

Introduction to the Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey

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Youths make up a considerable chunk of voters in several Southeast Asian societies, and the group has become an essential consideration when states approach elections.

On the one hand, they are the children or grandchildren of the second or third generations of the post-colonial era (c. 1960s). They are thus least concerned about developmental and industrialization policies. Today, they are born into middle-class and educated families, and some are referred to as the sandwiched class, having to bear the tussle between care for elders in the ageing society and care for children.

On the other hand, their aspirations also differ. No longer are they interested in the nation-building issues of their parents, where nationalism was a key part of collective

identity formation; today, youths want to take greater ownership of their identities and sub-identities and even challenge dominant narratives levelled out by the state. In this regard, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute ran a Youth and Civic Engagement Survey among undergraduates from six Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The survey was conducted between August and October 2024 and drew responses from 3081 participants. The survey is most interested in the issues that concern youth the most: their religiosity, how religion impacts their political choices, their attitudes towards politics,

law enforcement and economic outlook, and their online and offline behaviour. The survey targets university students in urban cities and maintains a balance of STEM and non-STEM students as well as male and female respondents. ISEAS published a series of articles related to the survey findings, and the following is a selection of Fulcrum pieces showcasing reflections from the data.

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Prabowo Should Take Heed of Discontent Among Indonesian Youths

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Two recent developments in Indonesia indicate that the country's youth are unhappy with the state of their country, to the extent that some have contemplated leaving the country. Their concerns warrant some examination and action from the incumbent government led by President Prabowo Subianto.

Recently, Indonesian university students held concurrent demonstrations across several cities in Indonesia, calling the movement “Dark Indonesia” (#IndonesiaGelap).¹ Two demonstrations have been held thus far – on 17 and 21 February 2025 – and Indonesian elites expect many more to come. Protesters have criticised Prabowo Subianto's performance during his first 100 days as president. The majority were displeased with Presidential Instruction (Inpres) Number 1/2025, which trimmed the state budget and has impacted education, health, public services, and poverty alleviation efforts.

However, a parallel digital movement is currently trending among the youth, united by the hashtag #KaburDuluAja (#JustRunAway).² Aligned with the #IndonesiaGelap movement, #KaburDuluAja is an online public expression of accumulated anger and despair due to the uncertain political and economic situation and unfavourable government policies.³ The implied message of the movement is that the country's youth should consider emigrating. Although the president is currently enjoying high approval ratings of 81 percent⁴ overall, the support is not equally distributed across all levels in society.⁵ Those with tertiary education showed a higher proportion of dissatisfaction compared to those with

secondary education or lower. It would be imprudent for the President to simply dismiss these online and offline expressions of youth discontent, as the protests might escalate and gain support from other segments of the population. They will form the bulk of Indonesian voters since Prabowo has declared his intentions to run for a second term.⁶

The state of unhappiness among the country's youth, whether online or offline, confirms the results of a recent survey conducted by the Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, which found that Indonesian youths tend to be the most pessimistic in Southeast Asia.⁷ The survey shows that they are frustrated with the country's unfavourable socio-economic and political conditions. While the president's populist policies to help young children with free meals could potentially make him one of the most popular presidents if executed well, he should quell youth unhappiness early to avoid a repeat of the *reformasi* movement in 1998, which toppled the authoritarian Suharto New Order regime. A coup or a large-scale protest similar to 1998 might sound far-fetched, but with social media and hashtag culture today – which were non-existent during the New Order – undergraduates can organise mass movements quicker and on a larger scale.

The ISEAS survey covered 3081 undergraduate students across six Southeast Asian nations. Respondents are 18–24 years old, with 48.1 percent males and 51.9 percent females. Indonesia was one of the six countries surveyed, in addition to Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. One of the areas the survey

covered was youth satisfaction with the political system and a country's economic outlook. At this, Indonesian youths were the most pessimistic.

Indonesian youths exhibit the highest levels of dissatisfaction with their political system compared to their Southeast Asian counterparts. Figure 1 demonstrates that 71.5 percent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction, with only 27.0 percent stating they were satisfied.

By contrast, the ISEAS survey also demonstrates that 63.9 percent of Indonesian youth agree with taxing the rich to help the economically disadvantaged – the highest compared to other Southeast Asian countries. Economic hardship is indeed a critical factor shaping youth pessimism. The survey indicates that 37.8 per cent of Indonesian youth perceive their national economy as “bad,” and only 2.6 percent believe it to be “very good” [Fig. 2].

Furthermore, only 62.6 percent of Indonesian respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the country's economic outlook over the next five years is promising, significantly lower than other Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam (88.1 percent) or Malaysia (84.1 percent) [Fig. 3].

The survey also reveals that perceptions of income inequality further exacerbate economic grievances. The survey shows that 67.3 percent of Indonesian youth viewed their country's income distribution as “very unfair” or “unfair,” the highest percentage in the region. By contrast, Vietnamese and Singaporean youths reported significantly lower dissatisfaction rates, at 18.3 percent and 30.6 percent, respectively. The perception that wealth and opportunities are disproportionately concentrated among the elite contributes to a growing belief that success is unattainable for ordinary citizens, reinforcing pessimism about both economic and political systems.

The significance of the recent physical protests notwithstanding, the government must not take the #KaburDuluAja youth digital resistance lightly, especially when it is aligned with their growing pessimism reflected in the survey. Young Indonesians are increasingly vocal about their struggles with unemployment, lack of upward mobility, and the societal pressure to

succeed quickly. In 2024, unemployment among youths aged between 15–24 years was the highest contributor to the national unemployment rate, reaching 16.4 percent.⁸ The high youth unemployment rate and difficulties in securing decent work have contributed to a sense of hopelessness, leading some to consider emigration.⁹ Indonesia can ill-afford a brain drain as it seeks to become a high-income nation by 2045.¹⁰

Unfortunately, some lawmakers from the House of Representatives and ministers have dismissed the youths' concerns as momentary emotional expressions and a form of escapism.¹¹ They have waved the nationalist card and stressed that the nation's development is the collective responsibility of all citizens, including the country's youth.¹² This argument will not go down well with the youth unless the government shows concrete evidence of their performance to bring about better socio-economic and political conditions. While the protest culture is a norm in Indonesia, it also signals youths' desire to channel their views without going through political representatives and the legislature. The Prabowo administration should listen to youth aspirations if it wants to maintain political legitimacy, run the government effectively, and slow down any slide in approval ratings.

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Fig. 1. Southeast Asian Youth Satisfaction with Political System.
(Source: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

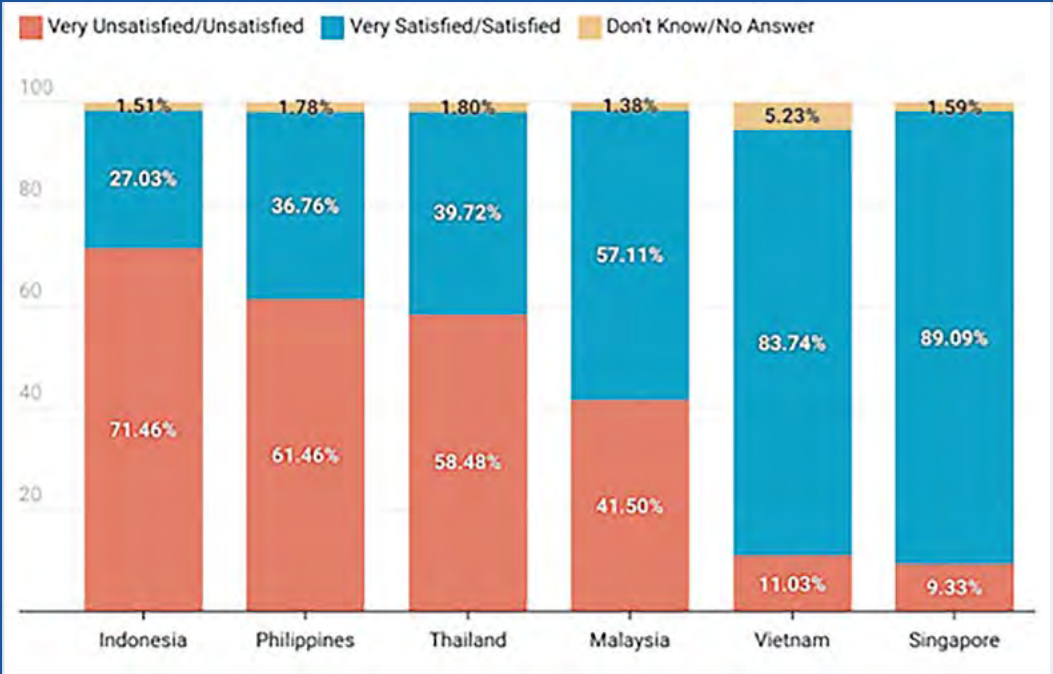


Fig. 2. Southeast Asian Youth Perception of Country's National Economy
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

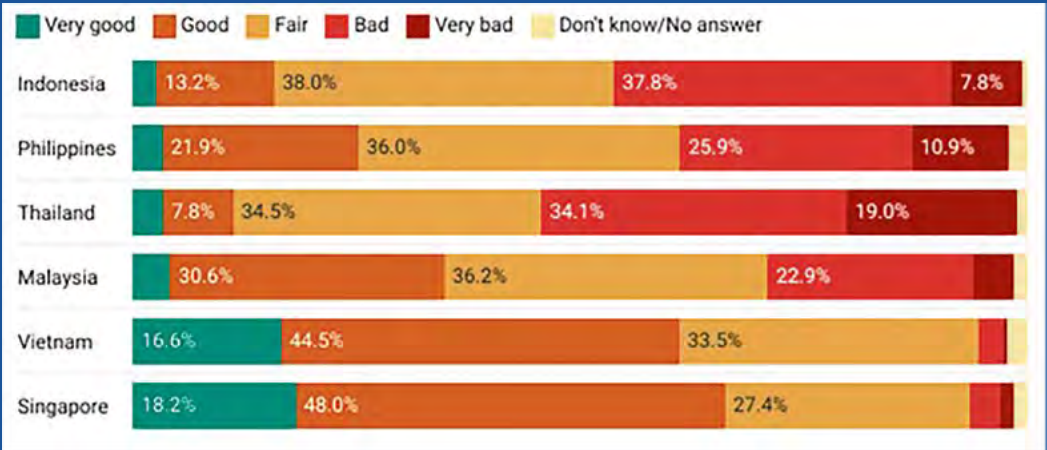


Fig. 3. Southeast Asian Youths' Optimism on Country's Economic Future
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

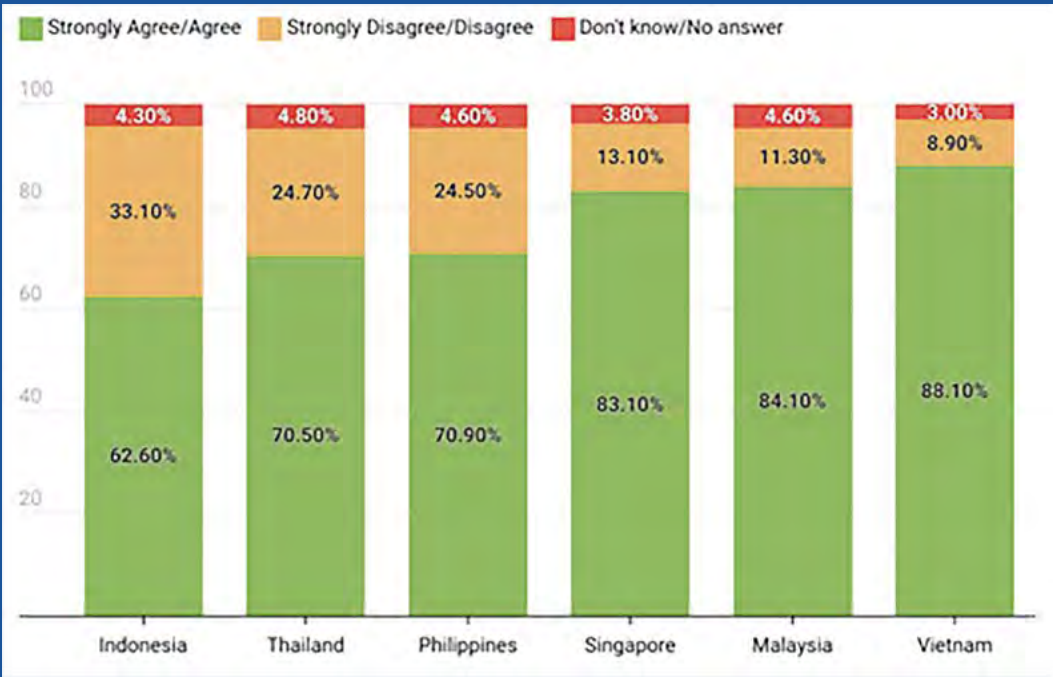
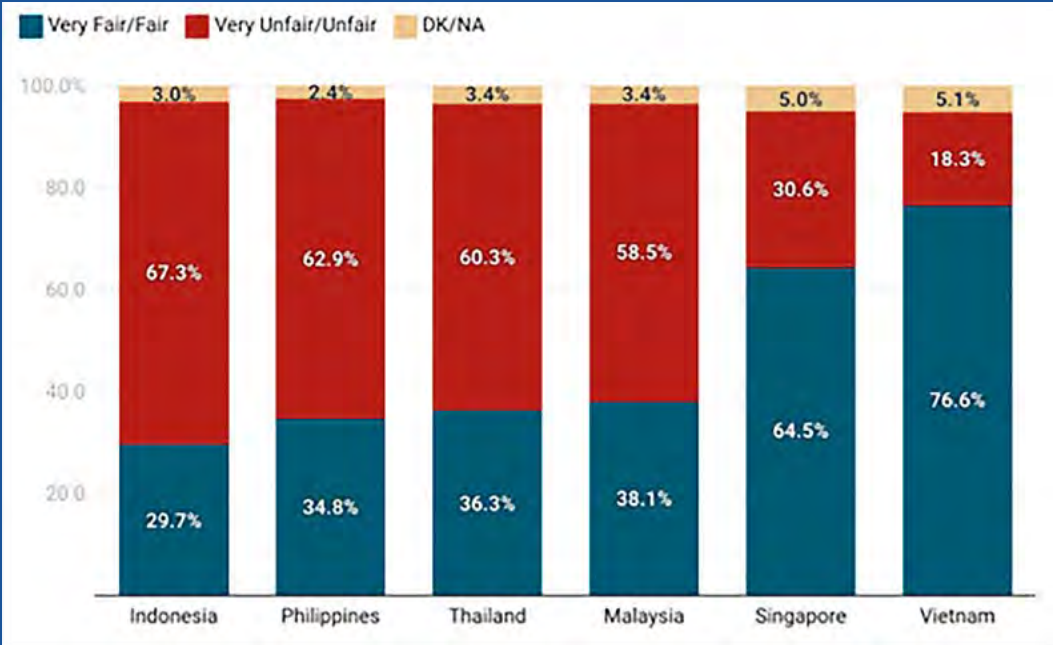


Fig. 4. Southeast Asian Youths' Perception of Country's Income Inequality
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)



Notes

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