RHIZOME VS REGIME

Southeast Asia's Digitally Mediated Youth Movements

Yatun Sastramidjaja

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Rhizome vs Regime: Southeast Asia's Digitally Mediated Youth Movements

By Yatun Sastramidjaja

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar, democratic regression and the reconsolidation of authoritarian regimes have triggered the rise of social media-driven protest movements. These are pioneered by a new generation of activist youth, distinguishing themselves from previous student and youth movements by the digitally mediated, decentralized and diverse nature of their protest.

- While experimenting with digitally mediated repertoires of action adopted and adapted from similar struggles elsewhere, these protesters forge transnational links that give rise to new protest assemblages across and beyond the region. This is exemplified by the social media-based #MilkTeaAlliance, in which the distinct protests in Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and other countries are conjoined through extended solidarity and affinity ties in a common "generational" struggle against entrenched authoritarianism. The youth resistance in Hong Kong was instrumental in driving this trend.

- Like a "rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), these movements are characterized by connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity and "unbreakable" expansion. This allows for a fluid participation of various activist and non-activist groups (such as K-poppers) and the inclusion of various issues and demands in the protest, which merge into the cause of fighting systemic injustice. It also heightens the movements' viability and resilience to repression.

- However, besides physical repression, protesters in all three countries face the added challenge of new modes of cyber-repression. The combined effect of repressive cyber laws, intrusive

cyber surveillance and aggressive cyber troops took its toll on the protest movements' capacities for online agitation and mobilization, thus contributing to the movements' silencing and suppression. Yet, the resistance did not die out, as activists dodge cyber-repression and make creative uses of digital media and technologies to cultivate their resistance online, at the grassroots level, or in the cultural sphere.

- Meanwhile, as long as authorities remain repressive and tone-deaf to this generation's criticism and concerns, the gulf between them looks set to widen. The longer-term implication is that this generation will remain alienated and continue to express their struggle in novel and unpredictable ways.

Rhizome vs Regime: Southeast Asia's Digitally Mediated Youth Movements

By Yatun Sastramidjaja[1]

INTRODUCTION

In various Southeast Asian countries, already weak democracies are being eroded by processes of democratic regression and reconsolidation of dynastic, autocratic and authoritarian regimes.[2] At the same time, these countries have seen the rise of new protest movements, pioneered by a new generation of activist youth. Youth fuelled spectacular mass protests in Indonesia (2019–20), Thailand (2020–21) and Myanmar (2021–22), mounting a daring resistance to the erosion of democracy. In doing so, they experimented with new instruments and repertoires of action, characterized by creative uses of digital media and technologies. The digitally mediated nature of their protest allowed them to forge new links across national and sectoral borders. This has given rise to new assemblages of protest that extend across and beyond the region, bound together by shared imaginations of generational struggle.

Organizationally, ideologically, and in strategy and style, these protest movements and their participants differ from the student and youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which were driven by centralized, hierarchical organizations and mono-directional targets oriented towards

[1] Yatun Sastramidjaja is Assistant Professor in Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, and is currently an Associate Fellow in the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

[2] Marcus Mietzner, *Democratic Deconsolidation in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Rainer Einzenberger and Wolfram Schaffar, "The Political Economy of New Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia", *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

the nation-state. Southeast Asia has a long history of student movements that pioneered key political events—from anti-colonial struggles in the early twentieth century, to regime overthrows in Indonesia in 1966 and 1998, in Thailand in 1973, and the People Power Uprising in Burma (Myanmar) in 1988. In the 1960s and 1970s, students also played a leading role in democracy and social justice movements in the region. Despite this legacy, the role of student movements has since declined, mainly due to their suppression, pacification and de-legitimation in the context of state consolidation.[3] The decline was also due to their burden of "rootedness" in national histories and political cultures, which limited them to fixed repertoires of student protest.[4] Those fixed roles and repertoires no longer appeal to younger generations known vernacularly as the "Millennial Generation" (roughly, born in the 1980s and 1990s) and "Gen Z" (born in the 2000s), whose political identifications have greatly diversified. So have their own modes of protest.

Rather than sprouting from the single "root" of national histories of student activism, today's youth movements form a heterogeneous assemblage with multiple origins and nodes that expand in multiple directions, much like the digital communication flows that shape their protest. Present-day youth movements thereby resemble what the French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari termed a "rhizomatic assemblage", referring to decentralized knowledge processes in which knowledge is liberated from linear thought, hierarchies of thought and single sources of

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[3] Meredith L. Weiss and Edward Aspinall, eds., *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Meredith L. Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

[4] Yatun Sastramidjaja, "Student Movements and Indonesia's Democratic Transition", in *Activists in Transition: Progressive Politics in Democratic Indonesia*, edited by Thushara Dibley and Michele Ford (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Press, 2019), pp. 39–56; Yatun Sastramidjaja, "Youth 'Alienation' and New Radical Politics: Shifting Trajectories in Youth Activism", in *Continuity and Change after Indonesia's Reforms: Contributions to an Ongoing Assessment*, edited by Max Lane (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 238–61.

authority.[5] Deleuze and Guattari argued that a rhizomatic structure (like its botanical original, such as fibrous ginger roots) has four characteristics that render it particularly viable and resilient: connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity and what they call "asignifying rupture", or the quality of being unbreakable; even as parts of a rhizome break off, perish, or are destroyed, it continues to spread in any possible direction, finding new gaps, routes and spaces to sprout, and making new connections. Internet observers have noted that this concept of the rhizome is especially fitting to the digital age, as "the rhizomatic structure of the web allows for a level of democratic, political and intellectual involvement that has never been seen before; it is pushing us into a new era of decentralized knowledge".[6] I argue it is also a fitting metaphor for digitally mediated youth movements and the novel types of political knowledge processes, practices and actions they engender.

One effect of the digital connectivity of these youth movements is the cross-fertilization of protest issues and repertoires, as activist youth from different groups and regions actively learn from, adopt and adapt each other's protest tactics, imagery and discourse. It also spurs new solidarity networks across Southeast Asia and Asia at large, based on a sense of generational affinity—of belonging to the same generational struggle against entrenched authoritarianism in the region. Crucially, this sense of generational attachment and agency heightens their resilience in dealing with the increasing repression, criminalization and delegitimation of their protest in each of their countries. It allows them to take refuge in shared virtual "spaces of hope"—that is, spaces that enable "utopian imaginings" and sustain the hope that change *is* possible[7]—and through these spaces carry on their struggle for political change.

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[5] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[6] Matt Bluemink, "The Web as Rhizome in Deleuze and Guattari", *Blue Labyrinths*, 15 July 2015, https://bluelabyrinths.com/2015/07/15/the-web-as-rhizome-in-deleuze-and-guattari/

[7] David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

However, the rise of *digital* authoritarianism—that is, the use of digital technologies and cyber legislation for authoritarian ends—is now also threatening these spaces.[8] Repressive cyber laws, cyber surveillance and other incursions on digital rights, and concerted attacks from regime-affiliated cyber troops, are making it difficult to sustain protest movements even online. The question is to what extent, and how, Southeast Asia's digitally mediated youth movements can withstand regime repression once this also moves online.

To answer this question, in this article, I compare the recent youth protests in Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome. In these three countries, youth-driven, digitally mediated mass protests met with violent repression, on the streets and online, which effectively broke their momentum and furthermore revealed the limitations of social media-driven protest. Yet, considering the rhizome's fourth characteristic of "being unbreakable"— or viability and resilience—it becomes clear that these movements did not really end and continue to have durable impacts.

CONNECTIVITY: YOUTH PROTEST AND DIGITAL MEDIATION

Recent anti-regime protests have spotlighted a new "youth culture of protest" in Asia,[9] which evolved since the early 2010s, alongside the growing popularity of social media, and inspired by the "Arab Spring"

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[8] Gerard McDermott, "The Spectre of Digital Authoritarianism for Southeast Asia", *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, Issue 33 (September 2022), https://kyotoreview.org/issue-33/from-the-editor-the-spectre-of-digital-authoritarianism-for-southeast-asia/; Aim Sinpeng, "Digital Media, Political Authoritarianism, and Internet Controls in Southeast Asia", *Media, Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2019): 25–39.

[9] Julian Ch. Lee, "Youth and a Culture of Protest in Southeast Asia", *New Mandala*, 8 November 2017, https://www.newmandala.org/youth-culture-protest-southeast-asia/; Nicholas Farrelly, "Asia's Youth in Revolt", *The Diplomat*, 1 April 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/asias-youth-in-revolt/

uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and the Occupy movements that spread from Wall Street to other parts of the world. *TIME* magazine's 2011 "person of the year" was "The Protester", typified as being "disproportionally young, middle class and educated", and not needing "encouragement from or endorsement by existing political parties or opposition bigwigs" to rise against dysfunctional and corrupt regimes, mainly relying on the Internet and social media to mobilize.[10] In Asia, Hong Kong's 2011–12 Occupy Central with Love and Peace and the 2014 Umbrella Movement were especially influential in shaping new protest cultures, establishing digital mediation as a vital part of youth resistance to authoritarianism.[11]

Beyond mere instrumental uses of social media as a tool for communication, digital mediation of the protests in Hong Kong and elsewhere shaped the very structure of the organization and the experience of participation; anyone could join, virtually or physically, and everyone that did felt personally involved.[12] Digital mediation facilitated fluid modes of organization based on peer-to-peer mobilization through online channels, and stimulated peer-produced, participatory modes of action that are manifestly multi-mediated in nature, seamlessly blending virtual and physical repertoires.[13] This also shaped the visual discourse

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[10] Kurt Andersen, "The Protester", *TIME*, 14 December 2011, https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132_2102373,00.html

[11] Stephan Ortmann, "The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong: From Economic Concerns to the Rejection of Materialism", *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 17 (March 2015), https://kyotoreview.org/issue-17/the-umbrella-movement-in-hong-kong-from-economic-concerns-to-the-rejection-of-materialism/

[12] Francis L.F. Lee and Joseph M. Chan, "Digital Media Activities and Mode of Participation in a Protest Campaign: A Study of the Umbrella Movement", *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 1 (2016): 4–22.

[13] Elizabeth Soep, *Participatory Politics: Next Generation Tactics to Remake Public Spheres* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

of protest, as online protest visuals and protest art on the streets formed a symbiotic pattern for visual storytelling,[14] heightening public impact and involvement. Thereby, digital mediation contributed to an "insurgent public sphere" that spread beyond the boundaries and lifespan of the specific protest,[15] expanding to, and blending with, emerging protest cultures elsewhere. As further discussed below, the Hong Kong protests not only inspired similar modes of youth protest in Southeast Asia but were also instrumental in forging transnational connections that enabled the emergence of "rhizomatic" protest assemblages in the region.

As in Hong Kong and elsewhere, the recent protest movements in Southeast Asia were decentralized in nature, lacking a single leadership, or single tradition to follow. While leading protest collectives were formed in the course of the protests, which could also include elements of established youth and student organizations, those collectives were heterogeneous, fluid and porous, defying pigeonholing into particular political groups or positions. As Joanne Lim notes on the case of social media-driven protests in Malaysia, this creates the sense of an organic, inclusive community of peers, congregating around a unified and unifying purpose of "change" that transcends particular goals and targets.[16] This also enables them to circumvent social and political fault lines that have hitherto hampered democracy efforts, particularly so in Southeast Asia's deeply divided societies.

While this allows for a diversity of demands to be included in the protest—combining resistance to immediate threats to democracy with a variety of social justice issues—ultimately, the protests question the very power base of contemporary regimes. Accordingly, beyond regime

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[14] Irmgard Wetzstein, "The Visual Discourse of Protest Movements on Twitter: The Case of Hong Kong 2014", *Media and Communication* 5, no. 4 (2017): 26–36.

[15] Paul S.N. Lee, Clement Y.K. So and Louis Leung, "Social Media and Umbrella Movement: Insurgent Public Sphere in Formation", *Chinese Journal of Communication* 8, no. 4 (2015): 356–75.

[16] Joanne Lim, "Engendering Civil Resistance: Social Media and Mob Tactics in Malaysia", *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017): 209–27.

change, they generally demand structural change, as they see no viable futures for themselves and their societies under current conditions. Their vision for what this change looks like and how to achieve it might be as diverse as the groups involved in the protests. Naturally, it is also influenced by the political conditions in each country. Nonetheless, narrative patterns for viable futures are starting to emerge as an outflow of these generational struggles.

HETEROGENEITY: THE CASE OF INDONESIA

In Indonesia, nationwide protests erupted in September 2019, four months after President Joko Widodo's ("Jokowi") re-election in April. Social media had been buzzing for weeks with calls for action, spreading from the accounts of activist youth—including those previously involved in the rainbow alliance forming the new voter abstention movement ("Golput 2.0"), and various other groups—to broadening peer networks, using the hashtag #ReformasiDikorupsi, "reform corrupted". The hashtag referred to a bill for revision of the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) that would curb the KPK's investigative powers and autonomy, and other bills and policies that were seen to harm civil rights and erode democracy. This included the bill for revision of the Criminal Code, which marked blasphemy, defamation and insulting the state or the President's honour as criminal offences, carrying heavy sentences, and furthermore penalizing "immoral" acts in the private sphere. As the hashtag #ReformasiDikorupsi gained momentum in the build-up to the outgoing parliament's final session on 30 September, netizens began expressing broader discontent with the state of Indonesia's democracy; hopes for "real" political change that had accompanied Jokowi's initial presidential victory in 2014 were dashed by his government's conservative and illiberal turn in recent years.[17] Many young netizens

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[17] Thomas Power and Eve Warburton, eds. *Democracy in Indonesia: From Stagnation to Regression?* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

also expressed concerns about a possible "return to authoritarianism"—conjuring up the spectre of a "New Order Part 2", "neo-New Order", or "reincarnation of the New Order"—even if they had never experienced authoritarian New Order rule.

The online warming up for action had a tremendous effect. Throughout the final week of September 2019, tens of thousands of youth—including students from over 300 universities—participated in the largest nationwide protest since the student demonstrations of 1998.[18] The press promptly dubbed the protest an heir to the 1998 student movement or the latest incarnation of Indonesia's historical tradition of "student struggle". However, students on the ground rejected the notion of such lineage; some protest signs even mocked the "1998 Generation", criticizing its members' absence in the protest and their "betrayal" of the struggle for reform, as many former student activists of that generation were now part of the ruling establishment. Rather than identifying as a traditional student movement, the students on the streets felt they represented a novel movement, more heterogeneous and organic than the student movements of the past, involving a wide range of activist organizations and youth collectives that had emerged since the mid-2000s around specific issues and specific identities *as* youth.[19] Furthermore, the ubiquitous use of hashtags on protest signs, and the intertwinement of action on social media and on the streets, indicated acute awareness of digital connectivity being a distinctive feature of their movement.

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[18] For further details on the September 2019 protests in Indonesia, see: Yatun Sastramidjaja, "Indonesia: Digital Communications Energising New Political Generation's Campaign for Democracy", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/16, 17 March 2020, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/indonesia-digital-communications-energising-new-political-generations-campaign-for-democracy-by-yatun-sastramidjaja/

[19] Maulida Raviola, "Typology of Contemporary Youth Organizations", Youth Policy Labs Report Series on Capacity Building for the Empowerment and Involvement of Youth in Indonesia, May 2013, https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Indonesia_2013_Mapping_Youth_Organisations.pdf

Because none of the groups claimed leadership, it lowered the threshold for first-time protesters to join the action. Their participation, in turn, affected the character of the protest: a heterogeneous multitude was out on the streets, adding new flavours to the protest and bringing their own protest signs that were filled with popular culture references and the Internet humour of a digital generation. This included the adoption of one-liners seen in youth protests elsewhere in the world—either written in English, translated into Indonesian, or merging the languages— indicating affinity to global dispositions of contemporary youth activism. For example: "Error 404: democracy not found" and "I've seen better Cabinets at IKEA", both in English, and "RUU KUHP & RUU KPK [Criminal Code and KPK bills] is so fucked up, even introverts like me join the protest [English]. #RejectRUUKPK&RUUKUHP [Indonesian]. #WeStandWithKPK [English]".

One group that stood out were "K-poppers", known for their fanatic engagement with Korean pop fandom on social media. Online, they helped to raise protest hashtags onto Twitter's trending topics. On the streets, they contributed unique protest images and slogans, such as "I ♥ BTS [K-pop band] but I ♥ justice even more. #K-Poppers won't remain silent!". Across Asia, the K-pop fandom is known to frequently engage in advocacy and activism, using its mass presence on social media to boost online protests or to raise funds for offline movements through fan-based crowdfunding.[20] It was less common for K-poppers to join protests physically. Their visible presence on the streets in Jakarta and other Indonesian cities—and soon also in Thailand and Myanmar—thus signalled a coming out of the "new youth culture of protest" in Southeast Asia.

In Indonesia, and later in Thailand and Myanmar, many protest signs also contained explicit sexual references, expressing anger at the impingement on sexual freedoms proposed in the Criminal Code Bill,

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[20] Amalia N. Andini and Ghaziah N. Akhni, "Exploring Youth Political Participation: K-Pop Fan Activism in Indonesia and Thailand", *Global Focus* 1, no. 1 (2021): 38–55; Dorcas Gan, "K-Pop Activism: A Potent Political Force", *Fulcrum*, 9 July 2021, https://fulcrum.sg/k-pop-activism-a-potent-political-force/

or at the government's stalling of the anti-sexual violence bill, which was another main protest issue. For example, one sign carried by a female student stated, in English, "I don't need sex, the government is fucking me right now", adding an Indonesian-language hashtag, #JanganMauDiperkosaNegara, "refuse to be raped by the state". Except for the Indonesian hashtag, the exact same sign would also be used in the 2020 protests in Thailand, indicating that the use of sexualized language and images did not refer to specific legislation alone.[21] Likewise, in Myanmar, sexualized symbols such as women's underwear were used in the 2021 protests, invoking cultural beliefs that it could undermine men's, or rulers', power.[22] In Indonesia, such bold sexualized statements and symbols—considered highly improper in Indonesia's public sphere—not only scoffed at government policy; it also signalled generational ideological distancing from the conservative ruling elites.[23]

The heterogeneity of participating groups was also reflected in the diversity of issues raised in the protest. For example, one protest sign seen on the streets of Malang listed multiple grievances, implying these were all connected: "Women are raped; KPK is weakened; Forests are razed; Papua is colonized; Land is given to investors; Farmers are evicted; Workers are exploited; Privacy is at risk; Democracy is undermined; Will the people be silenced? NO. RESIST!!!".[24] A notable characteristic of the protest was that it conjoined various issues into a single cause of resistance, exposing the underlying systemic injustice. This was also apparent in the list of demands issued by the Yogyakarta-based Alliance of People's Mobilization, which targeted a range of

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[21] Personal communication, Janjira Sombatpoonsiri.

[22] Michele Ford and Thushara Dibley, "Panties for Peace: Reflexivity in the Deployment of a Hyperlocal Campaign Trope from Myanmar", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2022): 319–34.

[23] Thus, it could also be read as a sneer at Jokowi's alliance with conservative Islamic groups, as represented by his chosen vice-president, Ma'aruf Amin, an elderly Islamic cleric and formerly the chairman of the Ulema Council of Indonesia.

[24] Source: Twitter, #MalangMemanggil, 23 September 2019.

specific laws and policies relating to human and civil rights, women's rights, digital rights, social justice, and agricultural and environmental legislation.[25] The juxtaposition of these distinct issues on a single protest sign, or a shareable list of demands circulating on social media under a single hashtag, served to convey to the public—and to the masses of first-time demonstrators—that protest on any of these issues, due to systemic links between them, implied resistance on all others.

This message reflected emerging intersectoral orientations within the movement, which became more pronounced in a second wave of protests erupting one year later, in October 2020. This protest targeted the Omnibus Law for Job Creation, a draconian law aimed at streamlining legislation on labour and investment, which since its announcement in October 2019 met with resistance from labour unions, environmental groups, women's organizations, academics, civil society organizations, and activists involved in the #ReformasiDikorupsi protest. They felt the Omnibus Law served to strengthen the oligarchy, with a detrimental impact on labour rights and the environment.[26] In the first half of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the protest mainly took place online, using concerted hashtag actions to raise protest messages—encapsulated in the hashtags #TolakOmnibusLaw, "reject the Omnibus Law", #MosiTidakPercaya, "vote of no confidence", and related hashtags— onto Twitter's trending topics.[27] Reliance on digital tactics accelerated

[25] Yatun Sastramidjaja, "Indonesia: Digital Communications Energising New Political Generation's Campaign for Democracy".

[26] Max Lane, "Protests Against the Omnibus Law and the Evolution of Indonesia's Social Opposition", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2020/128, 9 November 2020, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-128-protests-against-the-omnibus-law-and-the-evolution-of-indonesias-social-opposition-by-max-lane/

[27] Yatun Sastramidjaja and Pradipa R. Rasidi, "The Hashtag Battle over Indonesia's Omnibus Law: From Digital Resistance to Cyber-Control", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/95, 21 July 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-95-the-hashtag-battle-over-indonesias-omnibus-law-from-digital-resistance-to-cyber-control-by-yatun-sastramidjaja-and-pradipa-p-rasidi/

and expanded the protest, drawing in ever more online participants. Moreover, it allowed activists to inform and educate participants on the structural power abuses behind the Omnibus Law, most effectively through shareable infographics exposing close links between governing elites and big business interests. This further nurtured awareness of, and indignation at, systemic injustices.

By September 2020, messages rejecting the Omnibus Law overwhelmingly dominated the cyber-sphere. Following the parliament's hastened passing of the law on 5 October, the online protest surged to around half a million anti-Omnibus Law messages per day, largely owing to K-poppers' efforts,[28] while tens of thousands of demonstrators again took to the streets, mobilized by labour unions and through the same peer-to-peer networks that drove the #ReformasiDikorupsi protest. However, both in September 2019 and in October 2020, the protest was short-lived, as it was violently repressed and moreover met with cyber-repression, discussed below. By the end of 2020, Indonesia's new protest movement had petered out. Yet traces remain in the form of sporadic smaller protests, or various activist practices at the grassroots level, in the cultural sphere, and on social media and other digital platforms, where ideas of resistance and visions of change nurtured during the protest are sustained and further cultivated. Meanwhile, activist youth and their networks of peers in Indonesia take inspiration from protest movements happening elsewhere in the region.

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[28] Aditya Widya Putri, "Bagaimana Fan K-Pop Menggalang Gerakan Protes di Gerakan Sosial", *Tirto*, 26 October 2020, https://tirto.id/bagaimana-fan-k-pop-menggalang-gerakan-protes-di-media-sosial-f6cJ; Rosa Folia, "Fans K-Pop Aktif di Garis Depan Protes Pengesahan UU Cipta Kerja", *VICE*, 6 October 2020, https://www.vice.com/id/article/qj47ad/fans-k-pop-aktif-memrotes-pengesahan-uu-cipta-kerja-omnibus-law-di-medsos; Ismail Fahmi, "RUU Omnibus Law Disahkan: K-Popers Strike Back", *Drone Emprit*, 6 October 2020, https://pers.droneemprit.id/ruu-omnibus-law-disahkan-k-popers-strike-back/

MULTIPLICITY: "BE WATER" IN HONG KONG, THAILAND AND MYANMAR

Indonesia's #ReformasiDikorupsi protest in September 2019 did not go by unnoticed to peers engaged in similar struggles elsewhere. Solidarity statements from activist youth abounded on social media—notably from Hong Kong, where the 2014 Umbrella Movement had morphed into a radicalized resistance against the Extradition Bill and China's encroaching authoritarian control. Strikingly, Hong Kong activists expressed their solidarity not simply in written formal statements but in the form of graffiti spray-painted across the city, making it part of Hong Kong's protest landscape alongside their own slogan of resistance: "Give me democracy/freedom or give me death" (Figures 1 and 2). This juxtaposition manifested a sense of affinity that surpassed mere solidarity, indicating they were essentially fighting the same struggle.

Figure 1: Hong Kong Graffiti Expressing Solidarity with Indonesia's #Reformasidikorupsi Protest

Source: Twitter, @HongKongHermit, 29 September 2019.

Figure 2: Hong Kong Protest Graffiti Expressing "Solidarity with Labourers, Farmers, Students of Indonesia!!!", Written in the Indonesian Language, with Small Spelling Errors

Source: Twitter, @HongKongHermit, 29 September 2019.

The feeling of affinity was mutual, as illustrated by a viral image created by a young Indonesian artist, picturing two activist youths from Hong Kong and Indonesia (significantly, the Indonesian was not a student but a schoolboy), striking hands under the text: "Fulfil our demands, not one less!!", with the hashtags #StandWithHK and #ReformasiDikorupsi (Figure 3). Despite the different political conditions, activist youth in both countries felt they were similarly resisting authoritarian legislation that would detrimentally affect the freedoms and the future of their generation. The Asian connection further reinforced the sense of generational affinity, a sense of political and cultural kinship and common destiny.

It was not the first time that Hong Kong's youth resistance spurred transnational peer connections in the region. An earlier manifestation

Figure 3: Peer-Produced Image of Peer-to-Peer Solidarity Circulating on Social Media

Source: Twitter, @efi_sh, 18 October 2019.

was the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA), founded in 2016 as an alliance between activist youth from the Umbrella Movement, the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan, the New Democracy Movement in Thailand, and representatives from South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar and other countries. They aimed to "reclaim the social, cultural and political narrative of a region grappling with entrenched authoritarianism" by fostering strategic collaborations among activist youth across Asia.[29] In September 2017, they attempted to

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[29] Feliz Solomon, "Youthful Asian Activists Have Set Up a New Regional Network to Fight for Democracy", *TIME*, 14 November 2016, https://time.com/4560233/asia-youth-democracy-network-noyda/; Penchan Phoborisut, "Contesting Big Brother: Joshua Wong, Protests, and the Student Network of Resistance in Thailand", *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 3270–92.

institutionalize the network by formalizing its structure and formulating a strategy for democracy promotion and outreach.[30] However, the network remained dormant since. The attempt at institutionalization might have come ill-timed for member groups that were preoccupied with the specific struggles in their own countries. Moreover, these were youth struggles that resisted institutionalization in their respective settings, therefore to formalize them not only felt contradictory, but by 2019 the attempt was also overtaken by the reality of new protests.

Again, this started in Hong Kong, where the protests that erupted since March 2019 were more militant—though essentially non-violent, adopting direct action tactics—and more decentralized, diversified and digitized than seen in 2014, using various new repertoires such as flash mob and pop-up protests, mainly in response to growing repression and the authorities' increasingly sophisticated techniques of surveillance.[31] The strategy was encapsulated in the movement's saying: "Be water", adopted from Bruce Lee's martial art philosophy (or the Taoist philosophy of flow). It meant taking a fluid, amorphous approach that allowed for quick adaptation to volatile situations, making the protest unpredictable to authorities. Digital communications in the protest were similarly decentralized and fluid, as protesters moved away from established social media platforms, using new platforms like Telegram, a messaging app allowing users to broadcast messages to groups of all sizes anonymously, and LIHKG, a Hong Kong-based Reddit-like forum where users can endorse posts they support. Thus, participants could post suggestions for action, and be voted up or down by peers. To prevent police tracking of the conversations, mass Telegram channels and LIHKG forums were broken up into smaller and ever-changing groups. As activist Baggio

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[30] "Young Asians Make the Promise of Democracy a Reality", World Movement for Democracy, 20 September 2017, https://www.movedemocracy.org/network-of-young-democratic-asians-noyda-launches

[31] Heike Holbig, "Be Water, My Friend: Hong Kong's 2019 Anti-Extradition Protests", *International Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 4 (2020): 325–37.

Leung characterized the protest culture, "It's just like a machine or a self-learning AI that can run by themselves".[32]

This strategy was later adopted by activist youth in Thailand, who had been protesting against the military junta since the 2014 coup d'état, emerging as a new progressive force that shunned the colour-coded polarized politics of Thai parties, and moreover departed from the elitism of the student movements of the past.[33] Defying the post-coup state of emergency, these youth staged a series of protests, calling for democracy and reform of the *lèse majesté* law that was frequently used to mute dissent. To circumvent the ban on political activities, the protest often took the form of symbolic action such as silent readings of George Orwell's *1984* in public, raising the three-finger salute adopted from the dystopian movie *The Hunger Games* that pictured an uprising against a dictatorial regime, occasional flash-mobs, candle vigils for detained activists, or singing actions.[34] Additionally, many more youths joined cyber-actions. A major trigger was the junta's proposal in late 2015 for a Single Internet Gateway, modelled after China's Great Firewall; netizens responded with online petitions, hashtag actions on Twitter, and DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks on government and army websites until the proposal was cancelled. Instead, the Computer-Related Crime Act was passed in December 2016, providing a new tool to restrict free speech, enforce surveillance and censorship, and prosecute activists.

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[32] Alice Su, "A New Kind of Hong Kong Activism Emerges as Protesters Mobilize Without Any Leaders", *Los Angeles Times*, 14 June 2019, https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-hong-kong-youth-activism-decentralized-protests-20190614-story.html

[33] Tyrell Haberkorn, "A Budding Democracy Movement in Thailand", *Dissent Magazine*, 30 July 2015, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/new-democracy-movement-thailand

[34] Penchan Phoborisut, "Contesting Big Brother"; Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, "The Rise and Dynamics of the 2020 Youth Movement in Thailand", Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung E-paper, Series: Democracy (Brussels: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2022), https://eu.boell.org/en/young-voices-Thai-youth

But it did not deter netizens; in the following years hashtag activism on Twitter took flight, often with the use of euphemistic hashtags to dodge the computer crime act and *lèse majesté* law.[35]

A turning point in the youth resistance was the stunning electoral success of the new progressive Future Forward Party (FFP) in the March 2019 general election—largely owing to young voters—and its subsequent dissolution in February 2020 by the Constitutional Court for alleged violation of the election law. The court decision triggered the largest youth protest movement in Thailand since the 1970s, which instantly went beyond the specific issue of the FFP's plight; while emphasizing their rejection of junta and monarchy domination, the protest became a mass performance of the younger generation's disposition for political change, as reflected in the name of one of the new protest collectives: Free Youth. In the first weeks, the protest was still limited to university rallies, until the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed in mid-March 2020 pushed the protest fully online. On social media, it snowballed beyond activist circles, drawing on young netizens' taste for cyber-protest since 2016, and K-poppers again helped to catapult protest hashtags. Once the lockdown ended in mid-July, tens of thousands of youth, including school students, swarmed the streets of Bangkok and other cities in unprecedented mass rallies that were decidedly youthful. Here, too, the protest was spurred by online peer mobilization, integrating virtual and material protest repertoires with frequent references to popular culture. Iconic for the Thai protest was the image of masses of youth (often wearing facemasks due to the pandemic and to protect their identities) making the three-finger salute with one hand and holding up lighted smartphones in the other.

Taken by surprise, it took the regime until mid-October to respond. While royalist counter-demonstrations were held in other parts of the city, street protests were dispersed and prominent student leaders were arrested and prosecuted under the computer crimes act or the *lèse*

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[35] Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand", *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 192–205.

majesté law. But this did not quell the youth resistance, which had learned from the "Be water" strategy of their Hong Kong peers. Pop-up actions organized through decentralized online decision-making became common, using polls on social media to collectively decide on the course of action; for example, the "care" emoticon could be used to vote for a resting day, or the "wow" emoticon to urge: "keep going!". Telegram was used to announce action locations last minute. While this allowed them to continue public protests under increasingly repressive conditions, other tactics learned from Hong Kong helped them defend against police repression; when facing tear gas, they too used umbrellas, helmets and gas masks for protection. When fatigue kicked in after months of such ad hoc action, activists flocked to the new social media app Clubhouse; this audio-based, invite-only platform for real-time conversations that could not be recorded became a haven for free political speech as it was difficult for authorities to control.[36] It marked a partial, temporary retreat from the streets, but by August 2021 a series of new protests were staged in Bangkok, lasting until October. These protests were radicalized and more confrontational than before due to the mass participation of underprivileged youths who, similar to their peers in Indonesia, did not shun clashing with the police.[37] Moreover, they were not as savvy and vibrant in their digital activism.[38] As in Indonesia, the hardening of the action led to waning public support, which was compounded by concerted cyber-campaigns to influence public opinion and delegitimize the protest.

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[36] Punchada Sirivunnabood, "When 'Tony' Goes Clubbing: The Power of Clubhouse in Thailand", *Fulcrum*, 20 April 2021, https://fulcrum.sg/when-tony-goes-clubbing-the-power-of-clubhouse-in-thailand/

[37] Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, "The Rise and Dynamics of the 2020 Youth Movement in Thailand".

[38] The digital divide clearly played a role here; see Anusorn Unno, "'Thalu Gas': The Other Version of the 'Thai Youth Movement'", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/146, 15 November 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-146-thalu-gas-the-other-version-of-the-thai-youth-movement-by-anusorn-unno/

But the youth resistance continues, and it has rekindled transnational affinity among peers across the region. Besides solidarity statements, with the hashtag #StandWithThailand being spread online or as urban graffiti, it gave rise to the #MilkTeaAlliance, a social media-based movement for democracy and human rights. Created in April 2020 by netizens from Hong Kong, Thailand and Taiwan (originally as an anti-China meme, in response to Chinese cyber-attacks on a Thai actor and his partner who had mentioned Hong Kong and Taiwan as "countries" on social media), the #MilkTeaAlliance quickly grew into a popular platform for online youth resistance, expanding to Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Malaysia, India and other countries where youth are fighting authoritarian regimes. Different from the earlier NOYDA initiative, the #MilkTeaAlliance is a vivid manifestation of a rhizomatic assemblage expanding organically on youthful energies of affective connectivity. As a virtual collective performance of generational solidarity and affinity, it connects multiple nodes of resistance; as such, it could have real value for those fighting the struggles on the ground. For one thing, it provides "a way of knowing that one's struggle is seen and supported elsewhere in Asia—of affectively catalysing collective sentiment and action".[39]

The significance of the #MilkTeaAlliance became especially clear during the uprising against Myanmar's junta following the military coup d'état on 1 February 2021. Immediately, Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar accounts were set up on Twitter and other platforms—flooding social media with news updates, live videos and background information on the uprising and its brutal repression—and activist youth across Southeast Asia staged solidarity rallies under the banner #MilkTeaAlliance. Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement was initiated the day after the coup by health workers and joined by citizens from all walks of life. But online and on the streets—especially after the first month of protest, in which dozens were killed—a new generation of activist youth was at the

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[39] Adam K. Dedman and Autumn Lai, "Digitally Dismantling Asian Authoritarianism: Activist Reflections on the #MilkTeaAlliance", *Contention* 9, no. 1 (2021): 97–132, p. 100.

frontlines; they were the first generation that had experienced democratic change and political and economic liberalization in their youth, and they were adamant about defending their freedom,[40] as also symbolized by their adoption of the three-finger salute in protest. The icon for this brave new generation was the 19-year-old Kyal Sin, nicknamed Angel, a born-in-the-struggle activist, who was shot dead at a protest on 3 March 2021, wearing a T-shirt with the text "Everything will be OK". Photos and drawings of Angel wearing this T-shirt at the protest instantly went viral (Figure 4), and printed images of her became one of the attributes carried in demonstrations.

As the junta showed to be impervious to international pressure, the crackdown on the protest became increasingly violent; according to local human rights groups, by mid-August 2021 more than 1,000 citizens had been killed. Yet, activist youth refused to surrender, and digital communications helped them to keep going. While finding strength in continued expressions of solidarity—with the hashtags #StandWithMyanmar, #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar and #SaveMyanmar being shared by activist peers across Asia, Latin America and other regions, along with advice on how to help from abroad—they used digital media and technologies to stage and broadcast pop-up rallies, and map military locations and movements to circumvent them during these rallies; to organize fundraising and unofficial transactions for the protest, as the junta blocked all revenue streams to the resistance; and to coordinate among the many pockets of resistance in the cities and the countryside. Meanwhile, they began to reimagine the meaning of democracy and democratic citizenship in a post-junta world, which they are convinced can materialize in the foreseeable future. The #MilkTeaAlliance, which includes many Burmese overseas students and exiles, helps in this effort by facilitating online polls and conversations

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[40] Su Mon Thant, "In the Wake of the Coup: How Myanmar Youth Arose To Fight for the Nation", Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung E-paper, Series: Democracy (Brussels: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2021).

Figure 4: Artwork of "Angel" in the T-shirt Worn during the Fatal Protest

TAMS
@tamyumkung

RIP Ma Kyal Sin. One of many shot by the Myanmar military today. I'm so sad & wish that I could do more than paint these pictures. Int'l community don't look away. Keep the pressure on. It is the least we can do for the people of Myanmar. #MilkTeaAlliance
#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar

REST IN PEACE
MA KYAL SIN
3·3·21

EVERY THING WILL BE OK

2:21 PM - Mar 3, 2021 - Twitter Web App

4,359 Retweets   271 Quote Tweets   4,935 Likes

Source: Twitter.

on a more inclusive future, where full citizenship rights and social justice will also be enjoyed by the nation's oppressed minorities.[41] Similar discussions are ongoing in Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia and other

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[41] Jasmine Chia and Scott Singer, "How the Milk Tea Alliance is Remaking Myanmar", *The Diplomat*, 23 July 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-the-milk-tea-alliance-is-remaking-myanmar/

places with nodes in the rhizomatic network, in which they also learn from reading, hearing and participating in each other's conversations.

CYBER-REPRESSION AND RESILIENCE

While Southeast Asia's embattled protest movements take recourse to online platforms, they need to contend with intensifying cyber-repression, which has rapidly turned social media from an activist playground into an unsafe space for dissent. Indeed, it seems that cyber-repression is stepped up in response to protest movements gaining critical traction, threatening a regime's authority and legitimacy. Three distinct modes of cyber-repression are increasingly being used to stifle dissent: repressive cyber laws, intrusive cyber surveillance and aggressive cyber troops.

In the past decade (in Myanmar as early as 2000; in Indonesia since 2008), Southeast Asian states have implemented or amended cyber laws for the regulation of online communications, which are frequently used to prosecute regime critics.[42] During the protests in Indonesia in September 2019 and October 2020, several activists were arrested for violating the Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law, either on accusations of spreading fake news or for defamation. Cyber laws contributed even more effectively to the suppression of the protests in Thailand and Myanmar—in particular in Thailand, due to the compounded impact of the *lèse-majesté* law that makes it illegal to defame or insult the Thai monarch; leading activists of the 2020 protest movement received hefty sentences for violating this law. While arrest and imprisonment do not deter all activists, it does take considerable time and resources to deal with the numerous court cases.

Meanwhile, cyber troops are deployed to spread propaganda and attack opponents on social media. Either in the form of obscure army

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[42] Janjira Sombatpoonsiri and Dien Nguyen An Luong, *Justifying Digital Repression via "Fighting Fake News": A Study of Four Southeast Asian Autocracies*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 11/2022 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022).

divisions—such as Thailand's Information Operation and Vietnam's Force 47[43]—or shady networks organized by political brokers that employ masses of fake account operators—as seen in Indonesia and the Philippines[44]—cyber troops that target civilian opposition are found in seven Southeast Asian countries.[45] A case in point of their damaging impact on protest movements is Indonesia. During the protests against the KPK Law revision in September 2019, cyber troops drowned out protest messages on social media by catapulting the hashtag #KPKTaliban, manipulating public opinion on the matter by spreading and amplifying the rumour that the KPK was run by "extremists" and hence had to be put under control.[46] At the same time, KPK members and activists became targets of cyber terror, receiving anonymous phone threats, getting trolled on social media, or even having their phones and social

[43] Josh A. Goldstein, Aim Sinpeng, Daniel Bush, Ross Ewald and Jennifer John, *Cheerleading Without Fans: A Low-Impact Domestic Information Operation by the Royal Thai Army* (Stanford: Stanford Internet Observatory, 2020), https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:ym245nv3149/twitter-TH-202009.pdf; Dien Nguyen An Luong, "Placate the Young and Control Online Discourses: The Vietnamese State's Tightrope", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/43, 14 April 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-43-placate-the-young-and-control-online-discourse-the-vietnamese-states-tightrope-by-dien-nguyen-an-luong/

[44] Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto, *Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia's Cybersphere*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 7/2021 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021); Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines" (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7275/2cq4-5396

[45] Samantha Bradshaw, Hannah Bailey and Philip N. Howard, *Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation* (Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2021).

[46] Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto, *Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia's Cybersphere*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 7/2021 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

media accounts hacked.[47] During the Omnibus Law protests in October 2020, an even more massive cyber troop operation to influence public opinion and attack activists contributed to the sudden rapid demise of the protest movement. This was also the effect of the cyber troops' online attacks on activists; besides doxing, trolling and intimidating activists on social media, cyber troops framed them as "hoax-spreaders", which led activists to be arrested under the ITE Law.[48] This further indicates that the effectiveness of each mode of cyber-repression is compounded by their combined uses, demonstrating increasing sophistication in the state's capacity to mobilize digital instruments as effective "authoritarian innovations".[49]

Finally, cyber surveillance has been unevenly rolled out in different Southeast Asian countries. While there are strong indications that dissidents in Thailand have been targeted with sophisticated Pegasus spyware, countries in Southeast Asia generally lack the technology and resources for high-tech surveillance. Instead, they take recourse to cruder measures such as temporary Internet shutdowns, as happened in Myanmar and previously in Indonesia. Another common measure is to pressure Internet providers and social media platforms into taking down protesters' pages and content. In Myanmar, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp were blocked; in Hong Kong, Thailand and Indonesia, "extremist" Telegram channels were blocked, and government ministries threatened to block the messaging app altogether via Internet Service Providers. Furthermore, in Thailand, the single gateway was put back

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[47] Wijayanto, Fiona Suwana and Nur Hidayat Sardini, "Cyber Terror, the Academic Anti-Corruption Movement and Indonesian Democratic Regression", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 44, no. 1 (2022): 31–55.

[48] Yatun Sastramidjaja and Pradipa R. Rasidi, "The Hashtag Battle over Indonesia's Omnibus Law"; Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto, "Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia's Cybersphere".

[49] Nicole Curato and Diego Fossati, "Authoritarian Innovations: Crafting Support for a Less Democratic Southeast Asia", *Democratization* 27, no. 6 (2020): 1006–20.

on the agenda in February 2022. In Indonesia, new legislation was implemented in August 2022, requiring digital platforms to apply for a permit and abide by Indonesian laws and morals, or be blocked from the country; state officials stated that, in the latter case, they should be replaced by "patriotic" alternatives, raising fears among netizens for a China-style firewall.

However, activist youth find ways to circumvent cyber surveillance and control, using VPN (Virtual Private Network) apps, anonymous browsers, private search engines, and encrypted messaging services such as Telegram or the even more anonymous Signal app. One activist in Myanmar emphasized the importance of getting their message online, as a cry for help but also a warning: "If we don't act right now, [the Tatmadaw] will inspire many more brutal dictators around the world. It is our duty to defend democracy".[50]

Owing to these young activists' efforts, voices of dissent muted in their country are channelled through transnational assemblages of resistance, where they intersect and merge with other voices being suppressed in similar authoritarian conditions, turning into a collective battle cry that transcends national restrictions. Like a rhizome, these assemblages are "unbreakable". They continue to expand in multiple directions and make new connections with nodes in activist networks elsewhere, not only because digital technologies allow them to do so, but because of an innate drive to connect and multiply as a means of survival. This drive is founded on a powerful sense of generational affinity—of fighting the same struggle as a youth whose future is at stake, and as young citizens with the capacity to reimagine and remake this future.

Meanwhile, as long as authorities remain repressive and tone-deaf to this generation's criticism and concerns, the gulf between them looks set to widen. And unless policy changes are enacted to bridge this gap— and governing elites begin to truly listen to this generation and learn

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[50] Olle Tangen, "The Battle for Myanmar Plays Out on Twitter, TikTok and Telegram", *Deutsche Welle*, 20 April 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/the-battle-for-myanmar-plays-out-on-twitter-tiktok-and-telegram/a-57267075

from their criticism—the longer-term implication is that this generation, which is an increasingly important constituency in any Southeast Asian polity, will remain alienated and continue to express their struggle in novel and unpredictable ways.

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