

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

lim Halimatusa'diyah and Norshahril Saat

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.

This article was first published on **Fulcrum**: <https://fulcrum.sg/prabowo-should-take-heed-of-discontent-among-indonesian-youth>

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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.)

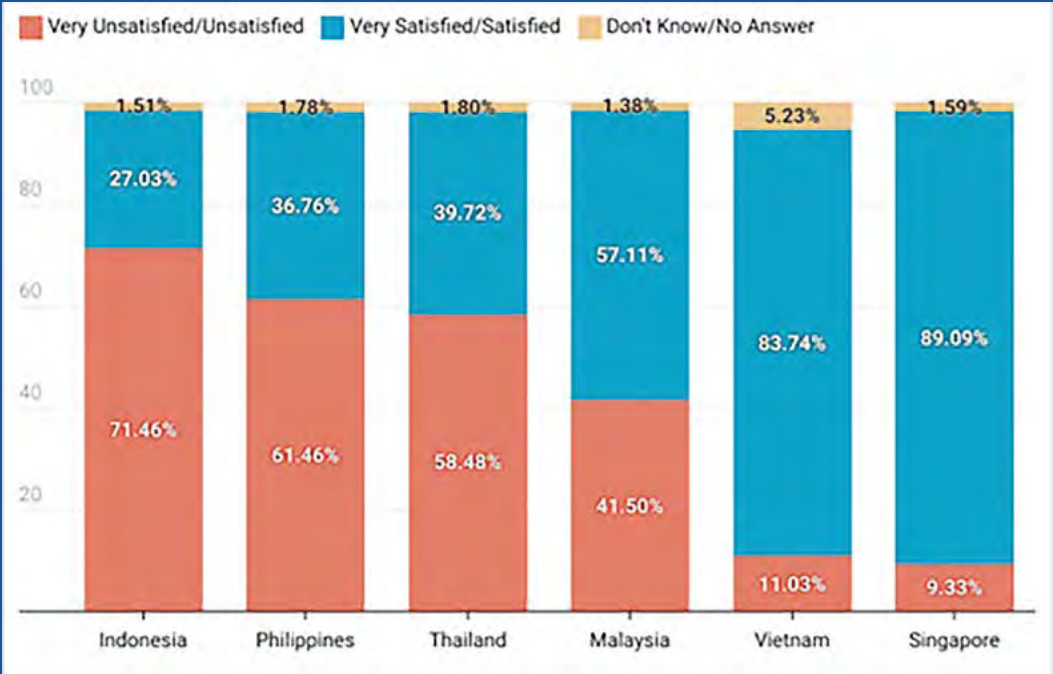


Fig. 2. Southeast Asian Youth Perception of Country's National Economy
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

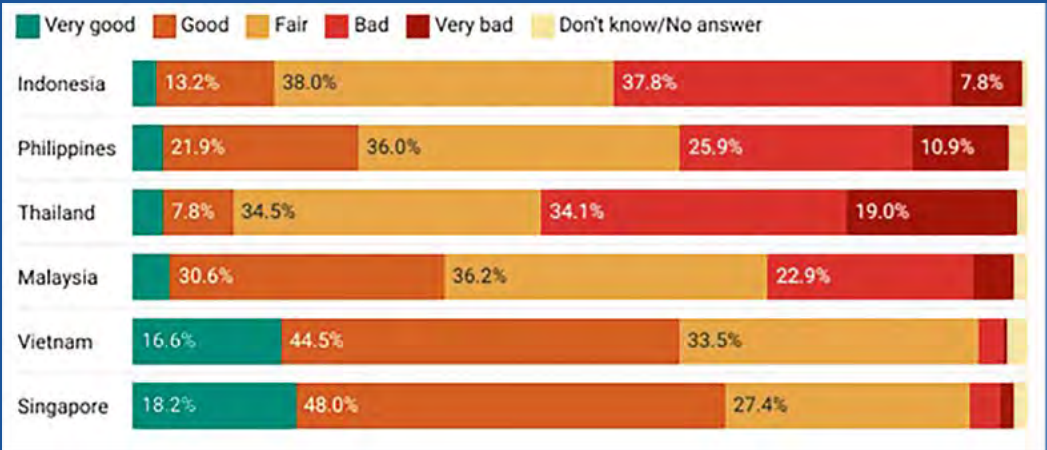


Fig. 3. Southeast Asian Youths' Optimism on Country's Economic Future
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

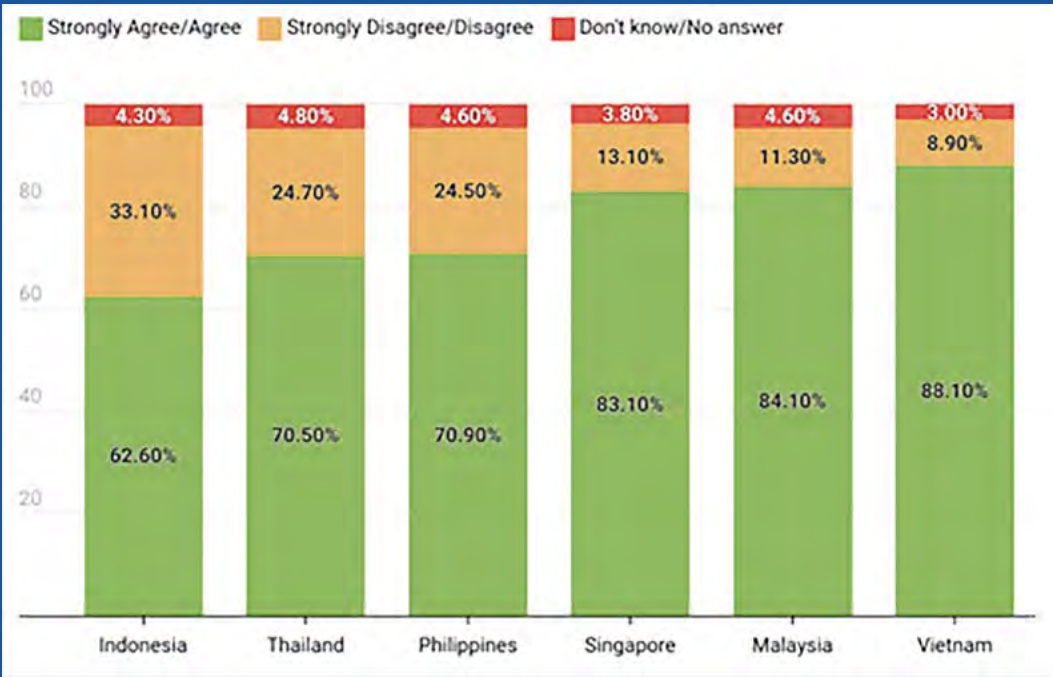
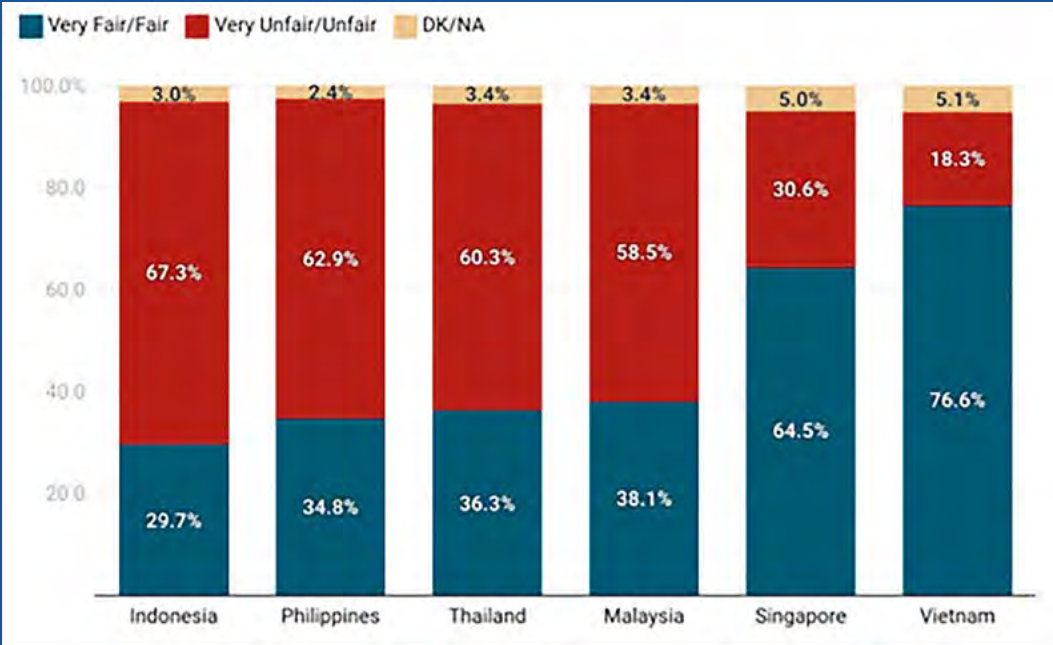


Fig. 4. Southeast Asian Youths' Perception of Country's Income Inequality
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)



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Malaysian Youths' Nuanced Take on Corruption in the System

Syaza Shukri

There are ongoing concerns about high-level corruption in Malaysia. These concerns are valid and warrant further government action. According to an ISEAS -Yusof Ishak Institute survey, however, Malaysian youths appear to have taken these concerns in stride amid growing political stability and economic growth.

On 25 January 2025, around 200 protestors, mostly university students, convened in Kuala Lumpur for an anti-graft rally.¹ Under the Unity Government led by Pakatan Harapan (PH) and headed by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim from the reformist Parti Keadilan Rakyat, the public has expressed discontentment over court cases involving well-known politicians. The most notable case is that of former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is pursuing legal means to move from incarceration to house arrest. Malaysia's 57th position in the Corruption Perception Index in 2024 showed no progress from 2023, even though it was ranked second after Singapore in Southeast Asia.²

Despite concerns about corruption, a large proportion of Malaysian youth have a positive outlook on the country's political system. In January, ISEAS released a report on youth and civic engagement in six Southeast Asian countries which sampled university undergraduates aged between 18 and 24.³ As seen in Figure 1, 57 percent of the Malaysian respondents were positive about the political system, whereas 42 percent responded that they were "not too satisfied" or "not at all satisfied." This showed that respondents were split in their views about the way the political system is working. Those who judged the political system negatively may have referred to corruption issues, whereas those who are positive may have looked more at the country's economy. In the survey, 84 percent of Malaysian respondents were optimistic about the country's economic future.

To understand the polarisation, the author conducted further studies about perceptions of the political system by socio-economic status [Fig. 2]. According to those additional findings, 61 percent of upper-class Malaysian respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the political system. On the other hand, more than 55 percent of the other classes responded positively. The classification was based on respondents' own perceptions of their socio-economic status. Because the survey was not followed by qualitative data, we can only suggest that economically less advantaged youth were satisfied with the political system because they were more likely to benefit from various government programs and initiatives, such as the cash assistance or *Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah* (Rahman Cash Contribution), which saw increased allocation in 2025.⁴ Bread-and-butter issues typically rank high when it comes to political perceptions.⁵ On the other hand, the upper class, who did not receive any assistance, might have looked at other matters, including the impact of corruption on the nation.

The fight against corruption is ongoing, but Prime Minister Anwar has been accused of being non-committal when it comes to reform. Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi's "discharge not amounting to an acquittal" (DNAA) was explained as necessary for a more thorough investigation.⁷ But more recently, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) detained four individuals linked to former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob and seized more than RM100 million in cash.⁸ Ismail Sabri is known to be in a different camp from Zahid in the United Malays National Organization. This brings into question whether political stability is prioritised over fighting corruption. Malaysians are calling out Anwar's inconsistency,⁹ and they may have a point after 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) dropped its US\$248 million suit against Najib Razak.¹⁰

The people, like the government, have been less than wholehearted in the fight against corruption. While corruption remains significant, its perceived importance may diminish if the general populace experiences economic and political stability. This is not new in Malaysia. Despite being found guilty in the 1MDB scandal, Najib Razak continues to receive support from different segments of society.¹¹ In December 2024, some 1500 participated in a counter-rally in defence of Sabah Chief Minister Hajiji Noor, despite him facing allegations of corruption.¹² It is important to note that those who participated in the January 2025 protest did not reflect the collective sentiment of Malaysia's youth. The turnout of 200 people at the anti-graft rally pales in comparison to other protests, such as the #Lawan protest in 2021,¹³ which saw more than 1000 participants, or the two-day Bersih 4 protest in 2015, which saw between 80,000 to 100,000 people attending.¹⁴

The government has taken additional steps to bolster confidence in its ability to fight corruption. The Prime Minister showed that he listened to the country's youth when he conceded at the eleventh hour to allow the 25 January protest to go ahead.¹⁵ This was despite earlier setbacks on location approval. The government is also seeking to amend the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 to remove the requirement to seek permission for protests at certain sites.¹⁶ Following Anwar's comment in the *Dewan Rakyat* to stop probes into student-led protests, the Attorney General's Chambers decided not to prosecute a student activist who had organised an anti-graft rally in Sabah in December 2024.¹⁷ The government should continue to respect young people's demands for clean governance and welcome their courage to stand up for their ideals – ideals that PH championed for decades.

This article was first published on Fulcrum: <https://fulcrum.sg/malaysian-youth-mixed-views-on-clean-governance-amid-stability>

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Fig. 1: Satisfaction with political system by country. (Graphic by the author, 2025)

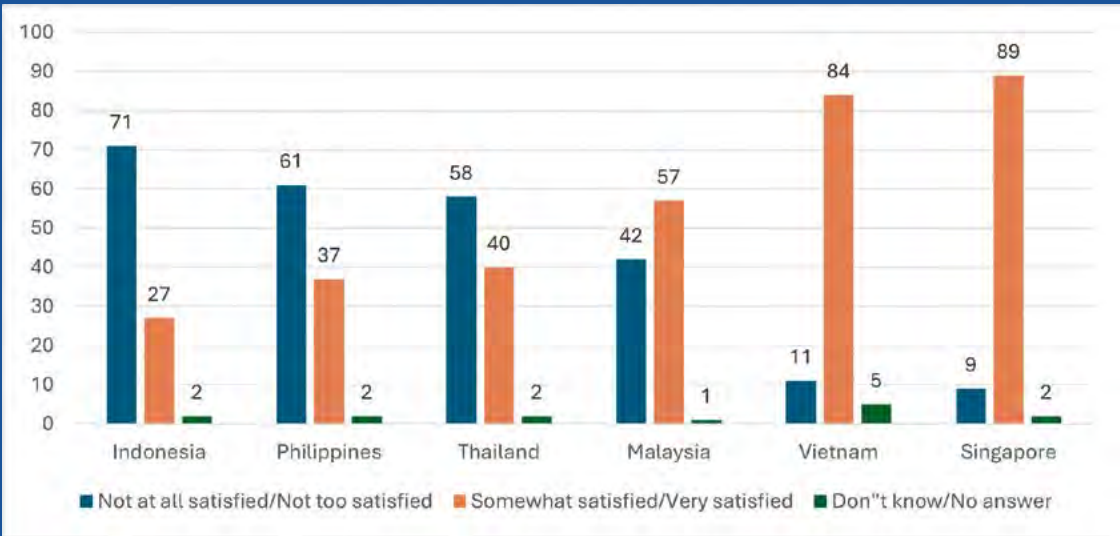
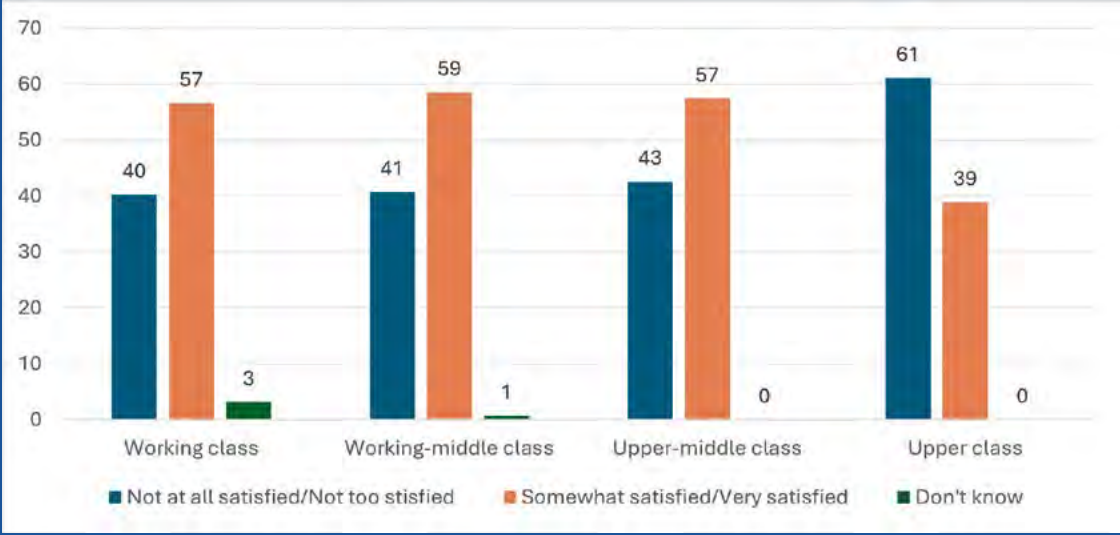


Fig. 2: Perceptions of the political system by socioeconomic status. (Graphic by the author, 2025)



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Online and Offline Support for Marriage Equality in Thailand

Panarat Anamwathana

On 23 January 2025, Thailand’s Marriage Equality Law came into effect.¹ Last year, Parliament² overwhelmingly approved the bill, and the King endorsed³ the Act in September 2024. The law replaces the terms “husband” and “wife” with gender-neutral language in Thai legislation, and it also ensures adoption and inheritance rights for all couples. This makes Thailand only the third country in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal, to recognise same-sex marriage. While the new law is undeniably the result of decades-long efforts of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) activists and their political allies, the momentous occasion was possible due to widespread public support in online and offline spaces.

Support for marriage equality has grown steadily in Thailand. In 2019, a YouGov poll found that 63 percent of Thais, especially 18-34-year-olds, supported the recognition of same-sex civil partnerships.⁴ In 2024, that number increased to 74 percent.⁵ This can be attributed to years of activism by LGBTQ+ rights groups and the introduction of a marriage equality bill by the now-defunct Move Forward Party in 2020.⁶

A recent ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey of the region’s undergraduates on youth and civic engagement found similar results.⁷ When asked if the state should protect LGBTQ+ rights, the response of young Thais stands out, with almost 70 percent of Thai respondents agreeing and only 7.6 percent disagreeing [Fig. 1]. The ISEAS survey asked respondents about the protection of LGBTQ+ rights – a broader question than in previous polls by others, which specified “same-sex civil unions.” It is thus possible that the ISEAS survey respondents may support only a marriage equality bill but not other rights for the LGBTQ+ community, such as protection from discrimination or recognition of various gender identities.

Religion partially accounts for Thailand’s LGBTQ+-friendliness. About 93 percent of Thai citizens practise Buddhism,⁸ which unlike Abrahamic religions does not unequivocally condemn homosexuality or non-conforming gender identities.⁹ This arguably allows more space for gender-

diverse individuals in Thailand.¹⁰ A 2023 Pew survey found that more than half of Cambodian respondents, also living in a Buddhist-majority society, endorsed marriage equality, and that Buddhist Malaysians and Singaporeans were more supportive than other religious communities of same-sex marriage.¹¹

These findings align with the 2024 ISEAS survey results, where only 11 and 15 percent of Indonesian and Malaysian youth, respectively, who live in Muslim-majority countries, endorse LGBTQ+ rights [Fig. 1]. However, their religion cannot be the sole explanation because Thai Muslim respondents showed greater support for LGBTQ+ rights compared to these two groups. Albeit a small sample size of just 22 Thai Muslim respondents, 31.8 percent of those believe that the state should protect LGBTQ+ rights [Fig. 2].

Thailand’s social and cultural acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community likely plays a crucial role in shaping its public support for marriage equality. Since at least the 1970s, Thailand has welcomed those seeking gender-reassignment surgery¹² and has culturally recognised “third gender” individuals (*kathoey*).¹³ In recent years, this acceptance is evinced by the prominent representation of queer people in traditional Thai media, including niche but increasingly popular “boys’ love (BL)” novels and dramas, which have gained fans across Asia.¹⁴ Scholars note that this increasing support for marriage equality has contributed to the growing popularity of LGBTQ+-related media.¹⁵ This, in turn, helped normalise LGBTQ+ experiences and foster greater acceptance even among conservative groups or older Thais.¹⁶

Social media platforms have also fostered Thailand’s LGBTQ+-friendly culture. According to the ISEAS survey, over half of Thai undergraduates use X (formerly Twitter) at least three to four days a week, and Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok daily. Meanwhile 77.6 percent use social media to receive news and 53.1 percent report using it to express their thoughts and opinions.

Throughout the years, activists, politicians, and Thai netizens have vocally supported LGBTQ+ rights online.

In December 2021, when the Constitutional Court ruled that marriage was only between a man and a woman “consistent with natural conditions and tradition,”¹⁷ the hashtag #ศาลรัฐธรรมนูญเหยียดเพศ [*#HomophobicConstitutionalCourt*] became the longest trending with over 260,000 posts on X in Thailand.¹⁸

Thais closely followed the legislative process for the marriage equality bill. During each parliamentary reading, the hashtag #สมรสเท่าเทียม [*#MarriageEquality*] trended on social media, with most users expressing their support. When the law was officially passed on 18 June 2024, the hashtag surged again, becoming Thailand’s most tweeted topic.¹⁹ Many politicians and celebrities participated in the conversation, further promoting the acceptance and normalisation of LGBTQ+ rights.

Over time, online support for LGBTQ+ rights transformed into tangible offline actions. This shift is evident in growing attendance at Bangkok Pride events, spurred by LGBTQ+ groups on social media encouraging allies to publicly demonstrate their support. While it is difficult to statistically ascertain the impact of such online encouragement, activist groups succeeded in organising well-attended Pride Parades in Bangkok. Bangkok Pride 2024’s popularity was reflected in its trending hashtag *#BangkokPride2024* on X, and LGBTQ+ groups successfully organised parades in other provinces like Phuket, where the march had the explicit goal of supporting the marriage equality bill. In conjunction with the Marriage Law coming into effect on 23 January 2025, Bangkok Pride successfully organised a mass marriage registration involving 1839 same-sex couples.²⁰

Thai political elites are not typically inclined to yield to public pressure. Yet, Thailand’s Marriage Equality Law exemplifies a perfect cocktail of effective activism, political campaigning, and widespread public support, as reflected in opinion polls and social media trends. This highlights the potential of online activities to bolster a cause in real life, provided they are successfully translated into tangible actions to foster alliances among activists and political groups.

This article was first published on Fulcrum: <https://fulcrum.sg/online-and-offline-support-for-marriage-equality-in-thailand>

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Fig. 1: Southeast Asian youth attitudes to LGBT rights. Respondents were asked to quantify their attitude towards the statement “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights should be protected by the state.” (Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024)

	Country						
	Total	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
Base	3081	529	506	506	504	501	535
1 Strongly disagree	28.7%	68.1%	63.0%	12.3%	9.9%	3.6%	14.2%
2	7.6%	9.8%	7.7%	7.5%	10.5%	4.0%	5.8%
3	17.2%	8.1%	11.5%	20.3%	25.6%	18.9%	18.9%
4	13.8%	3.8%	6.7%	15.4%	25.8%	15.8%	15.7%
5 Strongly agree	28.7%	7.0%	8.5%	41.7%	23.8%	53.9%	37.9%
Don't know/no answer	4.0%	3.2%	2.6%	2.8%	4.4%	3.8%	7.5%

Fig. 2: Thai youth support of LGBT rights, by religion. (Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024)

	Religion										
	Total	Islam	Protestantism	Catholicism	Buddhism	Hinduism	Confucianism	No Religion	Taoism	Folk Religion	Others
Base	501	22	7	8	432	3	4	19	1	1	4
1 Strongly disagree	3.6%	27.3%	-	12.5%	2.3%	-	-	-	100%	-	-
2	4.0%	-	-	12.5%	3.7%	33.3%	-	10.5%	-	-	-
3	19.0%	31.8%	14.3%	-	19.2%	-	50.0%	10.5%	-	-	-
4	15.8%	9.1%	-	25.0%	16.0%	33.3%	25.0%	5.3%	-	-	75.0%
5 Strongly agree	53.9%	22.7%	85.7%	50.0%	55.3%	33.3%	25.0%	63.2%	-	100%	25.0%
Don't know/no answer	3.8%	9.0%	-	-	3.5%	-	-	10.5%	-	-	-

Notes

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