

Digital Repression and Its Implications for Civic Space in Indonesia During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

The state of crisis and emergency due to Covid-19 has been exploited by governments of many countries, both autocratic and democratic, to intensify surveillance and restrict freedom of online expression. Indonesia is no exception. This article studies how digital repression occurred in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for civil society's space for movement and maneuver. We use a narrative review method by adopting PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria. We found that the Indonesian government practices all forms of digital repression conceptualized by Feldstein (2020): surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution of online users. All these forms of digital repression have indeed contributed to the weakening and shrinking of the civic movement in Indonesia to some degree. However, new resistance and maneuvers continue to emerge. Dissent always seems to find a way to seep out of the undercurrent in the face of repression, both offline and online. This article makes an important contribution to understanding the landscape and dynamics of digital repression in Indonesia, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, and helps in projecting the opportunities and challenges for civic movements in the post-pandemic period.

Keywords: digital repression, civil society, pandemic, online censorship, cyberspace

INTRODUCTION

Times of crisis are often an opportunity for political leaders to expand their power, beyond the limits of their authority and duration (Cassani, 2022). As stated by Agamben (2008), governments take advantage of emergency situations to normalize the “state of exception”, a condition when laws and constitutional provisions are fully present but suspended. This is also true for the Covid-19 pandemic. Agamben (2020) observes that the spread of the coronavirus has allowed the state to impose restrictions on freedoms in the name of “security”, while in practice stripping citizens of their rights. Indeed, some, even many, of these interventions (such as lockdowns and mandatory vaccinations) are necessary to save lives. However, that doesn't mean the normal workings of the state can be ignored. In fact, as in the past, despots around the world have utilized the pandemic to further crack down on opposition in the name of public safety, while contact tracing was misused to surveil and control civil movements (Barceló et al., 2022; Seyhan, 2020). Today, digital technologies enable new forms of surveillance and coercion that threaten citizens' rights, or what we can call “digital repression”.

The term digital repression is relatively new and increasingly used, although some researchers use other terms with similar meanings, such as “digital authoritarianism” (Dragu & Lupu, 2021; Jamil, 2021; Wilson, 2022) and “digital dictatorship” (Schlumberger et al., 2023). In terms of digital repression, Feldstein (2021, p. 25) defines it as the act of surveilling, coercing or manipulating individuals/groups through digital media, so their activities or beliefs that challenge the state are inhibited. In this way, digital repression can increase the costs of launching social movements (Earl et al., 2022). Feldstein (2021, p. 25) divides digital repression into five categories, including surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution of online users. These techniques can extend beyond cyberspace and into the real world, possibly predating more traditional forms of repression such as imprisonment, torture, or even murder (Mirzoyan, 2023; Wilson, 2022). Digital repression is less blatant than traditional oppression, making it less likely to spark public outcry, both domestic and international (Feldstein, 2021b, p. 11). Moreover, digital tactics also accelerate the state's ability to inhibit or even shut down information exchange, and thus detect the early phases of organizing dissent (Gohdes, 2024, p. 144; Weidmann & Rød, 2019).

The general literature on repression suggests that the main predictor of most forms of repression is the extent to which the government feels threatened by a movement or group—the so-called “Law of Coercive Responsiveness” (Davenport, 1995). This “law” is still relevant for explaining why digital repression occurs, but here it is also recognized that not all movements are perceived as equally threatening (Gohdes, 2024, p. 6; Schlumberger et al., 2023). The more threatening the government perceives a movement to be, the more likely they are to repress it in a violent manner. Small, long-standing conflicts will lead to a buildup of digital forms of repression, while large, sudden events are likely to be responded to with more overt physical coercion (Gohdes, 2020). However, in pandemic conditions, governments often frame their digital repression as an effort to maintain national security and order (Gregorio & Stremlau, 2020). The problem is that what counts as harmful information is not always clear, and the pandemic makes it difficult to distinguish between actions that genuinely intend to limit

the spread of the virus and those that merely protect the government from criticism. In this scenario, it becomes difficult for civil society actors to intervene or exert pressure because they do not know the real reasons behind a policy (Barceló et al., 2022).

Such ambiguity and uncertainty have been exploited by many countries to intensify surveillance and restrict freedom of expression online (Dragu & Lupu, 2021; Eck & Hatz, 2020; Shahbaz & Funk, 2020; Wilson, 2022). China is a popular example, where the government has censored millions of pieces of content containing over 2,000 pandemic-related keywords on the WeChat communication platform, allowing the Chinese Communist Party to control the global narrative of their inability (or actually unwillingness) to contain the outbreak in Wuhan (Germanò et al., 2023). Meanwhile, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Arab states used all repressive legislation to muzzle the press and crack down on civil society actors online (AlAshry, 2024). Alarmingly, such practices do not only occur in the world's most repressive regimes, but also across the democratic spectrum. The Philippine government, for example, has misused emergency laws as an instrument to consolidate power and intimidate critics of President Rodrigo Duterte, resulting in the criminalization of dozens of people on the basis of spreading “false information” (Feldstein, 2021a). In Hungary, a country with high internet freedom scores over the past decade, the government imposed a five-year prison sentence on those who spread misinformation about the pandemic, and used the world's most invasive spying software against investigative journalists (Walker, 2021).

We can see that digital repression during the pandemic has been well documented. However, reports on the practice of digital repression in Indonesia during the pandemic have so far been scattered, and few (if any) have examined its concrete impact on civil society space. Therefore, given that civil society plays an important role in mitigating the spread of the virus and its social implications, this article seeks to gather evidence of digital repression practices in Indonesia during the pandemic, and analyze how they have affected civil society, both during and after the pandemic. Indonesia actually had high levels of digital repression before the pandemic, but the crisis has given the government the opportunity to accelerate digital repression under the pretext of “creating social stability” and “maintaining national security” (Juniarto et al., 2022; Ufen, 2024). In the next section, we will detail our research methods and design, followed by a presentation of the results of a review of peer-reviewed articles and reports by leading organizations on the pandemic dynamics and practices of digital repression in Indonesia. After that, we will discuss the effects of a series of digital repressions on the movement and maneuvering space of civil society actors, as well as how their movements are projected post-pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This article examines how digital repression occurred in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for civil society movement and maneuvering space. We use a narrative review method by adopting PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria. We utilized the Publish or Perish software to conduct a literature search, where the databases searched were Scopus and Google Scholar. To narrow down the search, we combined the following key words: *digital repression*, *digital*

authoritarianism, online censorship, Indonesian civil society, non-governmental organization, pandemic, digital activism. As a result, 3,775 studies were identified as containing the specified keyword combinations (see Table 1). Out of these results, we included five additional studies consisting of leading organizations' reports on digital repression in Indonesia and citation searches. All studies were then exported to Covidence software to remove duplicates and determine their relevance based on title and abstract.

Table 1: List of keyword combinations used in the literature search

Keyword Combinations	Scopus	Google Scholar
<i>digital repression OR online censorship OR digital authoritarianism OR digital control AND Indonesia</i>	n = 53	n = 1.000
<i>Indonesian civil society AND pandemic</i>	n = 11	n = 996
<i>civil society decline AND Indonesia</i>	n = 10	n = 997
<i>digital activism AND pandemic AND Indonesia</i>	n = 5	n = 703
Total	n = 79	n = 3.696
	n = 3.775	

Articles will be fully reviewed if they meet the following criteria: (1) examine digital repression-or similar terms-in Indonesia; (2) analyze civil society activism in Indonesia during the pandemic; and (3) discuss cases of online censorship, control, or violence targeting civil society organizations in Indonesia. Publications should be peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or credible reports from reputable organizations (for example, Freedom House and SAFEnet). To supplement the data, we also included examples of digital repression cases during the Covid-19 pandemic period in Indonesia (March 2, 2020 to June 21, 2023) from reputable online news, both in Indonesian and English. Publications will not be reviewed if they are opinion articles, blog posts, or editorials. In addition, we also excluded articles that focused on digital repression in other countries or other forms of repression (such as legal restrictions and physical violence) without a clear connection to the digital realm. The verification and review process identified 36 studies that met the above inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were then used as references to examine digital repression in Indonesia during the pandemic and its effects on the space and maneuverability of civil society in advocating for critical voices.

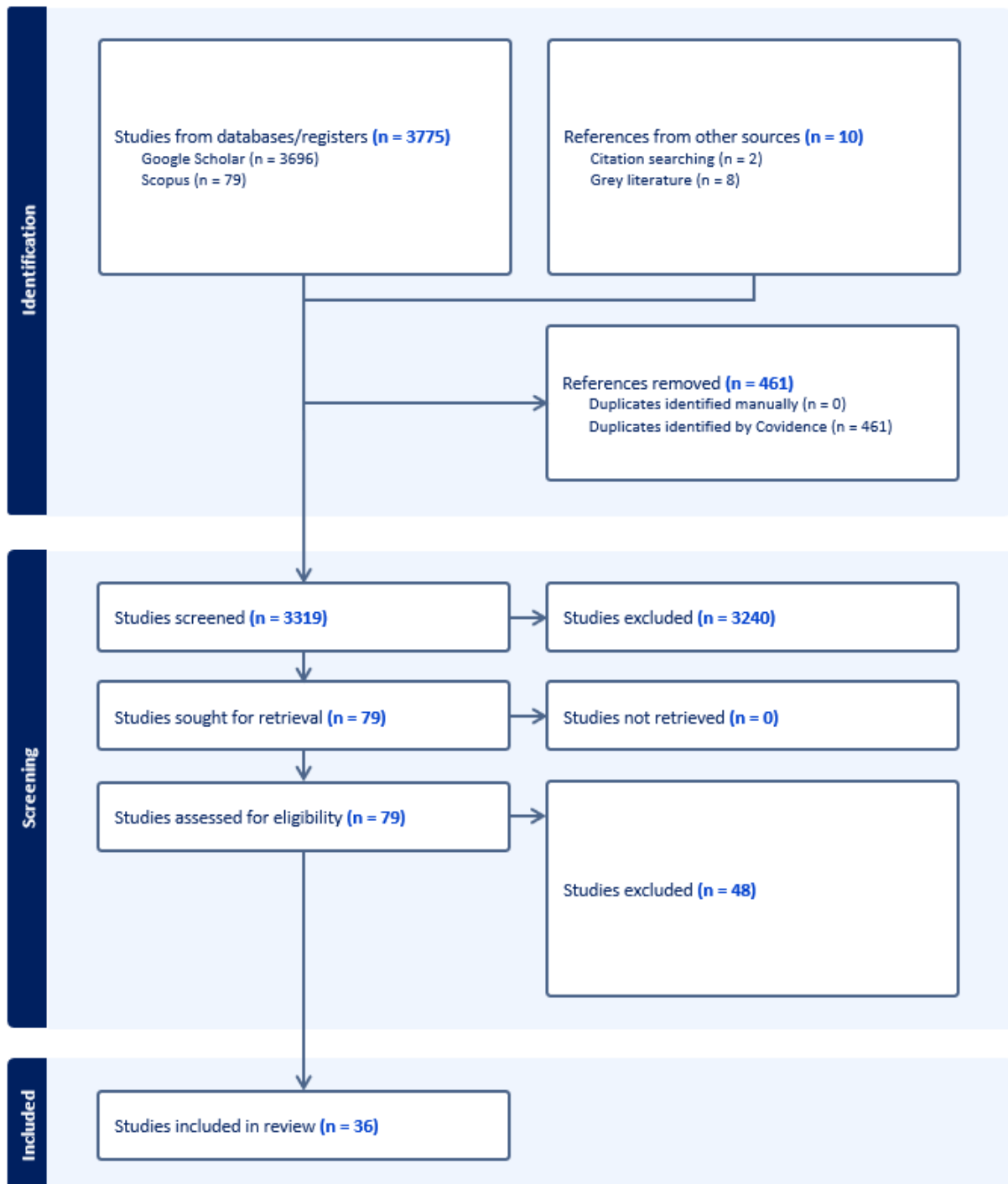


Figure 1: Literature screening based on PRISMA guidelines via Covidence

FINDINGS

This section outlines the dynamics and types of digital repression in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic. As we have outlined, Feldstein (2021b, p. 25) divides digital repression

into five categories, namely surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet blackouts, and persecution targeting online users. We found that the Indonesian government practiced all of these forms of digital repression. In this case, to make it simpler and easier to understand, we will present our findings in the order of the five categories. Before that, however, we need to put some important context around the pandemic in Indonesia. Like other countries, the Indonesian government struggled to balance economic recovery and public health protection, mainly because they were not responsive to the pandemic in the first place (Lindsey & Mann, 2020; Suryahadi et al., 2020). Over time, however, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) appeared to reflect a one-way focus on economic development, a strategy that allowed him to consolidate his power and popularity (Setijadi, 2021). As a result, the state of emergency became a momentum for President Jokowi to pass controversial economic policies that favored big businesses, such as the Omnibus Law and mining laws (Mietzner, 2021). In addition, critics of the government have also been criminalized under the pretext of “for the sake of social stability and public order”. Since then, Indonesia has been classified as a “flawed democracy” (Croissant & Diamond, 2020). As a result of this rampant repression, plus social restriction orders, mass demonstrations became unattractive (Jung, 2022; Papineau, 2023).

Gradually, most civic movements began to shift to digital spaces, but so did government repression. In a Freedom House report, Indonesia scored 47 (partly free) in terms of internet freedom, almost in the not free at all zone, lagging behind neighboring countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines which both scored 61 (Shahbaz & Funk, 2020). The following year, SAFEnet reported that digital repression was still rife, including restrictions on internet access, criminalization of civil society criticizing the government, and digital attacks (Juniarto et al., 2022). One of Indonesia's leading media outlets called President Jokowi's sixth year “the year of digital repression” (Tempo, 2020). Statistically, Jokowi has been the most prolific democratically elected Indonesian president in jailing his critics, about three times more than the second term of the previous president, Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono—and a third of them for insulting the president (Ufen, 2024). Even Jokowi himself considers this excessive. In late June, Jokowi asked security forces not to arrest citizens for posting “light hoaxes” on social media (Farisa & Krisiandi, 2020). Next we will show the types of digital repression that occurred in Indonesia during the pandemic. We will organize them based on Feldstein's (2021b) categorization and theory.

First, the Indonesian government is intensifying surveillance that enables control through identification, tracking, monitoring or analysis of individual data. The most obvious case for digital surveillance is the rise of “cyber patrols”. In April 2020, the Indonesian National Police issued a circular letter (Telegram Letter of the Chief of the Indonesian National Police Number ST/1100/IV/HUK.7.1/2020 of 2020) instructing the police to crack down on “hoax spreaders” and any acts of insulting the President during the Covid-19 pandemic (YLBHI, 2024). In order to “maintain security and order”, cyber patrols were established with the authority to send warnings to users and give orders to change or delete their content. Amnesty International (2021, p. 35) reported that at least 57 people were arrested, consisting of journalists, academics, students and activists. This cyber police has indirectly restricted what can and cannot be said about the Covid-19 pandemic, although the pretext is to reduce false or

inaccurate information (Amnesty International, 2021b; Forum Asia, 2021). A second example of digital surveillance in Indonesia is the PeduliLindungi app designed to track people's exposure to Covid-19. Without this app, which among other things stores evidence of an individual's participation in vaccination programs, a person is not allowed to freely use or enter bus stops, train stations, markets, hospitals, shopping malls and other public places (Desyana, 2022). The problem is that this app has some serious privacy concerns. An audit conducted by CitizenLab found that the PeduliLindungi app collects users' WIFI MAC address and local IP address, which can help track users and is not necessary for tracking the virus spread chain (Lin et al., 2020). Although the government asserts that such measures are taken to address the app's security concerns, it is unclear about who owns the user data-especially again, who it is collected for (Putri & Herdiman, 2023).

Secondly, the Indonesian government conducts online censorship, whether through regulations, laws, or actions. The first challenge regarding this issue is the emergence of automatic censorship. Since 2018, Indonesia has developed a new system called Cyber Drone 9 that is equipped with an artificial intelligence system to identify content that the government deems negative (Ramadhan, 2022). The problem is that even if the government does not intend to silence certain voices, so-called “negative content” or “hate speech” is a very slippery area (Glowacka et al., 2021; Paterson, 2019). This is because the positivity of content depends on linguistic, social, historical and other relevant contexts. The next challenge is the trend of lawfare, the misuse of law to criminalize oppositional civil society. In this context, the government's modus operandi of digital repression is not arbitrary arrest and detention. Instead, the government uses sedition or defamation laws, both old and new, to rhetorically justify prosecution and imprisonment (Sombatpoonsiri & Mahapatra, 2021). In general, these rules refer to the Electronic Information and Transaction Law (ITE Law).

Originally, ITE Law was created to prohibit online crime, extortion, false information, hate speech, racist content, pornography, gambling, and most controversially, defamation. The law threatens offenders with a maximum sentence of six years in prison, a large fine, or both. Since its inception, civil society actors have criticized and called the law ambiguous and full of “rubber articles”, worried that it would be used as a “legal tool” to silence and punish government critics (Asyari, 2023; Paterson, 2019). Their concerns were not wrong. The ITE Law developed into the main regulation used by the government to limit citizens' expression, especially the article on defamation. In 2012, there were 24 charges filed under the ITE Law's defamation clause, but this increased to 84 charges in 2020 and 91 charges in 2021 (Alvina et al., 2022). In September 2021, for example, the Presidential Chief of Staff sued two Indonesian Corruption Watch researchers for defamation, following their study exposing the government's involvement in promoting Ivermectin as a Covid-19 drug (Afifa, 2021). In the middle of the previous year, the Tempo news website was hacked and replaced their website with a black screen with the word “hoax” written in red (Khatami & Pahlevi, 2022). On the same day, several articles, including two critical pieces on the role of the Republic of Indonesia's State Intelligence Agency in pandemic response, were removed from the tirto.id website (International Federation of Journalists, 2020). Such online censorship has clearly affected the dissemination of credible and timely information on the pandemic.

Third, the Indonesian government is spreading social manipulation and disinformation through so-called “buzzers”, a type of cyber mercenary. This army of trolls is usually recruited by the government to discredit or intimidate critics, often spreading disinformation in order to drown out important and accurate content (Glowacka et al., 2021, p. 26). A report by Indonesia Corruption Watch (in Ryandi, 2020) shows that the Jokowi administration has allocated a budget of around 90 billion rupiah just to pay influencers since his inauguration in 2014—a figure that stands in stark contrast to the five billion rupiah cost of Covid-19 vaccine research. In general, there are two main objectives of these buzzers and influencers: promoting a single national narrative that the pandemic is not a deadly crisis and fortifying the government (from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy) from the critical voices of civil society (Juniarto, 2022). As found by Pambudi et al. (2021), buzzers have always sought to build a positive sentiment of the government's role in tackling the pandemic, also scapegoating the pandemic as the main cause of various problems in the economic and health sectors. They also framed the pandemic as an unavoidable disaster, a narrative that diverted public attention from the government's negligence in handling the pandemic crisis (Putra & Irwansyah, 2020).

Fourth, the Indonesian government conducts internet shutdowns or throttling, which causes access to electronic communication networks to be disrupted for a period of time. In Papua alone, SAFEnet received at least four reports of internet shutdowns or slowdowns during 2020 (Sanjaya et al., 2021). On July 15, 2020, for example, as the conflict in Nduga, Papua escalated, there were reports that the internet and cellphone signals were turned off. A similar incident occurred in Maybrat, Papua, a week later. On August 15, ahead of the one-year anniversary of racist protests against Papuans, internet connections in Papua slowed down for several days, just as they did in Monokwari ahead of the anniversary of Papua's independence. The government framed the series of incidents as technical problems, but several civil society organizations (CSOs) have successfully challenged this explanation in court, even suggesting a more deliberate motive (Siagian et al., 2021). However, the verdict seems to have passed without any serious follow-up. The consequences of an internet blackout are far-reaching. In the context of the pandemic, it impedes the flow of vital health information about Covid-19. In addition, communication with family and friends has become difficult, isolating individuals at a moment when they desperately need others to calm themselves from the panic of the crisis (especially Papuans who have long experienced conflict).

Fifth, the Indonesian government carries out digital persecution or attacks targeting civil society actors, journalists and academics. This last type of digital repression is not always isolated to cyberspace, but can also result in prosecution, arrest, imprisonment or even murder (Feldstein, 2021b, p. 26). In the case of Indonesia, critical voices have been silenced and threatened with criminal penalties, and some women have been subjected to violent misogyny (Amnesty International, 2021a, p. 39). SAFEnet's report also reveals a similar thing, where the trend of digital attacks continues to increase, from 147 cases in 2020 to 193 cases in 2021 (Sanjaya et al., 2021). One case that caught the public's attention was the hacking of the WhatsApp account of Ravio Patra, an Indonesian researcher at the Westminster Foundation for Democracy who actively criticized the government's negligence in responding to the crisis. Patra was arrested on charges of spreading hate speech and inciting violence,

despite human rights groups suspecting his WhatsApp account had been hijacked and then fabricating conversations (Suroyo & Da Costa, 2020). The defense of Patra grew so serious that it led to the formation of the “Coalition Against Criminalization and Case Manipulation” (KATROK), consisting of a number of national and international CSOs (The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, 2020). Around the same time, the Twitter account of Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist who said the government's approach to producing vaccines did not meet WHO international standard tests, was hacked and began uploading a bunch of fake photos of him on his honeymoon with his second wife in Sydney (Rohman, 2021). In fact, at that time Riono was in Jakarta with his family. Another case that provoked public uproar was the criminal and civil defamation complaint against prominent activists Fatia Maulidiyanti and Haris Azhar. Both were reported by Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan, following a YouTube video of Fatia and Haris discussing an academic study on Luhut's alleged involvement in conflicts of interest in Papua (Robet et al., 2023).

These stories illustrate only a small part of the digital repression in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic. What is clear is that the Indonesian government has increased its control over the digital world in response to perceived cyber threats. While it is true that false information and hate speech are highly disruptive to the comfort and critical dialectic in cyberspace, there are indications that the Indonesian government has over-corrected, resulting in damage to the reputation and quality of Indonesia's democracy (Armiwulan, 2022; Paterson, 2019; Robet et al., 2023). As other leaders have done in many countries, the Jokowi administration has also exploited the crisis to launch controversial projects and further consolidate its power. This expansion of digital repression poses significant challenges to civic movements, even after the pandemic ends. In the next section, we will discuss in more detail the implications and challenges, and then project post-pandemic civic movements in facing (and avoiding) digital repression.

DISCUSSION

A pandemic can create a climate of fear and panic, leading to a public perception that strong control measures are necessary (Agamben, 2020; Seyhan, 2020). As a result, there is likely to be little resistance to restrictions on civil and political rights, even though they are the most severe restrictions experienced by most people. A survey in the UK showed that most participants saw lockdowns as a violation of various rights, but considered such violations to be legitimate in order to protect collective health (Halliday et al., 2020). However, the idea that we should sacrifice our democracy for centralized control, even in times of crisis, is misguided. In fact, democratic participation is the best way to overcome crises and rebuild the country afterwards. In particular, surviving the threat of crisis depends not so much on citizens' trust in their leaders, but on the capacity of democratic citizens to punish leaders who fail to meet basic needs. This is where the strength and resilience of the civil sector plays an important (and tested) role. Whether we speak of civil society in its broadest sense or narrow our attention to civil society organizations (CSOs), periods of crisis such as the pandemic highlight the ability and willingness of the sector (and its actors) to assist the weak and vulnerable and hold governments accountable for crisis management (Kövé, 2021). Thus, it is interesting to

examine the pandemic period from a civil society perspective. We have previously reviewed and synthesized separate evidence on the dynamics of digital repression in Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic. This section will first discuss some of the implications of the increasing trend of digital repression on civil society's space for movement and maneuver, both during and after the pandemic, and then we will show that digital repression, while narrowing civic space, has not completely extinguished their movement and activism. This observation is important for projecting the next civic movement post-pandemic.

The first consequence of Indonesia's rampant digital repression of civil society is widespread threat perception and self-censorship. Repressive laws such as the ITE Law provide harsh penalties for violators—long prison sentences, hefty fines, and difficulty in obtaining bail—thus intimidating civil society actors from expressing (different) opinions in digital spaces (Robet et al., 2023). In other words, when the government criminalizes someone for defamation, for example, it intimidates thousands of others who want to voice their concerns. As reflected in a survey by the Institute for Research on Economic and Social Information Education (LP3ES) in 34 cities in Indonesia in 2021, most people (52,1 percent) agree that civil liberties are increasingly threatened, which results in people's fear of opinion, expression and association (Wibowo, 2021). Meanwhile, a survey by the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) showed that more than a third of the public admitted to being afraid to express their opinions on the internet and social media (Noroyono, 2021). A further effect of this fear is self-censorship. Individuals, fearing government reprisals, choose to withhold their critical viewpoints online, even if they have a strong personal desire to do so (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023; Ong, 2021). They perceive the expected rewards of expressing their critical opinions online as negative or not worth it. This may seem like a minor issue, but its impact can be equivalent to physical violence, albeit less visible and measurable. Overall, self-censorship can hamper civil society's ability to hold governments accountable.

The next consequence is to normalize the criminalization of civil society. In this case, digital repression does not necessarily trigger immediate violence, but in the long run it can create a climate of tolerance for violence. This “conditioning” effect weakens public support for civil society actors and makes violence or oppression against them seem more acceptable (Wilson, 2022). In addition, digital repression can also have implications for the depoliticization of civil society, shifting online discourse away from critical discussion towards entertainment or regime-approved topics (Uniacke, 2021). This creates the illusion of broad public support and downplays diverse viewpoints, and identifies dissidents and regime supporters. In Indonesia, “cyber patrols” are an interesting example. In early 2021, they awarded badges to citizens who actively reported criminal acts on social media (Maharani & Erdianto, 2021). Such techniques may encourage citizens to “compete” to find fault with others online. In other words, cyber patrols have become a new model of surveillance, embracing pro-regime citizens to faithfully manually monitor cyberspace, report suspicious content, and engage in the silencing of critical voices. Many of these volunteers regard themselves as civil society devoted to the interests of the state, an example that reflects the “decivilization” of civil society.

Digital repression, especially in the form of internet blackouts or slowdowns, has implications for disrupting collective mobilization at critical moments. Over the past decade, digital technology has become an instrument and medium for civil society actors to organize themselves collectively, as we can observe in recent civil movements such as the Arab Spring (Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017; Theocharis et al., 2015). This may explain why when the state shuts down or restricts access to the internet, coordination and collective mobilization are hampered (Gohdes, 2024, p. 53). Even when opposition groups have developed the capacity to maintain cohesion and control in the absence of network access, the closure of communication channels and/or information sources allows the government to further isolate and fragment these groups from their core networks (Alami et al., 2023). This has been the experience in Papua during internet outages or slowdowns (Sanjaya et al., 2021).

The final implication of digital repression on the space and maneuverability of civil society is the disruption of public discussion through the presence of “buzzer” accounts or the regime's troll army. There are at least two reliable tactics. *First*, “electronic flies” serve to manipulate and distort conversations in the digital space. They, consisting of a mix of automated bots and real people, flood social media with positive narratives and often use hashtag tactics to drown out criticism (Jones, 2019; Masduki, 2021). During the passage of the Omnibus Law, for example, buzzers filled Twitter (or now platform X) with pro-Omnibus Law hashtags, often using automated bot accounts to multiply tweets (Sastramidjaja & Rasidi, 2021). In addition, they also spread negative stories about mass demonstrations, framing them as “anarchy” and spreaders of fake news. *Second*, this strategy aims to sow discord and distrust. By bombarding online conversations with irrelevancies or incitement, more substantial discussions can be avoided, and thus critical voices within them are lost to the surface (Slater & Arugay, 2018). Conversely, if not positive sentiments towards the regime, far-from-relevant content occupies the conversation in cyberspace.

Thus, as observed by Mietzner (2021), increasing repression, both offline and online, has contributed to weakening the capacity of Indonesian civil society to resist the elite-driven democratic backsliding during the pandemic. Moreover, the Covid-19 crisis has also reinforced this trend, as the state has become freer to justify restrictions on people's mobility, including their movements (Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023). However, we are not saying that civic movements in Indonesia died out completely during the Covid-19 crisis. Despite the increasing intensity of digital repression, civil movements have shown resilience and adaptability in the face of these challenges. Dissent has always found a way to seep out of the undercurrent in the face of repression (Rydzak et al., 2020). This was observed by Setiawan and Tomsa (2023), who found that progressive activists have been able to survive and adapt to repressive environments through new strategies and occasionally succeeded in building diagonal accountability. An example is the women's movement that urged the House of Representatives (DPR) to immediately pass a law on sexual violence in April 2022. In this case, repression (both offline and online) clearly complicated and narrowed the space for civil society actors, but they were able to resist and achieve some remarkable “small victories” through legal approaches, mobilization of cross-sectoral alliances, and transnational linkages (Corpuz, 2021; Lorch &

Sombatpoonsiri, 2023). For civil society actors, the pandemic is a strange and difficult time, but also a hopeful one.

We do not want to leave the mistaken impression that technology has completely upended the balance between citizens and governments. Instead, we observe that the online space has become a new and crucial arena of power struggle; it is not a neutral place. This is where new forms of political battles are fought, information is shared, civil society operates, and the state seeks to gain control through long-term coercive tactics (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2011; Uniacke, 2021). Civil society actors need to recognize this in order to adjust and, if necessary, rebuild their strategies in the post-pandemic period. A well-functioning democracy relies on citizen criticism to hold leaders accountable and, if found wanting, punish them. No one wants a crisis to occur, but when it is inevitable, a more democratic approach should not be sacrificed in favor of centralized control. Crises, or actually even normal conditions, require scrutiny from all directions. In this post-pandemic world, therefore, the struggle to expand space and control over cyberspace is a long-term agenda for civil society in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, digital repression was already prevalent in Indonesia before the pandemic, but the Covid-19 crisis has opened up new opportunities for the government to intensify their digital repression. Of the five categories of digital repression developed by Feldstein (2021b), we find that the Indonesian government practices all of them to varying degrees and amounts. Internet freedom, according to many reports, has declined successively overall. The government also institutionalized control of digital space through repressive laws such as the ITE Law during the pandemic, the majority of which are based on national security and public order. Its articles are written in a vague set of terms, allowing authorities to interpret them freely, for example twisting criticism as hate speech or defamation. In some cases, online persecution simply occurs without any legal justification, usually by government-funded buzzers to silence criticism or disrupt critical conversations online. We argue that all of these forms of digital repression have indeed succeeded in weakening and discouraging the civic movement in Indonesia to some extent, but new resistance and maneuvers continue to emerge. When the government restricts internet access to quell protests, for example, public anger builds and encourages stronger resistance. There is a dialectic between the two.

The next agenda for civil society in Indonesia is to re-strategize and take proactive steps to end—or at least minimize—digital repression in the post-pandemic period. One fundamental strategy is the rising cost of digital repression itself (see Feldstein, 2021b). An effective strategy should include pressure on four key areas: reputation, economics, politics and supply. In terms of reputation, civil society can highlight government misbehavior in international forums. When states realize that their repression risks international criticism, they will rethink whether centralized control is worth the price. Economic pressure can take the form of sanctions, boycotts and disinvestment. Meanwhile, political pressure could take the form of campaigns to raise public awareness about the repressive effects of digital media, and/or providing electoral challenges to incumbents (e.g., by exposing their repressive behavior, their re-election prospects are diminished). Finally, supply-side considerations could involve developing

technologies and tools that help civil society actors to avoid or minimize digital repression. By combining these strategies, civil society can make digital repression costly and unsustainable for repressive governments. This can ultimately drive change towards a more open and democratic digital society.

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