

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

The years between 1974 to 2005 witnessed what would later be called the “third wave” of global democratization, where many countries transitioned to democracy and thus increasing the number of democratic governments by almost twice the previous number (Diamond, 2021; Huntington, 1991). This wave spread everywhere. It started in India, southern Europe, and Latin America in the 1970s, before advancing to Asia, central and eastern Europe, ex-Soviet states, and Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (Diamond, 2021). Meanwhile, the 2000s saw democratic progress in various Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, and even Cambodia, and Myanmar (Kurlantzick, 2020).

Unfortunately, this democratic progress did not last. After a decade of transition to democracy, many countries are reverting to their previous form of authoritarian government. This trend is often coined as “democratic regression” or a loss of democratic quality (Gerschewski, 2021). Particularly in Southeast Asia, this democratic regression was starting to become noticeable in the early 2010s. We see this in Thailand’s 2014 military coup and the subsequent election won by the pro-military party in 2019; Duterte’s ‘drug wars’ which saw thousands of civilian murders and the jailing of journalists and political opponents; and Indonesia’s increasing favorability towards more populist politics and illiberal regulation of civil liberties (Aspinall & Warburton, 2018; Kurlantzick, 2020).

This democratic regression hits even harder in countries like Myanmar, which has always been comparatively more authoritarian even during the era of democratic transition. Although Myanmar was never a fully democratic country, it experienced a brief period of democratic progression after the National League for Democracy (NLD) party won the 2015 general election. The win marked the leadership of Myanmar's first non-military president since the 1960s. Unfortunately, the party was unseated by a military coup after their second landslide victory in the 2020 general election. The coup put Myanmar's military junta back in power and caused Myanmar's status to backslide from 'Partly Free' to 'Not Free' in 2020, a status which the country still maintains now (Freedom House, 2022).

Even so, not all hope is lost for democracy. In many countries experiencing democratic regression, pro-democratic movements are working hard to fight against it. This is true in the case of Thailand's mass demonstrations, in Indonesia's rallies against unjust and undemocratic laws, and even in Myanmar's demonstrations against the junta. Furthermore, there have been accounts of pro-democratic movements which are fighting for their values beyond national borders, forming transnational advocacy networks across Asia, which helps amplify their demands for a more democratic government.

One of Asia's newest pro-democratic transnational movements is the Milk Tea Alliance. This movement first emerged in April 2020 when pro-democratic communities in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan banded together online to fight back against pro-Beijing cyber warriors (Tanakasempipat & Potkin, 2020).

Although it started as an internet war, the movement quickly grew into something more serious as communities within the movement started to utilize their network for heavier issues, such as boycotting Disney's remake of *Mulan* and raising awareness about Xinjiang human rights abuses (Barron, 2020). The movement has also turned their meme wars into real-world action; as Thais started their demonstrations against the military government, Taiwan pro-democratic communities gathered to show their support; as Thai demonstrators marched down the streets, they waved slogans demanding Hong Kong's democracy and carried Taiwan independence flags (Barron, 2020; Everington, 2020).

Although the MTA started as an alliance between Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan pro-democratic communities, its efforts to fight against authoritarianism did not just stop there. After Myanmar's military committed a coup d'état against the country's elected democratic government in February 2021, activists in Myanmar quickly rose to reject the coup and regain their democracy. Not only do these activists work with domestic movements, members of the country's youth movement "Gen Z" also reached out to the MTA through Twitter for help. In response, the MTA members from Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Malaysia also showed their support by accepting Myanmar activists and demonstrating in their respective countries (Potkin & Tanakasempipat, 2021). Under the alliance's Twitter hashtag, various pro-democracy communities across Asia have also shared information regarding the situation in Myanmar and tips on how to protect oneself during demonstrations.

Due to the alliance's efforts in Myanmar, some experts have even gone as far as citing that the alliance 'can play a critical role in the battle for democracy in Southeast Asia' (Chia & Singer, 2021). This claim, along with the Milk Tea Alliance's unique start, its online-based strategies and offline implementations, the fact that it continues to thrive under Asia's increasingly authoritarian governments, and the role that it potentially plays in the fight for Myanmar's democracy are the reasons why this alliance is interesting to research about.

1.2. Research Question

Based on the study cases and context presented in the background, this research aims to answer the following question: "How does the Milk Tea Alliance use social media as an instrument to advocate for democracy in Myanmar?"

1.3. Purpose of Research

1.3.1. General Purpose

In general, this research aims to understand the role of social media in supporting the MTA in the fight against Myanmar's regressing democracy, specifically through the lenses of network society and transnational advocacy networks.

1.3.2. Specific Purpose

The specific purposes of this research are as follows:

- a. To understand the MTA's advocacy strategy by using transnational advocacy networks theory.

- b. To understand the utilization and impact of social media as a tool in the MTA's advocacy by using the theory of network society.

1.4. Benefits of Research

1.4.1. Practical Benefits

From a practical perspective, the author hopes that this research can become a point of reference for future works and help to understand how transnational advocacy networks utilize social media.

1.4.2. Academic Benefits

The author hopes that this research can contribute to the study of international relations, particularly related to topics such as transnational advocacy networks, network society, and the study of democracy in Southeast Asia.

1.5. Literature Review

The relationship between social media and transnational advocacy networks is a popular research topic, notably due to the steady increase of social media users worldwide and the numerous social movements which have utilized it as a platform to voice their aspirations. In this section, I will be highlighting previous research which has discussed this topic. In his research, Bégin (2011) discusses the role of social media in supporting pro-democracy transnational advocacy networks under a repressive government, by using Tunisia's democratic revolution as the case study. Although Bégin did not explicitly use new media theory in analyzing the role of social media in political contexts, he still concludes that social media is a positive

addition to transnational advocacy networks and the fight for Tunisia's democracy. On the other hand, when talking about Southeast Asia, there have been many scholars who argue that social media can be considered a factor that worsens the region's backsliding democracy due to the online campaigns of political disinformation, hate speech, and online mobilizations by the government (Bünthe, 2021). This means that the role of social media in relation to democracy and pro-democratic movements is something that varies and is still heavily contested.

Then, let us narrow down our review to research that has highlighted TANs and pro-democratic movements in Asia. Unfortunately, there hasn't been much research focusing on pro-democracy transnational advocacy networks in Asia or anything which points to the existence of such networks. While research regarding transnational advocacy networks exists, much of them focus on migrant rights. Examples include Piper & Rother (2021), who investigated the strategies of the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) in advocating migrant rights through the lens of regulatory theory. So far, in the context of pro-democracy movements, much of the research focuses on the level of domestic activism, such as (Ting, 2017), which examines the struggles of and how future perceptions can shape Hong Kong's youth activists' participation.

Lastly, we will briefly brush upon literature focusing on the Milk Tea Alliance itself. Perhaps because it is a recently formed movement, not much research has been done about it. One such research is done by Schaffar & Wongratanawin (2021), which discusses the movement's use of social media, particularly in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, as a way for citizens to reject Chinese-led

globalization and authoritarianism; this research also focuses on drawing parallels between the MTA and the anti-globalization movements of the early 2000s.

Although past research has gone in-depth and is incredibly contributive in discussing social media, transnational advocacy networks, and even the MTA, none has focused on studying the movement's strategy and the implications of its social media usage in promoting Myanmar's democracy. The urgency becomes even bigger considering that the MTA is one of Asia's first transnational networks which advocates for democracy and that, regardless of its recency, it has spread to multiple Asian countries.

1.6. Conceptual Framework

1.6.1. Transnational Advocacy Network

Emerging in the 1990s, the theory of TAN is one which attempts to explain and explore the role of advocacy networks in solving various issues. By definition, TANs are networks that are composed of various actors, all of whom are 'bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services' (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Since these networks involve multiple actors, this allows for more opportunities for dialogue and exchange, and for international resources which would otherwise be inaccessible to be available for certain actors (Keck & Sikkink, 1999).

In order to be able to influence certain actors or targets, there are four main strategies that TANs typically employ (Keck & Sikkink, 1998):

- 1) *Information politics*, or the ability to utilize and create political impact by using certain information. TANs obtain influence by gathering and reporting information that otherwise would not be easily available, which they obtain through their widespread networks and connection with grassroots movements (Magrath, 2015). For TANs, information is so important that some scholars argue that information is the key for TANs to be able to present themselves as legitimate and credible representative for the issue they are advocating (Garwood, 2005; Magrath, 2015). Meanwhile, Keck & Sikkink (1998) argue that the most effective information politics strategy is one which combines statistical evidence with testimonials from those who have been directly involved or affected by the issue (Garwood, 2005); the former provides credible data while the latter provides a dramatized packaging to make the presented data more ‘real’ and therefore can resonate better with the public (Magrath, 2015). Since media interest and public sympathy are ‘limited commodities’ (Ron et al., 2005), *when* to present this information is also important; TANs must be able to choose the right political opportunity to present the information they have gathered to maximize its impact (Magrath, 2015).
- 2) *Symbolic politics*, referring to the ability to use certain symbolism or acts to create more public awareness and increase the network’s reach. Usually, TANs utilize symbolic politics after they’ve framed the data and testimonies (Sesar et al., 2021). Moreover, Sesar et al. (2021) argue that if the implementation of this strategy occurs at the right time, it can further

strengthen the previously built framing of an issue through information politics and makes it possible for TANs to create new understandings regarding the issue they are working on (Sesar et al., 2021).

- 3) *Leverage politics*, referring to the ability to work together with more powerful actors to create pressure on the ‘target actor’. This pressure comes in two forms: material and moral (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). While material pressure means that TANs would usually link the issue to money and goods, moral pressure means that the networks expose the behavior of the target actor so that the public can scrutinize said behavior, thus ‘shaming’ these actors (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).
- 4) *Accountability politics*, or the ability to hold the government accountable to their previously stated principles or policies by using the information these networks possess. There are some ways in which TANs can use this strategy, such as by monitoring the progress and implementation of certain policies or by highlighting the hypocrisy of the target actor, should they fail to deliver their promises (Garwood, 2005).

Using these strategies, TANs are then able to frame the issue they bring up in a way that could possibly capture public attention, create pressure on their target, and thus influence positive change. Specifically, this research will discuss the MTA’s strategies and how it is able to utilize information effectively for the benefit of its movement.

To investigate the impact and success of the MTA’s advocacy, this research will use Sikkink’s (2005) dynamic multilevel governance model. This model explains

that movements operate within two spheres or structures, which are domestic and international. The four patterns of interaction that can happen within these spheres are described in the following model:

		International Opportunity Structure	
		Closed	Open
Domestic Opportunity Structure	Closed	A. Diminished chances of activism	B. Boomerang pattern and "spiral model"
	Open	D. Democratic deficit/defensive transnationalization	C. Insider/outsider coalition model

Fig. 1.1 Dynamic Multilevel Governance model. (Source: Sikkink, 2005)

Domestic structures refer to the question of how open domestic political institutions to domestic social movements or NGOs are. It can be considered “closed” if social movements face repression or exclusion in authoritarian regimes. Meanwhile, *international* structures refer to how welcoming are international institutions to the participation of NGOs, networks, and coalitions. This openness varies within different organizations and across years, issues, and regions. Sikkink also emphasizes that the issue of closure or openness is relative, in that activists compare the openness of domestic structures with the international. Thus, the opportunities or threats that structure presents should also be analyzed as how the activists would perceive them instead of from a completely objective perspective.

When these structures are applied to Sikkink’s model, the results are four types of interactions. According to Sikkink (2005), these types would then explain the

possibility of domestic and international activism, its type or focus, and its likelihood to achieve success. The first type is the *closed domestic and international opportunity* or ‘diminished chances of activism’, where activists perceive that opportunities are closed in both domestic and international spheres; in this case, there would be minimum activism and lower chances of success. Second is the *closed domestic and open international opportunities* or the ‘boomerangs and spirals’; when domestic opportunities are closed, for example when the movement is oppressed or faces exclusion, activists turn to international society. Third, *open domestic and closed international opportunities* or the ‘democratic deficit and defensive transnationalization’, where activists believe change should happen within the domestic sphere and international intervention would worsen the current situation. Lastly, the *open domestic and open international opportunities* or the ‘insider-outsider coalitions’, where there are strong domestic norms and international support for a cause.

1.6.2. Network Theory

Castell’s (2010) theory of network society talks about the development of society into something that he calls ‘the network society’, where people are becoming increasingly connected through networks and these networks have become the dominant mode of organizing social relations. He explains how the development of communication technologies such as the internet, computers, and cell phones, create a network of information that’s multidimensional and multidirectional. This means that individuals’ relations aren’t limited by geographical boundaries or time. These technologies and networks help the

decentralization and the efficiency of communication as they create more dynamic, innovative, and adaptable communication.

Not only do networks change communication, Castells also argues that they change social dynamics, for example between individuals and powerful institutions, including the government. With the network's availability and ease of access, more and more people can take advantage of its benefits and use it for theirs, including marginalized communities and economically disadvantaged groups. He suggests that the Zapatistas' social media-coordinated activities and protests against the Mexican government, and the existence of WikiLeaks are some examples of how networks have assisted various communities and the act of online activism.

At its core, there are three concepts that make up the theory of network society: centrality, community, and connectivity (Patty & Penn, 2017). Centrality talks about the extent of an actor's connection with other actors to understand their influence within a network. There are two measures to centrality: first, the more people you know, the better; and second, the more people you connect, the better. The second concept, community, focuses on distinguishing different subgroups or "communities" which exist among the actors within the network. The last concept, connectivity, link the previous two. For example, actors who have many connections with other actors will most likely have a high centrality score, as they know and connect with more people, and are involved in a lot of communities.

To apply network society to politics, we must first understand how politically involved actors utilize these networks to influence other actors. In their transnational advocacy network theory, Keck and Sikkink (1998) discuss how

information, goods, and finally power, are channeled or exchanged through the network. They talk about how local organizations often reach out and become involved with various groups and individuals outside of their state so that although local efforts are suppressed and ineffective at bringing change, the “dense web of connections” between the organizations makes it possible for improvements to happen (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Furthermore, various research has suggested how social media can influence political action, such as by providing mobilizing information and news that are not available in other media, facilitating coordination of protests, allowing users to participate in political issues, and opening up opportunities to exchange and discuss opinion with others (Valenzuela, 2013). In their research, Storck (2011) and Valenzuela (2013) analyzed how political movements benefit from networks, particularly networks facilitated by social media platforms. Storck found that during the 2011 Egypt Uprising, social media helped Egyptian activists in three ways: as an organizational tool, as an alternative press and outlet for citizen journalism, and as a tool for generating awareness both regionally and internationally. Meanwhile, Valenzuela concluded that there are also three mechanisms by which social media use by Chilean political activists influenced collective action: information, where media acts as a news source; expression, where social media functions as a space for expressing political opinions; and activism, where social media serves as a venue for joining causes and finding mobilizing information.

1.7. Concept Operationalization

1.7.1. Conceptual Definition

1.7.1.1. Transnational Advocacy Network

In general, this research uses the concept of transnational advocacy network as a network of various actors whose goal is to “multiply the voices” in international and domestic politics (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Actors in the network may include international and domestic nongovernmental research and advocacy organizations; local social movements; foundations, the media, churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, and intellectuals; parts of regional and international intergovernmental organizations; and parts of the executive and/or parliamentary branches of governments. Due to its vast networking and the various actors involved in an advocacy network, these networks thus offer alternative channels of communication and make it possible for groups of people whose concerns have been oppressed to domestically to reach out and seek for help from the international arena.

1.7.1.2. Network Theory

Based on Castell’s (2012) definition, ‘network societies’ are networked in multiple forms: networks exist within the movement, with other movements around the world, with the Internet, with the media, and with society at large. Due to this unique structure, these networks typically do not have an identifiable center, yet they are capable of ensuring coordination through the interaction of multiple ‘nodes’ or actors within the network. This means that the network has reduced vulnerability against the threat of oppression due to the lack of specific targets; it

can also reform itself whenever there are enough participations connected by common goals and values (Castells, 2012).

1.7.1.3. Social Media Advocacy

Looft (2017) explains that, along with the development of communication technology, social media platforms have played an increasingly important role in advocacy. This development of advocacy efforts on social media is coined as “social media advocacy”. This concept views social media as tools that allow for the creation of a collaborative environments and instantaneous engagement and participation; due to that, this concept argues that social media allows for an easier way to gather resources and communicate with targeted publics (Özdemir, 2012).

This research in particular focuses on social media advocacy on Twitter. This platform has become the center of attention of social media advocacy researchers due to its political and volatile nature. Moreover, the platform also offers the chance to engage with individuals and communities regardless of cultural and national boundaries. It does that through the “hashtag” feature, which allows users to easily find or connect through discourses by using specific key words (Looft, 2017).

1.7.2. Conceptual Operationalization

1.7.2.1. Transnational Advocacy Network

This research will use Keck and Sikkink’s transnational advocacy networks’ strategies to understand how the MTA is utilizing information to advocate for democracy in Myanmar. This means that through its network, the MTA can implement information politics as it then can gather information about the abuses committed by the Myanmar government and report them to the international community through social media. This information then allows the MTA to utilize

symbolic and leverage politics as it allows for the use of certain symbolisms to attract international attention, and allows the alliance to leverage against its target actors.

1.7.2.2. Network Theory

In this research, the author will use network society theory to explain how Internet-facilitated platforms such as social media play a very important role in the activities of the MTA. Social media is positioned as a useful tool to implement the MTA's strategies. This is because social media platforms' decentralized and accessible characteristics help MTA in gathering and spreading information they possess, thus allowing the movement to organize and raise awareness about Myanmar's issues.

1.7.2.3. Social Media Advocacy

This research uses the concept of social media advocacy to understand how the MTA uses social media in its efforts, whether it benefits the alliance's advocacy, and analyze the general public's reaction towards its advocacy.

1.8. Research Argument

In the fight for Myanmar's democracy, social media helps the MTA to spread information regarding human rights and democracy abuses in Myanmar and exchange information with other pro-democracy networks across Asia. The author also argues that the alliance uses social media to connect its members and ensure that the information is spread as much as possible. Using this information strategically and sharing it on social media allows the alliance to demand support

or action from various international actors and create awareness about Myanmar's regressing democracy.

1.9. Research Methodology

1.9.1. Research Design

This research is a descriptive study that will use a qualitative approach. Descriptive research is aimed to give a general description or portrayal of a certain phenomenon (Moleong, 2007), where in this case, the author will try to describe the MTA's strategy and how they use social media to their advantage in the fight against Myanmar's authoritarian government. In pursuing this goal, the author will use a qualitative approach, where this research will try to understand and decipher human interactions in certain situations and, from these interactions, produce descriptive data in the form of written words (Gunawan, 2013; Moleong, 2007). When applied to this research, this means that this research will produce a descriptive breakdown of the MTA's strategy in advocating for democracy in Myanmar using social media.

1.9.2. Research Site

This research will focus on studying the activities of the MTA in Myanmar, specifically during the 2021 demonstrations against the military junta.

1.9.3. Research Subject

The subject of this research is the MTA movement in Myanmar. Meanwhile, social media is positioned as the "tool" that the movement utilizes to achieve its goals.

1.9.4. Data Type

This qualitative study will use data in the form of written words and symbols which the MTA has used throughout its activities in Myanmar.

1.9.5. Data Source

The data taken for this research is secondary data, such as literature or academic journal articles regarding transnational advocacy networks and network society, social media posts, especially from the MTA's official Twitter account, and posts under the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag, and news articles about the movement.

1.9.6. Data Gathering Method

The data for this research will be gathered through desk research, where the author will gather and analyze data that contain relevant information. Specifically, the data will be gathered from Twitter using the method of manual scraping. This means that this research will use Twitter's search feature to collect Tweets containing specific hashtags or keywords that are related to the MTA.

1.9.7. Data Analysis Method

The data collected in this research will then be analyzed using the Content Analysis and Social Network Analysis methods. Content Analysis is a method that focuses on systematically analyzing written texts or transcribed speeches and non-textual messages such as pictures, graphics, and moving images to interpret the sociocultural meanings and political messages that these texts, speeches, and non-textual messages contain (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). Specifically in this research, the author will analyze the messages that the MTA delivers through social media, to understand the deeper political meaning behind them.

Meanwhile, Social Network Analysis will be used to understand the structure of the MTA's networks. This is because this method was developed as a tool to study the relations of actors within a social network (Edwards, 2010). The study of relations is done by analyzing the 'ties' (the lines) between actors (the nodes). The data of these relations can then be visualized as network maps that are commonly known as 'sociograms'.