

Today's Young Progressives Do Not Belong to Southeast Asia's Future— THE TIME FOR THEM IS NOW

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PLATTITUDES ABOUND EXTOLLING YOUNG PEOPLE as the hope of tomorrow and the harbingers of a better world. Yet, political marginalization, *at best*—and political exclusion, *at worst*—remains to be an all-too-common experience of young people the world over. It appears in fact that such “hope-of-the-future” platitudes have come to be taken literally in most societies where young people, considered as actors of “the future,” are taught to be mainly onlookers in the present and are asked to patiently wait on as “adults” confront life-changing events that pass them by; this, in exchange for a promise that their time “will come” and their turn comes tomorrow. This very traditional mindset fails to recognize that, more than in any future time, young people contribute actively to their societies today.

Young people—those aged 15-35, or 15-40 years, depending on where “official” parameters lie—are politically in the margins even in Southeast Asia where the population is considered to be among the youngest in the world. In Cambodia, young people comprise over 60% of the population; in Malaysia and Thailand, a little more than 40%; in the Philippines, around 30%. It is ironic therefore that, as shown in the country reports in this publication, the political participation of young people in these young societies is often relegated to the narrow formal processes prescribed by the authorities. If other forms of participation in politics are made available, they range from tokenism to manipulation. Those who cannot work with the system face outright exclusion and restriction, paving the way for interventions in extralegal or meta-legal arenas.

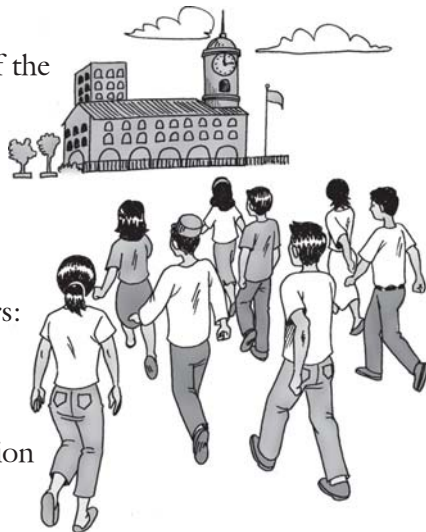
Young people in the region are made to grapple with the limited realities of their often adult-indulgent polity, yet manage to harness the best instruments that bring their societies closer to change at very crucial junctures: the *reformasi* movements in both Malaysia and Indonesia, the street protests in 1992 that helped usher in the democratization of Thailand and, to a certain extent, the so-called “EDSA Dos” protests in 2001 in the Philippines that ended a corrupt government. Among other examples would be students in exile championing the cause of democracy in Burma, and young people in East Timor attempting to establish a vibrant democracy after their country’s independence. In these, and in various other outstanding political episodes in their countries, young people have exhibited not only the capacity to instigate change, but have also shown an advanced level of discernment to ascertain what kind of change they want to create.

It is this potent link between young people and political participation that the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Philippine Office explored and sought to reaffirm when it organized the regional seminar of young progressives in Southeast Asia in October 2004 in Manila. The initial thrust was to focus more on “*young people*” rather than use the term “*youth*,” which for most implies age-specific concerns and limited engagements. Another aim was to gather like-minded “*progressives*” who—either as young politicians or members of political parties or as activists in social movements, or NGO workers, or media practitioners—actively engage their institutions and governments to make real the timeless concepts of equality, social justice, democracy, human rights, gender equality and peace, among others. A gathering of *young progressives* is a statement in itself—to highlight the irony that even within progressive parties or social movements, the hierarchy of the old over the young is an established reality. Political groupings in the region subscribing to socialist or social democratic values are not insulated from a system where leaders—those who possess the wherewithal, the much-vaunted experience,

and unfortunately also a high level of cynicism—define the direction for the young to follow or replicate. What is obviously needed in this situation is striking a good balance for intergenerational collaboration, which must happen now, not only in the future.

The chosen theme for the meeting was “*Making Young Voices Heard.*” This implies two things: that “young voices” in fact exist and are waiting to be heard, and that given the chance, they can “make” people listen to their voices. The meeting was also an attempt to address the reality that in Southeast Asia, networking among young people has been minimal: most of the “young voices” may be prominent in their countries but are often muffled by cultural or ideological barriers once they go beyond their borders.

One significant achievement of the meeting of progressive young women and men—from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines—is the extent by which they familiarized themselves with their neighbors: their histories, struggles and visions for change. This is a particularly significant step for a group that comes from a region where heterogeneity—in terms of political history, political structures and systems, colonial experience, religion, ideological moorings, culture and customs—is stark.



The issues discussed during the meeting were varied as well: young progressives are especially concerned with the asymmetrical levels

of democratization that sweep the region, the implications of the long-running “economic growth-versus-freedom” debates, the impact of the current form of economic globalization on young people in the labor force, and the sublimated issue of race even within and among progressive groups in the region. That these issues were discussed candidly is in itself a breakthrough; that these issues were surfaced for discussion is another feat, in a way putting to rest the misplaced notion that multi-dimensional political issues of the present are concerns only of certain age groups in society.

The breadth of the issues discussed, particularly relevant in developing countries, and the synergy of progressive ideas helped in affirming a general set of *values* for an incipient regional network of young progressives, among which are:

- Social justice and equality
- Genuine representation and popular democracy
- Anti-discrimination
- Human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Gender equality
- Pluralism
- International solidarity
- Anti-neoliberalism
- Empowerment of the marginalized
- Peace

While the fine details of the network still need to be worked out, the group’s set of “unities” and principles have been initially framed as follows:

▷ **Proposed Unities (*What is the network for?*):**

- It is for providing a venue for exchanging ideas, strengthening unities and developing strategies to advance democratization in Southeast Asia;

- It is a venue for developing skills and strengthening capacities of young people and progressive organizations to effectively engage in political processes in their own countries and in the region;
- It is a mechanism for establishing solidarity ties among progressive young people in the region;
- It is for providing a platform for progressive politics and young people's participation at the national and regional levels; and,
- It is for converging efforts and forces for collective action.

▷ **Proposed Principles** (*What the network stands for?*):

- We believe that meaningful participation of young people is an important tool [element] to deepen democracy in the Southeast Asian region;
- We believe that respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, people empowerment and gender equality are essential to genuine democracy;
- We believe that economic development should be based on equality and social justice;
- We affirm that solidarity strengthens peoples struggles, fosters regional understanding and promotes international cooperation and peace; and,
- We value participatory processes and critical thinking in advancing democracy, equality and progressive politics.

In the interim e-mail group (youngprogressives_seasia@yahoo.com) that was set up after the October 2004 meeting, young progressives continued to share their views on important and urgent national and regional issues. Among the initial topics of exchange were the conduct and the results of the 2004 Indonesian presidential elections, the outburst of violence in Southern Thailand in late October, the state of press freedom in Southeast Asia, the repression of student rights in some universities in the region, updates on the 2004 tsunami catastrophe, among others. Aside from being a means of e-mailing, the e-group has also become a small repository of informative materials on elections, democracy and ethno-religious conflicts in the region. It has also become a cyber-spot for exchanging political statements, photos of current initiatives of progressive organizations and other solidarity activities such as petitions or letters of protest to government officials and institutions. The e-group, as it is now, may relatively be a small step, but it is a step nonetheless.

Looking beyond the initial meeting in Manila, several activities have been proposed for the network to follow through. Among the ideas that have been suggested are summarized as follows:

Proposed Next Tasks:

- ▷ ***Regular regional forums:*** Annual or twice-a-year meetings on different socio-political issues in the region have been identified as among the tasks that can potentially keep the positive momentum of the incipient young progressives network. ***Thematic sessions*** can be organized as venues for exchange on issues that affect the region, especially young people: e.g., on political participation, the peace situation in the region, conflict management issues, the potentials of deepening the regional integration in Southeast Asia, and other issues relevant to young people in the region.

- ▷ ***Continuous updating of the per-country situation reports:*** Looking back, the regional seminar in October 2004 took off with a session on per-country sharing of the national socio-political situation of the countries represented therein. These reports became useful tools in recognizing the variance in the milieu of the young progressives in the region. At the same time, the reports managed to highlight threads of comparable conditions where regional cooperation or cross-border partnerships can initially be forged. Within this context, the young progressives have articulated the need to continuously provide their colleagues with updated information and analysis especially in the area of the ongoing democratization processes in the region and the role of young people in these processes.
- ▷ ***Training sessions on skills upgrading:*** As a collective, the young progressives are cognizant of the fact that any regional network is primarily a “support group” for their national political work. Thus, the network should also focus on capability building and skills enhancement, such as those on basic organizing skills (especially for young people), on political education strategies and technologies, on skills related to progressive advocacy and lobbying, among others.
- ▷ ***Solidarity initiatives:*** Contributing to regional and international solidarity initiatives is recognized as a key facet in any progressive project. Thus, the young progressives sought to emphasize that among their tasks is to link up—guided by the spirit of pluralism—with existing progressive regional formations, to share statements of support on issues that involve any or all of its members and to initiate solidarity activities with other sectors (women, children, workers, young professionals, and alike).

Without pretending to supplant other similar initiatives in the region, the young progressives group has given another shot at regional networking, especially at the current crucial stage when political developments in the region seem to require like-minded young progressives to contribute their share in sustaining a healthy atmosphere of open debate within their own countries thereby maintaining the main lifeline of democracy. At a time when there is a seeming resurgence in the region of highhanded styles of leadership, of opposing voices being jeopardized by way of threats and intimidation, of a loss of faith in political systems weighed down by corruption, a group of young progressives who can still *make their voices heard* should be supported, to continue their claim on the present.

Democracy, after all, is a project of the “adult” and the “mature” as much as it is an aspiration and an endeavor of the young. *The time for them is now.* The perceived infirmities of the young are nothing compared to the bold sense of imagination and a deep sense of commitment that only they, better than anyone else, can offer.

