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Digital Youth and Rhizomatic Protest Movements

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Historically, youth have been at the forefront of democracy struggles in Southeast Asia. As their lifeworlds and means of expression change, so does the nature of their protest. From Indonesia to Thailand and Myanmar, recent youth-led uprisings share key characteristics that bind them across borders and that distinguish this generation of activist youth from previous generations. First, they are digitally-savvy and interconnected. Second, they are imaginative beyond borders, evincing a deterritorialized, yet firmly local, generational consciousness that is evolving into a deterritorialized praxis for political change. Third, they shun and transcend existing political fault lines that have hitherto hampered democracy efforts in their respective countries. These characteristics reflect the 'rhizomatic' nature of their protest. Rather than sprouting from the single 'root' of national histories of student activism in each country, today's youth movements form a heterogeneous assemblage with multiple nodes that expand in multiple directions, much like the digital information and communication flows that shape their protest.

Fig. 1: Youth movements across Asia unite in the social media-based Milk Tea Alliance, while using the iconic three-finger salute, adopted from the Hollywood blockbuster The Hunger Games. Photo credit: AFP/Jack Taylor.

With its young demographics and rapid growth in digital connectivity, at least in urban centres, Southeast Asia is no stranger to digitally-mediated action. Especially since the rise of social media and relatively affordable smartphones in the late 2000s, cyberspace has become a popular vehicle for political expression. In Indonesia, young netizens began experimenting with online campaigns that were not confined to activist circles but invited the participation of the general public. In 2009, two such campaigns against state corruption and injustice created a momentous impact, as thousands of young netizens took to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to co-create, share, and discuss user-generated content to hold the authorities accountable. For a generation disillusioned by the outcome of the political reform initiated in 1998, the success of these cybercampaigns generated a strong sense of participatory power, which could be readily reactivated for specific causes.

In September 2019, tens of thousands of youth across Indonesia took to the streets to protest a set of controversial bills which, to them, symbolized the government's increasing authoritarianism. While the majority of demonstrators were students, the protest brought together a heterogeneous crowd that included NGO-affiliated activist youth, masses of high-school youth mobilized through WhatsApp groups, and a multitude of young netizens that joined the protest online and on the streets – all united under the street banner and hashtag #ReformasiDikorupsi ('reform corrupted').

The participation of the 'meme generation', as young netizens were called, added a particularly novel flavor to the protest, which otherwise could have been mistaken (and frequently was) for a revival of Indonesia's student movement. Although student representative bodies did help to mobilize student masses, they could not dictate the mood nor the message of the protest, which was created in the moment by the multitude of young participants, many of whom had never joined a protest before. One group that stood out amongst this multitude were the self-proclaimed 'K-Poppers', known for their massive engagement with Korean pop fandom on social media. Online, they helped to raise #ReformasiDikorupsi and associated hashtags on Twitter's list of trending topics; on the streets, they contributed a unique type of protest imagery and slogans, for example: "I [heart] BTS [a popular Korean boyband] but I [heart] justice even more – #K-Poppers won't remain silent!"

Although the street protests subsided due to violent repression, minimal concessions from the government, and then the Covid-19 pandemic, the youth resistance continued unabated online, now focusing on the contested Omnibus Bill for job creation. Indeed, activist youth cleverly used the situation to engage an even broader multitude of young netizens through Twitter. For example, during a concerted Twitter action on 23 March 2020, the hashtag #TolakOmnibuslaw ('reject the Omnibus Bill') topped the trending topics, as young netizens were especially charmed by the paired hashtags #LockdownDPR ('lockdown Parliament') and #dirumahaja ('just stay home', also connoting, 'protest from home'). Similar actions followed over the next months. While such hashtag actions might not have the same public impact as street protest, it kept young participants attuned to a resistance that had the potential for further expansion into new participatory publics.

The significance of nurturing the resistance online became clear in the first week of October 2020, when massive protests again erupted against the Parliament's hastened ratification of the Omnibus Bill. Twitter exploded with anti-Omnibus Law hashtags, again largely pushed by K-poppers, while students and high-school youth, together with labour unions and other disaffected groups, staged angry demonstrations using the same hashtags in their posters and banners. This time, however, the authorities not only repressed the protests on the streets, but also embarked on a targeted strategy of cyber-repression, utilizing cyber-laws, cyber-troops, and 'counternarratives' spread on mainstream and social media to criminalize and delegitimize the protesters. This strategy seemed to work: the street protest quickly died out, and on social media, too, anti-government criticism was more or

less stifled. Nonetheless, the resistance lived on in more subtle ways, not least inspired by similar youth-led struggles that have erupted elsewhere in the region.

Transnational solidarity and affinity

The blurring of boundaries between virtual and material spaces of protest was all the more evident in the youth resistance in Thailand, which took off in February 2020 following the regime's disbandment of the popular Future Forward Party. While shunning Thailand's polarized political landscape, this youth resistance was also long nurtured through online political criticisms, which has now consolidated into a generational call for systemic reform and curbs on the monarchy's power. Here, too, the youth resistance developed in rhizomatic fashion along fluid networks that crossed online and offline spheres.

This protest strategy is clearly inspired by the 'Be Water' tactics developed by activist youth in Hong Kong. Indeed, activist youth in Thailand have maintained close contact with peers from Hong Kong as well as Taiwan's Sunflower Student Movement since 2016, when they formed the Network of Young Democratic Asians. In a more recent reincarnation as the social media-based Milk Tea Alliance, this transnational network has steadily reached out to youth movements elsewhere in Asia. This includes Myanmar, where an intrepid youth resistance has risen following the military coup of February 2021. Meanwhile, youth across the region have staged solidarity actions online and offline, using the same hashtag format, #StandWithMyanmar and #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, as initially used for Hong Kong and any subsequent youth-led struggle for democracy.

Through these digitally-mediated networks, activist youth across the region have thus started to cross-promote and cross-pollinate their causes, recognizing that, at the core, they are part of the same rhizomatic resistance against entrenched authoritarianism. Digital technologies have facilitated the emergence of a shared citizen identity as Asian-activist-digital youth.

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FULFILL OUR DEMANDS NOT ONE LESS!!

#STANDWITHHK
#REFORMASIDIKORUPSI

Fig. 2: Image circulating on social media in October 2019.
Source: https://twitter.com/efi_sh/status/1185202306054148096/photo/1.