law[4], Thai and foreign people who violate its provisions could be sentenced up to 15 - 20 years. If you look at the freedom of expression perspective, this kind of action violates it completely. It is really a contradiction within Thai society. I think we have to discuss this more seriously – how far should the government censor and how much could we tolerate? Those related laws and regulations on expression need to be reviewed too since many acts have been misused. However, there is a limitation – this issue can't be discussed openly and it is difficult to defend freedom of expression because it is perceived to be against some public sentiment, against the views of some people who believe that internet should be controlled by government, not only for political issues but also for social issues too.

Since young people are addicted to internet and new media, the older people have become upset saying that the internet has been exploiting their kids. So that is why they tend to agree with the government when they start to control or highly regulate the internet. That is why our group should be concerned and that is why we are working with different groups as well because not all people think that internet is an opportunity, they see it more of a threat. So it is important to know how to balance the Thai society.

Isis: Are there particular programmes or projects that have aim towards trying to create this balance? What are you engaged in?

SK: We had a dialogue with our prime minister last year who agreed that there was a need to create a balance between cyber liberty and internet liberty. We wanted to engage with government and policy makers because this is an issue related to the law and one that needs legal actions. At that time, we had a good talk with the PM and he said there really is a need to balance internet liberty and national security. However the government also is going through a political turmoil and the government had to take sides rather than uphold internet liberty. Then we eventually lost contact since there are many cases of internet users and webmasters being arrested continuously. We observed that the situation was beyond the negotiation but I am still optimistic that the government will change the way it has dealt with the issue. The government, because of the political situation has controlled the internet and new media such as satellite TV and community radio as they are seen as threats to political stability. Opposition groups have used these forms of media quite effectively and efficiently and government has responded by using authoritarian or special control over them.

But after the crisis, we have been talking about reconciliation. The government too has begun the Thailand Reform and Reconciliation Campaign[5] because they realised that the way that they controlled the media was not helpful.

For now, we have been keeping distance from the government but while we do that, we are engaged in education campaigns, public forums and such to raise concern about the issue with the public and to get attention of the media. We are also looking forward to the coming election. We are hopeful that it will be a time that Thai people can take advantage of.

We are also taking time to resume debate on the issue of liberty, as the country becomes more stabilised. It's not easy to talk about liberty because people talk and say if there's too much liberty in this country what will happen to us? That's the reason why we have this kind of disaster. So what we are doing now is the education campaigns to inform others and engage other sectors to participate and to elicit their concern about this issue.

Isis: How has this particular issue affected women?

SK: The turmoil really affected women because during this time a lot of people died – form the police, the military, the other groups, many of them were men. The problem is that the women who are wives of the victims suffer greatly. The women are carrying a lot burdens. Political conflict in Thailand has penetrated deeply in every home and women bare much of the responsibility. There was a case that one woman from a rural area who is married to a red shirt but her son is a member of the military. The father participated in the protests and was injured – not by the his son but by the military and of course this has implications on their relationship and how each of them would relate to their own group and the mother/wife has to deal with this too.

The whole conflict is between elite groups but has resulted in a battle where poor people are fighting poor people. Most of the victims are poor people from the countryside who love Mr. Thaksin and they joined the Red Shirts because they believe that Thaksin, the Red Shirts and Democracy will help them rise from poverty. That's why they are not happy with this government. The male children from poor families can't go to universities so they join

the military. Women—the mothers and the wives have to take responsibility, they take care of the family and the kids. So this is a double burden—she wants to participate in politics on the one hand but on the other hand, she has responsibilities for the family too. And it becomes heavier if someone in the family gets injured or dies – especially the husband or son.

Isis: Given that context, are there a lot of participation from women in terms of the action you are doing?

SK: Yes but I must admit that there is not a big group that is involved in the issue of cyber liberty. And in our group, even if there is more men than women, we still have many active members who are women and who participate. In our group though, it is mostly comprised of people from the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector which we know is still male dominated. But even if this is the case, men and women within the network, I can say, are quite equal and respect each other. Some of the men who are very interested in the issue have been very open-minded and have liberal thoughts about gender issues. Some of the males activists, who believe in internet freedom tend to believe in other freedoms and liberties and respect other

issues. So you can see mutual respect especially in terms of gender.

In general, the movement is still very small and there are very few organisations working on this issue. In other countries, there are a lot of organisations and individuals working on the issue of internet liberty. But in Thailand, there are still very few and I really don't know why. This may be related to how many people believe in internet freedom but if it involves specific issues like the monarchy it becomes very difficult.

People think that Thailand has much freedom already, and that this is just one issue, so why does it matter? Some people argue that... we are quite open and can talk openly about anything. The only issue we can't talk about openly is the monarchy. Thai people love their King and so we should limit ourselves, that's one of the reasons why there isn't a lot of groups talking about internet freedom. Also there is still an ambiguity in terms of what we can discuss or not so most people practice self-censorship. There is a lot of philosophical and theoretical debate around this but at the same time we also want to develop the legal standard especially in human rights protection. What we do is to raise concern and talk to government and get everyone involved, especially women. We are also interested in the gender perspective in internet use.

Isis: What kind of education campaigns do you do?

SK: We are concerned about two aspects – one is on access. We hope we can also do work on internet literacy. Only 25% of the people of Thailand has internet access and this is mostly concentrated in the urban areas. I am working with the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) in order to liberalise mobile communications. And working towards 3G technology and work towards this has been very slow because the government does not want to invest in internet infrastructure. But we work towards a policy that would give people access to internet by women in the rural areas.

Isis: You mentioned that people from the rural areas do not have access to the internet, they also use community radio. Have community radio stations or programmes been able to increase women's participation in politics as well, the way the internet has for many urban women?

SK: Yes, community radio provided opportunity for women to participate in politics especially these days that Thailand has gone through the period of political crisis. Thai citizens are more politically motivated and women have been more engaged on social and cultural issues. However, in general, men still occupy most of the leadership and high level positions in community radio such as producers, announcers and management positions. Also community radio is voluntary therefore most women can't participate because they are pre-occupied with housework and caregiving.

Isis: Community radios have also been censored by the government. How has this affected the women?

SK: Yes, most of community radio affiliated with the opposition or those represented by dissidents voices have been censored and shut down by the government under the state of emergency law. This censoring has prevented the airing and spread of opposition point of views. I feel that this has affected women too, and has pushed them to be more passionate and involved in politics. Yet while this is happening, community radio has also been a space where hate speech and violence are cultivated – a very critical issue to reflect on as people's political engagement increases through the use of media.

Isis: Given the political and cultural context in Thailand right now, what do you think would the future of community and independent media would be? Do you foresee a rise or a decline in the creation and use of such media? Why/ why not?

SK: There is a critical need for independent and impartial media in Thailand especially during this time when the country is highly polarised and divided, as well as in a critical transition, a situation which, while brought about by the political crises, also highly influenced by partisan media. Community radio stations are considered a media that serves local taste and affairs. However, there needs to be fair and proper regulatory policies in place, including a code of conduct that is agreed upon by all stakeholders. It is also important to develop gender fair capacity building within the community and to ensure the participation of women so as to provide them with more opportunities to engage in community radio. I think this is necessary if community and independent media is to foster a healthy and democratic society. ◆

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Sources:

1 From "Thailand: Where Thinking Differently is a Crime," a report of community radio intervention during political conflict situation prepared by the Campaign for Media Reform (CPMR) in August 2010.

2 "Silenced Smiles: Freedom of Expression in Thailand," East Asia Forum.

3 Supinya Klangnarong is a Thai media rights advocate and current vice-chair of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform (CPMR). A graduate from Chulalongkorn University she holds a BA from the Faculty of Communication Arts, a MA from the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Thammasat University and a MA in Communication Policy and Regulations from the University of Westminster. She previously served as secretarygeneral of the CPMR from 2003-2008. (http;//www.wikipedia.org)

4 Is a crime of violating majesty, an offense against the dignity of a reigning sovereign or against a state (Wikipedia.org). In Thailand, this is enshrined in Section 8 of its constitution.

5 Launched on 10 June 2010 by Prime Minister Abhisit who called on all Thais to participate in reforming the country. The campaign was launched under the premise that government alone could not pull Thailand out of the political crisis it is in and that it needs the help of its people in order to build a better future for the country. The campaign resulted in a five-point national reconciliation plan that discusses various issues such as respect for the monarchy, socio-economic reform, political reform, media reform, and constitutional amendment. The reconciliation plan also includes the conduct of a fact finding mission on the incidents that transpired from the protests in April and May.