

Preface

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IS ESSENTIAL FOR AN efficient and emerging democracy. It is, therefore, of prior importance to involve the young generation in politics to gain new insights and implement changes. If the society does not listen to what the young people say, their perspectives and criticisms, hopes and aspirations, campaigns and strategies, the society has neglected its own future.

The unsettling realization of inadequate available data on the issue of progressive young people involved in politics worldwide, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, gave rise to the idea of this publication. Thus far, minimal information can be found when one researches on young progressives and their political participation. This shows the lack of attention and interest given to such an important issue for every country and its people. The lack of information on this theme can be attributed to two reasons: first, there is simply no space for the young generation to participate and second, the involvement of young people is ignored, unrecognized and considered insignificant.

There are some governments that do not perceive the young generation as an intrinsic, qualified part of the society and continue to suppress the voices of young progressives for progress and change. One of the consequences of this outlook is the frustration and disillusionment of many young people with politics. The general definition for young people is those persons below 40 years old while young progressives are young people who engage effectively in political and democratic processes in their own countries and in the region, critical of the government politics and advocates of human rights, fundamental freedoms, people empowerment, gender equality and social justice.

In the Philippines, there is a mindset that young people are naïve or too idealistic to even take part in the political decision-making process. A similar observation was raised on the conservative educational system of Thailand where students are discouraged to take part in social and political activities, resulting to the absence of a productive communication and interaction between the government and its younger citizens. Or in Malaysia where political organizations of young people, if not coalesced with existing political parties, are seen as dangers to the security of the state. While traditional hierarchies inhibit young people in raising awareness and gaining support for political participation as it is a big problem in Cambodia, the loss of confidence and legitimacy as expressed in words by a student in Indonesia: *"I don't trust the political elites. I have no hope for this election. The ruling political parties have no meaning for the poor. We expected proof, not promises. I am so pessimistic,"* is even more disturbing.

It is important to convey attitudes, values, opinions, views and ways of thinking on the political involvement of all groups of the country. Questions such as *what possibilities of political participation are used? how to encourage political participation among all sectors of society? what are identified shortcomings of current government strategies?* must be raised and discussed. The questions on democracy, political systems, societies' political culture and the individual possibilities to participate in the political process require responses that incorporate views of the diverse sections of the society, including the young people.

The purpose of the publication at hand is to discuss some of these questions and endeavors to show alternatives, which could pave the path to searching for answers. It portrays the difficulties and challenges young people in five Southeast Asian countries face as they pursue and reinforce areas for political participation in their respective countries, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

The publication is part of a project that builds up a network among progressive young people in Southeast Asia. As of yet existing networks on the topic, involvement of young progressives in politics, focus only on thematic issues and remain mostly student organizations. The network takes a step further by bringing together experiences and ideals of young people in the region with students, members in political parties, in political organizations and in NGOs as network members. As a central part of the Young Progressives Network, this publication is a tool for network members and readers alike to gain better understanding of the various situations of young progressives in selected Southeast Asian countries.

In the same way, focus should not only be on the young generation in general but more significantly distinguishing the different implications of political decisions towards young women and young men. When the cultural structures of a country already instruct specific roles for men and women, differences of political responses and commitments from women and men follow suit. For this reason, equal opportunities for women and men to join and participate in politics is central in efforts to strengthen political participation of young people.

Young leaders in political positions have vital roles to truthfully represent the voices of the young generation. They can articulate the needs and dreams of young peoples and make a stand for new, better and progressive politics. Topics such as educational policies and the shaping of globalization are critically discussed among young political people. However, a young politician does not necessarily imply that she/he is an authentic spokesperson of the young generation. Unfortunately, it is reality that there are young leaders in the position to call and create change but opt to work for their personal interests.

By this publication the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Philippine Office wants to draw attention to the ideals, visions and opinions of the young generation and the importance of political participation of young people. Though in many instances in the five countries, the commitment to be politically involved and progressive is a difficult decision to make for young people, all the authors have stood up to the challenge and attested their strong commitment to this cause. They are young people actively involved in political organizations and political parties and the country studies presented as outcomes of their experiences and point of views.

... and we have a network now, so Go!

Beate Martin, Sara Franz
and Joanne Barriga
FES Philippine Office