



[ADRN Online Seminar] Democracy Cooperation Series 11: Voices of the Youth for Democracy

The Status of Youth Politics: Voices of the Youth Not Represented in Asia

East Asia Institute (EAI)

I. Overview

A functional democracy requires the representation of all voices of the society, regardless of age or generation. However, voices of the youth are often left unheard in many countries. This is especially prevalent in Asian democracies, in which the youth is largely marginalized from political decision-making processes. An overarching trend of gerontocracy and lack of youth representation in politics in Asia has for long disengaged the youth from participating in political processes. However, a hike in the number of youth leading social movements and/or participating in traditional political processes suggests that the youth are set on a path towards change.

During this seminar, youth panelists from Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia and Sri Lanka discussed the issue of youth representation in political processes, the forms in which youth participate in politics, and political agendas raised by the youth. Additionally, panelists discussed ways to enhance youth participation and representation in politics.

II. The Saliency of Generational Cleavage In Domestic Politics

Thailand

- **Struggles Amid a History of Hybrid Regimes:** With a constantly changing government of an absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, and parliamentary democracy, Thailand has experienced political instability since the 1930s. The current military coup installed the Junta government. While the country retains a constitution and elections, the military maintains its power and influence through various unelected institutions like the Senate and independent agencies. As an alternative party for the Thai youth, the Future Forward Party offers a radical agenda to reform Thai politics through military reform, rewriting the Junta drafted constitution, and providing state welfare.

South Korea

- **Generational Conflict:** With South Korea's rapid economic, cultural, and political advancements, an inter-generational cultural lag is developing between the older and younger populations. South Korea in the 1950s, 1970s, and 2000s, respectively were under extremely different realities based on the country's government and economic situation. Such rapid change cultivated an economic gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" based on prior generational wealth and capitalistic development.

Indonesia

- **The Role of Youth in Indonesia's Independence Movement:** Young people's involvement in Indonesian democracy has been observed via the following five stages: colonialism, independence, the



Old Order, the New Order, and the Reformation. During a time of colonialism, youth movements aimed to build an awareness surrounding Indonesian nationality. The youth were equally important in Indonesia's independence movement, pushing the movement leader Sukarno towards the proclamation of independence. Under Sukarno's Old Order, student movements defied unstable political circumstances and participated in the country's political discourse. Later, the student movement was equally central in bringing down Sukarno's Old Order in 1966 and Suharto's New Order in 1998. During the post-Suharto era, not only college students, but also high school students were involved in the antiauthoritarian youth movement. It is clear that student and youth movements in Indonesia have always been at the forefront resisting dominant political forces and regimes.

Sri Lanka

- **Generational Divides:** The youth in Sri Lanka face an older political establishment that, like in many other countries, holds deeply conservative attitudes when it comes to gender, sexuality, and economics. Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in Asia that still criminalizes homosexuality. Economic disparities within the country also cause grave concern.
- **Multiple crises:** Compared to generational cleavage, there are many more salient issues that have dominated the Sri Lankan political landscape in recent times. First is the centralization of power, especially in the executive. The recent weakening of independent checks on the president through the 20th amendment of the constitution is a cause for concern and there have been criticisms of the country's increased militarization. Moreover, the country is still experiencing remnants of ethnic conflict led by the state against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which only ended in 2009. In present-day Sri Lanka, there are still major tensions between Buddhist majority groups and the Muslim and Tamil minorities. The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified such conflicts, through practices like the prevention of burials according to Muslim traditions.

III. The Framing and Representation of Issues Pertaining To The Youth

Thailand

- **Libertarianism Vs. Authoritarianism:** With high school and university students growing up under military dictatorship, youth politics in Thailand has become an issue of libertarianism vs. authoritarianism. Youth-led movements hold three demands: the resignation of the prime minister, the drafting a new constitution, and the reformation of monarchy.

South Korea

- **"Silver Democracy":** With a low birthrate and an increasing aging population, a majority of political decisions and policies are slowly curating towards conservative decisions. Such policy redirections are not ideal in coping with the rapid development of technology and culture for the youth.

Indonesia

- **Corruption, Injustice, and Inequality:** Major political parties have generally failed to incorporate concerns of the youth into their platforms and operations. Despite parties trying to nominate young political figures for elections, in order to capitalize on the youth vote, they have not truly adapted to the dynamic tactics and concerns of youth politics. In general, the youth is very angry at the government, especially on concerns regarding corruption, injustice, and inequality, which have only been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Sri Lanka

- **No Unifying Message:** Given the salience of ethnic conflict in Sri Lankan politics, it is almost impossible for parties to form a united front representing the concerns of the youth. In Sri Lanka, upon the introduction of representative politics based on religion and ethnicity by British colonizers, these factors have divided people more than issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, class, and age have done so. Since 70% of the population is Sinhala Buddhists, they always have a firm grasp on the government; the Tamil and Muslim population is unable to overcome the majority even when united. Political parties are mainly segregated along ethnic lines, and are generally afraid to create platforms that center on identities and concerns other than religious and ethnic ones. Although agendas like anti-corruption and environmental protection do unify young people, political viability is often elusive.

IV. Youth participation in politics: The utilization of conventional political channels and SNS

Thailand

- **Hashtag Activism:** Under the idea of “Hashtag Activism,” social media has become a place for communication, mass mobilization, and a political tool utilized by the youth. As Thailand has one of the highest user presence on Twitter, hashtags like #letitendinourgeneration help organize online movements and protests, as well as in-person mobilization in forms like flash mobs.

South Korea

- **The Young Tent:** More youth-led movements are forming in South Korea. As these organizations are working towards individual goals and movements important to them, organizations like the Young Tent are helping them create synergy and a larger voice through cooperation. As an alliance of eight to ten political youth groups in Korea, the Young Tent participates in events every two to three months to share their infrastructure, knowledge, and marketing strategies.

Indonesia

- **Formal Participation:** Formal participation in electoral politics amongst Indonesian youth is low. Only 11% of the Members of Parliament in Indonesia’s most recent elections are under the age of 30. Of the major parties, the only one that emphasizes organization by the youth is the Socialist Party of Indonesia (the PSI). The lack of youth participation in electoral politics is likely because of the inability for major political parties to follow the dynamics of youth culture. A further problem with the youth’s formal participation in politics is the reality of nepotism and political kinship. Many young Members of Parliament are the sons and daughters of older Members and political figures, creating political dynasties. Moreover, direct voting elections in Indonesia are very costly, making only the privileged few, who likely come from political families, able to run effective campaigns.
- **Social Media Critics of the Ruling Class:** Young people in Indonesia have taken social media as their new political landscape. The youth have moved from traditional political parties to digital organizations, using tools like online petitions and crowdfunding, and platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Political discussions online are often not based on religion or ideology, but rather issues of national interest like welfare and anti-corruption. Young political leaders are no longer Members of the Parliament, but rather online “influencers” with their own social media presence and digital life. Much of this political participation has also stirred up great controversy in Indonesia, since the criticisms online of major political figures tend to be informal and humorous. In many cases, the older, ruling politicians in government characterize such criticism as “rude” and refuse to engage with this



new style of participation by the youth.

Sri Lanka

- **Entrenched Power:** Political participation through formal channels for young Sri Lankans is very difficult. Young people are not often represented in powerful political positions: the average age of a cabinet minister is 65. Even when young people are represented, it is often the result of entrenched power brokers within political parties nepotistically promoting their relatives. For example, one cabinet minister in his thirties is the nephew of the President and son of the Prime Minister. Without reform from within partisan hierarchies, formal participation in politics would remain inaccessible for ordinary young people. Even though youth representation is important in itself, what is more important is tackling entrenched power structures and selecting young people who can stand for democracy, and stand up for the least powerful and most marginalized.
- **The Good and Bad of Social Media:** Technology and social media can be a hopeful force in the politics of Sri Lanka. However, there are concerns regarding these tools as well. Beyond the organic and youthful social media communities that increase political accountability, platforms can also act as harbors for fake news and misinformation, and be tools of authoritarian repression. Laws that are supposedly meant to target fake news can also be abused and used to suppress dissent. Some of these harmful elements on social media could also be organized campaigns, such as what Facebook calls “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior.”

V. Demographic and socio-economic backgrounds shaping youth agenda

Thailand

- **Critical Moment:** This is a critical moment for the country and the youth in political governance and social-cultural development. The youth in Thailand want to decide their own future. There is a growing desire and realization that they want to have a good life and that is something that the current political system cannot accommodate.

South Korea

- **The Loss of Democracy’s Sacred Image:** Amongst the youth, there is a lower degree of trust in democracy, spearheaded by the accumulating economic gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” This gap creates a void of emptiness in the youth without wealthy parents, leading to a dangerous idea of populism. In recent national elections, there are growing notions of false hope and false promises concerning state expenditure and the distribution of money.

Indonesia

- **Incentives to Participate:** Young people in Indonesia seem poorly positioned to participate in politics, and the interest Indonesian youth have in politics is generally low. According to a study conducted by the Center for Political Studies, young people present themselves as uninterested in politics, political news, and political campaigns, and the government as unlikely to listen to their political complaints.

Sri Lanka

- **Economic Challenges:** Poor economic conditions may negatively impact the youth’s ability and propensity to participate in politics. In Sri Lanka, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately harmed the least well-off, who were already suffering. Poor economic conditions and employment



prospects within the country have also resulted in brain drain from the country. With young people heading to the West to seek economic opportunities, their political participation may also decrease. ■



VI. Speakers, Discussants, and Moderator Biographies

- **Jung Kim** is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of North Korean Studies, South Korea. He teaches courses on International Relations in East Asia and Political Economy of the Two Koreas, among others. Prior to this, from 2009-2015, he was a Lecturer at the Underwood International College and Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University. During this time, Mr. Kim was also a Chief Researcher at The East Asia Institute. He pursued his Bachelors and Masters in Political Science at Korea University and went on to pursue his Ph.D. at Yale University. His research interests include Comparative Politics and International Relations in East Asia.
- **Purawich Watanasukh** is a researcher at the College of Politics and Governance at King Prajadhipok's Institute. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. He is also a Guest lecturer on Thai Politics and Government course at Chulalongkorn University, and a regular speaker for the programme "Towards Democracy with King Prajadhipok's Institute" on the Thai Parliament Radio and podcast "Democracy X Innovation," hosted by the Office of Innovation for Democracy at King Prajadhipok's Institute. He has been part of the Working group on Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) of the House Committee on Political Development, Mass Communications, and Public Participation, the House of Representatives of Thailand. Mr. Watanasukh is a frequent Commentator on Thai politics for Thai media (TNN, NBT, Thai PBS, The Standard) and international media (The New York Times, Radio New Zealand). His research interests include Thai Politics, Election, Party Politics, Political Institution, Constitution, Political Leadership, Comparative Politics, Democratization. He is the co-author of *A New Scenario of Thailand's Election: The 2019 General Election in 7 Provinces* and the author of *Phronesis Leadership: Newin Chidchob*.
- **Kyung Dong Kyle Kim** is the CEO and Co-founder of 'Wcoding': an International Programming Bootcamp and the CEO and Founder of 'The Young Tent': An Alliance of Youth Politics Groups in Korea. He also serves as the Board of Director of 'The Youth Politics Academy.' Previously, he has served as the Former Committee Chairman of the 'Future Forum' from 'The Yeouido Institute', the official Think Tank of the 'People Power Party', the largest conservative party in Korea.
- **Mouliza Kristhopher Donna Sweinstani** is a researcher at the Center for Political Studies, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI). She completed her Bachelor Degree in Government and Political Studies with a summa-cum-laude predicate from Diponegoro University, Indonesia, in 2014 and got her Master's degree in Political Science with a cum laude predicate from the University of Indonesia in 2017. She has authored several academic publications on electoral studies, women and politics, and political parties in national journals, international journals, and books. The author is also active in political education activities for youth through the Indonesia Youth Political Institute, an organization she founded in 2014.
- **Senel Wanniarachchi** is a Co-founder & a Director of Hashtag Generation which is an organization led by a group of young tech-savvy Sri Lankans working towards building a society where everyone has the skills, information and tools to be active participants in making the decisions that affect their communities, technologies and bodies. Senel is currently pursuing a PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He also sits on the board of the Innovation for Change South Asia Hub which is a collective of organizations and human rights defenders working together to preserve the civic space in South Asia. In 2017, he received a medal from Queen Elizabeth the 2nd in recognition of his work on using social and new media tools to empower young people to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes. In 2014, he was nominated as Sri Lanka's official Youth Delegate to the United Nations. He is the co-author of a book titled 'Montage of Sexuality in Sri Lanka' which was published by the UN Population Fund. Senel holds an MSc in Human Rights from the London School of Economics and Political Science which he followed on a Chevening Scholarship from the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He is an alumnus of the Department of International Relations of the University of Colombo where he followed his Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Degree. He is also an alumnus of Cambridge University's Leading Change programme.



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