Introduction
Youth and Politics in Southeast Asia

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YOUTH AND POLITICS—TWO DIMENSIONS OF
SOCIAL life that are not readily associated with one another.
Why is this so? What are the obstacles young people face in
participating in the political life of their countries? Do these
obstacles negate opportunities for change?

To begin to answer these questions, we need to probe into the
prevalent images of today's youth and uncover the realities behind
these perceptions.

The most common attribute of young people is that they are
"idealistic." Is this a euphemism for being *unrealistic*? It is also
often said that young people are "apathetic." Does this mean young
people have *no ideas*? In the mainstream media, youth culture is
equated with consumerism. Does this mean young people are
shallow?

Certainly it is not possible to make such sweeping generalizations.
The following contributions—from Cambodia, Indonesia,
Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand—show that there are
significant *institutional and societal obstacles* that prevent young
people from contributing meaningfully in the political arena.
Politics is seen as a domain for seasoned policy-makers and
campaigners. Young people are, at best, dismissed as being too
"inexperienced" to make meaningful contributions to politics; at
worst, senior officials brand them as "naïve."

In Cambodia and Indonesia, the state has no articulated youth
policy to begin with. In Malaysia, students are prohibited by law
from joining any political activity altogether. In Thailand, the

educational system does not encourage young people to take in information with a critical eye. In the Philippines, the omnipresent reality of patronage politics often thwarts youthful aspirations.

Aside from these institutional barriers, globalization and capitalism also have profound effects on young people everywhere. Earning a living is a daily struggle and top priority to most members of the "MTV generation." One can hardly fault them for that. Nor can we outrightly condemn young people's preference to unwind at shopping malls rather than taking part in a demonstration on a hot and humid day.

These are serious handicaps young progressives have to overcome. Yet, the country chapters also bear witness to the resilience and bravery of young people. Vivid images of young Indonesian *reformasi* protesters come to mind, along with Malaysian and Thai student activists who continue to defy repressive state authorities.

What this shows is that political participation can take place inside parliament as well as on the streets. In this publication, youth political participation is therefore seen as a *multi-dimensional* phenomenon.

On the one hand, political participation can be channeled through *officially prescribed political processes*, such as voting in elections and standing for public office. Also included here is participation in state-initiated consultations on youth policy, as found in Thailand and the Philippines.

On the other hand, political participation can also refer to *self-organization* by young people. From the early days of independence struggles to more recent milestones in democratization struggle across Southeast Asia—young people have been at the forefront of mobilizing against hegemonic

regimes in all of the five countries. These mobilizations may take place *within* the institutional shell of formal politics (e.g. lobbying and dialogues) or *outside* the halls of power, in what we may call "alternative politics."

It is also possible to distinguish between different forms political participation can take.

Much of political participation is *associational* in nature. This is the case when people come together to collectively draw up and promote common agendas. Included here is membership in socio-civic or political groups and self-help organizations, like student councils or neighborhood associations. Organizations provide the base for all kinds of political action: campaigns, network building, and resource generation.

Political participation can also take place outside the organizational realm. Artistic self-expression and writing are examples of this. Interactive media also play an important role here, like Internet discussion forums or signature campaigns conducted through email.

The following diagram captures the multi-dimensional character of youth political participation:
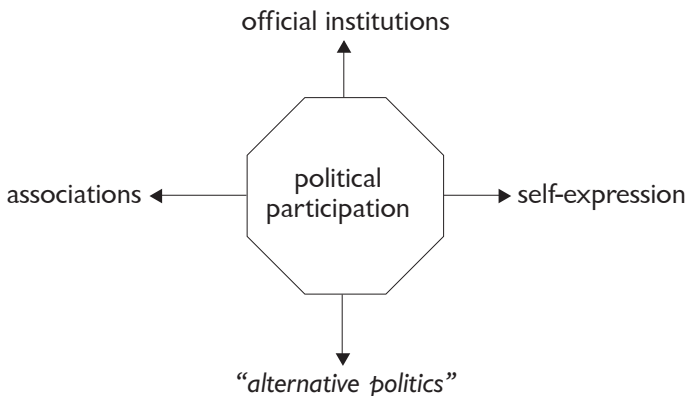
A striking finding of this cross-country comparison is that there is no uniform definition of "youth." *Table 1* shows some interesting comparisons:

Country	Accepted Norm for "Youth"	Voting Age
Thailand	14-25 years old	18
Cambodia	14-30 years old	18
Philippines	15-30 years old	18
Malaysia	below 40 years old	21
Indonesia	no consensus	17

In Thailand and the Philippines, definitions vary across government agencies. In Cambodia, the state has adopted a common norm, although various political parties continue to operate youth wings based on their own conventions. In Malaysia, anyone under the age of 40 is considered part of the "youth" sector. In Indonesia, there seems to be no consensus to begin with.

Browsing through this publication, there is considerable variation in how writers highlight issues relevant to young people in their respective countries. This is necessary in providing context-specific information and analysis, as the five countries in focus share no "organic" unities, other than their membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

With the exception of Thailand, each country had a different experience of imperialism: Cambodia was under the French, Malaysia was part of the British empire, Indonesia belonged to Dutch, and the Philippines was occupied by Spanish and American colonizers. And although all five countries experienced years of un-democratic rule, no dictatorship is the same. In Thailand, for example, past regimes were controlled by the military; while in

Malaysia, it is a race-based hegemonic order that continues to rule the country. Economically as well, no country resembles the other.

Inevitably, writers also provide their assessment of the political situation and trends in each country. This is because obstacles and opportunities for young people in politics have to be understood within the larger picture of democratization. As the Malaysian case illustrates, youth and student activists must first contribute to the struggle against the oppressive regime, so that freedom on campus can become a reality. The Philippine state, by contrast, provides an almost exemplary framework for youth participation—if only this was not undermined by the continuing practice of patronage and money politics.

Both similarities and differences can provide points of learning and solidarity. It is hoped that the lessons and trends presented here are no more than an initial guide to mapping strategies for greater youth participation in the region and beyond.