

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 27 January 2023

The ‘Future-Ready Youth’ of Brunei Darussalam: Meeting National Aspirations through Digital Civic Engagement

*Siti Mazidah Mohamad**



Brunei youth featured on Project Youth.RISE’s Facebook page. Project Youth RISE is a community project which focuses on the young in the country. Photo from SEALNet Project Brunei Youth.RISE at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=954600365491397&set=pb.10006684277791.-2207520000>. Accessed on 21 January 2023.

** Siti Mazidah Mohamad is Visiting Fellow at the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. She is an Assistant Professor and Director for Centre for Advanced Research (CARE) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, researching on Muslim youth culture and engagements with popular culture and new media in Southeast Asia.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since the 1960s, the youth in Brunei Darussalam has been regarded as significant stakeholders in the country’s national development. In recent years, they have been lauded as “agents of change” and “future-ready”; the “future-ready youth” narrative anchors Brunei’s national aspirations and development under the *Wawasan 2035* (Brunei Vision 2035).
- This article examines the future-ready youth discourse and how it shapes policies and strategies concerning youth. More importantly, we ask how this narrative aligns with the current state of youth civic participation, particularly in digital spaces.
- So far, Brunei youth civic engagement in digital spaces has not been formally recognised as part of the country’s development agenda, even though it demonstrates their role in changing Brunei’s sociocultural landscapes and in their active civic and political participation.
- This article argues that it is high time to consider including youth digital civic participation when crafting youth-related policies and strategies in the national development agenda.
- Acknowledging and addressing their digital practices would help relevant stakeholders—such as academics, policymakers, and other agencies—to be more in tune with the concerns of young people, and with how they manoeuvre during uncertain times and become future-ready in their way.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Brunei Darussalam government introduced the notion of future-ready youth into its national agenda. The youth are characterised as ‘values-driven world-class youths, who are future-ready agents of change for national development, rooted in inclusivity’. This agenda, which falls under the purview of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MYCS), was set to be one aspect of the ministry’s Strategic Plan 2020-2024. Brunei aims to be ‘*Bangsa Brunei Cemerlang*’ (Brunei a Nation of Excellence). This vision of future-ready youth was further cemented in the National Youth Policy and Strategy 2020–2035, a revised version of the National Youth Policy 2002. The state hopes that the formulation and implementation of this revised policy would consider current global disruptions such as globalisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, recognising young people as significant stakeholders in the country’s national development; thus, the narrative and discourse of ‘future-ready youth’ anchor national aspirations and development towards *Wawasan 2035* (Brunei Vision 2035).

In this article, I examine Brunei’s future-ready youth discourse and how it has been positioned in policies and strategies related to youth development. I then juxtapose this with the current state of civic participation among the young in digital spaces. Since 2017, Brunei youth has been actively engaging in social justice debates online, but this has not been factored into the national development agenda. To be sure, Brunei youth are changing the country’s sociocultural landscapes; and I argue that it is high time for the state to consider their digital civic engagement when crafting youth-related policies and strategies. Doing so would further support the state in its future-ready youth aspiration and strengthen the ‘Whole of a Nation’ approach, the collaboration between state and non-state actors to achieve *Wawasan 2035*.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

The state’s top-down approach to fostering youth participation in development started before Brunei’s independence in 1984. Evident in the establishment and development of NGOs started as long ago as 1964, the country further saw the number of NGOs (including charity-based and social support organisations) increase from 20 to 220 between 1964 and 1984¹. During that period, activities and volunteerism were confined to educational institutions such as secondary schools and to residential areas (villages). Youth participation in the economy, in the culture, and in society beyond NGOs is further concretised in the National Youth Policy 2002 (NYP 2002). The key strategic areas of NYP 2002 include personal development education, youth employment and training, leadership, enterprise, international understanding, and service to others and the Nation.² These earlier youth-focused programmes and participation were already envisioning future-ready youth.

With the introduction of the ‘future-ready youth’ vision in 2019, state and non-state actors, such as youth-led organisations, are ramping up efforts in preparing and empowering youth for future challenges. Youth-focused programmes are set up to develop young people’s capacity and skills and to inculcate a solution-driven, forward-thinking, and collaborative youth

community. Since 2020, five Youth Town Hall Brunei events organised by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports (MCYS) and Young Professional Network (YPN) have covered the following topics: youth as future-ready agents of change to meet national aspirations, and youth-leading development in post-pandemic and uncertain times.

As part of the state's effort to promote its vision to the public, the narrative and discourse of the future-ready youth and the youth as agents of change have been discussed on various platforms. The questions of who the future-ready youth are: why there is a need for young people to be future-ready; and how the nation's strong Islamic character, with strong Bruneian values, can shape youth's future readiness, were discussed at the plenary session of the 2020 Brunei Chevening Youth Forum (BYCF). The session was attended by high-school and university students, government officers, and youth leaders.³ Future Ready Youth, Youth Participation, and Entrepreneurship, and the three key areas of discussion at the National Youth Congress in 2019 were further highlighted as key areas of concern in the National Youth Policy and Strategies 2020-2035.

These youth-focused activities are not solely state-led programmes. There is a growing number of youth-led programmes initiated by prominent youth leaders supported by, or organised in collaboration with, different ministries and agencies in the country, especially the MCYS. These include Youth Forum Brunei, Youth Town Hall Brunei, and Young Professional Network (YPN), and other international volunteering activities. Brunei youth are passionately driving these initiatives to address critical issues such as economy, education, environment and humanitarianism. To illustrate, Bruneian youth significantly engage in issues related to social justice and humanitarian concerns via Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as Hand 4 Hand and Youth Against Slavery (YAS). Hand 4 Hand is a volunteer group that has done community work in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh,⁴ while Youth Against Slavery (YAS) focused on issues affecting youths and migrants seeking better economic opportunities.⁵

However, unlike these officially sanctioned programmes, some organisations and activities do not appear in the state and public's discourse on national development agenda. More importantly, other forms of youth civic participation, such as digital civic engagements, also escape the public radar.⁶ This form of engagement can contribute to civic and political participation, which is listed as one of the key performance indicators in the updated youth policy, and improve Brunei's Youth Development Index (YDI) in the political and civic integration and participation aspect. Even though digital civic engagement can be considered a form of grassroots leadership, it is never explicitly mentioned by relevant agencies and the public in the context of youth participation in Brunei.

Individual and collective actions on social media sites engaging with matters such as racism, sexual harassment, and geopolitics are on the rise. These have become part and parcel of youth's active civic participation. Popular culture and new media engagements offer discursive resources for them, and these have shaped the different forms of civic engagement and issues of concern such as societal development, well-being, health, and social injustices locally and globally. The plight of other societies reported by the media (including mass and social media) somewhat opens their eyes to the existing local issues. The reach of the media enables a growing consciousness among young people via the circulation, exchange, and reproduction of digital media content.⁷ Furthermore, social media sites, as new public spheres, are effective

platforms for users to share individual thoughts and collective concerns. The ease of sharing, reposting, or retweeting content facilitates empathy among users.

DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENTS

Brunei has a high percentage of social media users and its internet penetration is deep. Bruneians are therefore active on Instagram (IG), Facebook (FB) and Twitter. In early 2022, at least 89% of those aged 13 and above are on Instagram, 38.4 % on Facebook, and 23.3% on Twitter.⁸ Although Twitter engages a lower percentage of users out of the total population compared to Instagram and Facebook, concerns about social justice are strongly expressed there. Recently, issues related to moral and social justice have been moderately raised. Bruneian youth are acting on behalf of global Muslim communities to shed light on global conflicts (Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and raising awareness of local issues such as racism. These include engagements in international and local concerns via the use of the hashtag (#) and the circulation, exchange and reproduction of videos and images on these matters on social media—and the correcting of fellow nationals who do not conform to their actions.

In the following, I discuss young Bruneians' responses to global critical events, the appropriation of Black Lives Matter (BLM) to the local context and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the different identities (racial and religious) used in negotiating these concerns. These young people's engagements could inform the state, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders of how future-ready Bruneian youths are in ways that have not been thought of before.

As a country with a relatively small population, Brunei relies on migrants working in manual labour and blue-collar jobs.⁹ Racist slurs against migrants of South Asian descent (Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani nationals) are common but often trivialised and even normalised in society. Classification of this group of people as “reckless” and “lacking manners” contributes to racism in the community. Black Lives Matter (BLM), particularly the death of George Floyd in 2020, was appropriated by young people to raise awareness of racism against migrants in Brunei. Several significant issues were raised on Twitter and Instagram by local influencers. Bash Harry,¹⁰ a law graduate and content creator, calls out influencers for not using their voices and social media platforms to engage with BLM and racism in the country. The young also problematised the derogatory term “*Kaling*” used on South Asian migrants. In this situation, the young people's identity as individuals with moral responsibilities and as part of a Malay Muslim majority who are in the position to question society's hegemonic practices is used to justify this compassion for others. In its basic sense, they exhibit a cosmopolitan disposition of openness, tolerance and flexibility on social media.

Another global critical event Bruneian Muslim youth are passionate about is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their support of Palestine is seen in several ways, with individuals claiming to boycott companies supporting Israel, such as Johnson & Johnson and Starbucks, and even boycotting a hijab brand, dUCK¹¹ which customers claim omits Palestine from their world map hijab design. A Bruneian local celebrity was called out and cancelled by some Bruneian Muslims for his allegedly neutral stance regarding this conflict. His music video, released in 2020, reminded his audience to understand the situation by assessing both countries'

positions and allegedly dismissing the use of the hashtag (#) in raising awareness of the plight of Palestinians. Bruneian Muslims flocked to his social media and Reddit to contest his views and actions. Many expected him to support Palestine. It is common for young people to correct fellow Muslims who are perceived as not showing respect to Islam or Muslims or seemingly taking the opposite stance. They position themselves as part of the global Muslim community (global ummah), and the Palestine conflict remains an emotive issue among Muslims globally. Some have posted the Palestinian flag as part of their Instagram profiles, and others showcase well-curated updates on Palestine, and selling hijab and bags designed to match the Palestinian flag. In fact, some individuals took the Israel-Palestine issue even further, disputing the term 'conflict' to describe the issue, preferring to use the term "genocide" instead. The way young Bruneians responded manifest their geopolitical and religious orientation going forward.

However, in comparison to neighbouring countries, civic engagements in Brunei are generally short-lived. Moreover, online discussions rarely overflow to become fully-fledged activism and a movement. This is due to the short runway of Bruneians acquaintance with online activism (circa 2017-2018). Furthermore, there is a general absence of strong NGOs that address racism and geopolitics. The non-contesting culture in Brunei contributes to their unwillingness to speak up or engage with controversial matters.¹²

Considering the high social media adoption and internet penetration in Brunei and the rising number of youths' voices shared and heard on various digital platforms, a more intense civic engagement by the digitally connected youth can be anticipated. Acknowledging and addressing their digital practices would help relevant stakeholders such as academics, policymakers, and other agencies to be more in tune with young people's concerns, how they manoeuvre uncertain times, and how they are being future-ready in their ways.

More importantly, paying attention to their online views will provide the state with some insight into Brunei's future. I contend that Bruneian youth calling out existing racism and voicing their opinions on social injustices allude to their cosmopolitan outlook. This also mirrors future-ready youth who are "values-driven world-class youths, who are future-ready agents of change for national development, rooted in inclusivity."¹³ Within this context, I posit the inclusion of digital civic participation in mainstreaming youth-related policies and strategies in the country.

CONCLUSION

In Brunei, many issues once considered taboo are now raised, contested and addressed on different platforms (both online and offline), suggesting that a group of young people seek positive change, and are resilient, competitive, dynamic, and inclusive. The future-ready youth are expected to be globalised yet rooted in their Bruneian identity, which indicates a globally inclusive youth driven to develop the country and well-equipped for future challenges.

Young people's identities are fluid when responding to global and local concerns. When needed, their racial, religious, or individual identity is made more salient than another. When appropriating BLM to discuss racial discrimination in Brunei, their identity as a responsible individual and a Malay majority in the country becomes salient. In turn, their identity as Muslims, as part of the global Muslim community, is applied when engaging the Israelis-

Palestinian conflict. They are conscious of their Bruneian (predominantly Malay Muslim) identity with *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) values and therefore draw from this to assess the plight of others globally or within the country. In this context, the narrative of future-ready youth, specifically the rootedness of *Calak KeBruneian* (Bruneian identity) based on *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) values, is significant. *The Calak KeBruneian*, such as being respectful to the head of state, government, and religion and adhering to Brunei's sociocultural customs become the "core of the national solidarity that ensures harmony, security, stability and well-being of the nation".¹⁴

Bruneian youth's digital civic engagement can contribute to the future-ready youth vision. It can lead to more youth advocacy and participation. I anticipate active youth involvement as they become more comfortable voicing opinions and concerns on social media sites and calling for actions from relevant agencies. The current state of youth participation in Brunei indicates that they are collectively working towards *Wawasan Brunei 2035* and achieving a '*Bangsa Brunei Cemerlang*' that is progressive, cosmopolitan, rooted in their Bruneian identity and future-ready in its broadest sense. What is needed at this time is for all stakeholders, particularly government agencies, to pay attention to youth voices online and to recognise different ways young people contribute to national development. Such recognition would lead to the creation of a more conducive environment for youth mobilisation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Abdul Hai, J & Mohamad, S. M (2022). 'Culture of Volunteerism: An Overview of Youth Participation in Youth-led NGOs and Youth-led Platforms in Brunei'. *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Brunei*, edited by Ooi Keat Gin and Victor T. King, 341-50. Routledge.

² National Youth Policy, 2002.

³ <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/young-leaders-discuss-challenges-day-action-forum/> accessed 10 November 2022.

⁴ <https://progresif.com/progresif-hero-iqbal-damit/> accessed 20 December 2022.

⁵ <https://communityforbrunei.com/yas-brunei/> accessed 20 December 2022.

⁶ <https://fulcrum.sg/digitally-connected-youth-as-potential-agents-for-bruneis-socio-cultural-change/> accessed 20 December 2022.

⁷ Jenkins, H., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Zimmerman, A. (2016). *By Any Means Necessary: New Youth Activism*. New York Press.

⁸ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-brunei-darussalam> accessed 11 January 2023.

⁹ Mohamad, S. M. (2021) Micro-celebrities Practices in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia. *Popular Communication. The International Journal of Media and Culture*. 19 (3). 235-249. DOI: 10.1080/15405702.2021.1913492.

¹⁰ Twitter Handle @heybash

¹¹ dUck is a Malaysian brand selling hijabs, handbags, and other accessories. Website: <http://ducked.com>

¹² I use the term non-contesting culture to refer to the common societal practice of not wanting to offend or contest others. I see this as face saving practice (*menjaga maruah orang lain*).

¹³ MCYS Strategic Plan 2020-2024.

¹⁴ Haji Saim, H. S. (2013). Brunei Darussalam in 2012: Towards a Zikir Nation. *Southeast Asian Affairs*. 63-69.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
---	---	---