

# GOING AGAINST THE FLOW: Political Participation of Thai Youth


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## Introduction: “Youth” Defined

IN THAILAND, PERSONS BETWEEN 14 AND 25 YEARS of age are generally referred to as “youth” in acknowledgment of the important role young people play in the future of society.

Yet the use of the term “youth” varies in different contexts.

The official Thai dictionary, published by the Royal Institute in 1982, defines “youth” as a person of at least 14 years of age, but below 18 years of age. The same age bracket is cited in the “Act Instituting the Juvenile and Family Courts and the Juvenile and Family Procedures” of 1991.

THAILAND		Country Background	
	Head of State	H.M. Bhumibol Adulyadej	
	Head of Government	Prime Minister Dr. Taksin Shinawatra	
	Government	Constitutional Monarchy	
	Capital	Bangkok	
	Population	64,865,523 (2004 est.)	
	Language	Thai	
	Religion	Buddhism, Islam, Christianity	
	Traditional Founding Date	1238 (never colonized)	
	Suffrage	Voting age is 18 years old, universal and compulsory	
	Currency	Baht	

Sources: The Official Website of the Royal Thai Government, Websites of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Wikipedia [date accessed 11 April 2005]

A different definition is given in the Thai National Youth Promotion and Coordination Act of 1978. This key piece of legislation in the promotion and development of Thai youth defines “youth” as a person no older than 25 years old. Here the definition of “youth” covers that of “child.”

Yet another interpretation is found in the Child and Youth Development Plan, under the 7<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan from 1992 to 1996. Here “youth” are classified as those between 15 and 25 years of age.

## 1. Thailand’s Youth: A Profile

Records of the Office of National Statistics show that there were approximately 27.1 million children and young people in Thailand in 2002. This figure accounted for 42.7 percent of the total population, which underscores the importance of unleashing the full potential of the youth in development. The statistics also showed that there was an average of 1.8 young people in each household.

*Table 1* shows that the percentage of young people in the Thai population is higher in the Northeastern and Southern regions than it is in the capital city of Bangkok.

Table 1: Young People Aged 0-24 by Region (2000)

Region	Percent
Bangkok	37.1
Central	39.7
North	39.6
Northeast	46.4
South	48.0

Source: Household Census,  
Office of National Statistics, 2000

The 2002 Time Use Survey revealed that young people commonly spend their free time watching television and video films. The second most popular activity is playing computer games and using software. Young people in Thailand spend little time engaging in educational activities, such as reading and library research.

Opportunities for self-development vary greatly. The standards of education are generally higher in urban areas than they are in the countryside. Aside from education, young people in cities also have greater access to modern media, current information and various modes of honing their creativity. However, when it comes to political issues, young people in rural areas seem to be more involved, despite their lack of access to information and facilities. Active participation of young people in the rural areas can be attributed to the direct impact government projects have on their accustomed way of life and livelihoods, such as through the construction of power plants and dams.

In terms of physical and mental health, young people in Thailand are at risk of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), particularly HIV/AIDS. Compared to rural areas, young people in urban areas are more likely to experience emotional problems, especially young women. Suicide rates are higher in urban than in rural areas.

Criminal activity is another harsh reality in Thailand. Each year, 4,000 young people are found guilty of criminal offenses. Drug charges have increased six times over the past five years. There has also been a five-fold increase in the incidence of robberies, while that of rape has doubled over the last five years. Root causes of such criminal acts stem from family and peer pressure, financial problems, neglect, and other related factors, such as alcohol and drug use, gambling and possession of weapons.

## Education

In the past, the Thai government had a policy of nine years of compulsory education. The 1997 Constitution, however, extended compulsory education to twelve years. Primary education requires six years. Secondary education is broken down into two blocks of three years each.

A 2002 survey showed that 24.1 million young people between the ages 3 to 24 were part of the formal school system (from kindergarten to university level). Only 1.8 percent of the 24.1 million young people graduate, while three out of five graduates face unemployment.

Additional data on education is provided in *Table 2* below. Interestingly, there is a higher percentage of females with no education (10.29 percent) compared to men (7.23 percent). However, the percentage of females at the tertiary level is comparably higher, with 9.04 percent for females compared to 8.51 percent for men.

Table 2: Population Aged 6 Years Old and Above by Educational Attainment (2000)

Education level	Female		Male	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Uneducated	2,898,889	10.29	1,961,156	7.23
Primary	16,833,778	59.76	15,922,926	58.74
Secondary	5,539,454	19.66	6,516,951	24.04
Tertiary	2,546,860	9.04	2,306,569	8.51
Others	350,385	1.25	401,441	1.48
TOTAL	28,169,366	100	27,109,043	100

Source: Household Census, Office of the National Statistics, 2000

Completion rates are uneven throughout the country. This is due to the insufficient number (quantity) and sub-standard quality of schools, teachers and other educational facilities provided by the government. Educational standards vary from district to district

and from school to school. Despite efforts at education reforms, schools in rural areas are still completely neglected, while opportunities are concentrated in the capital city of Bangkok. Many potentially bright young people in the countryside are deprived of the opportunity to obtain a quality education.

The Thai government's budget for 2000 reflects that about 7,000 Baht (equivalent to about US\$155) were spent per child. This corresponds to 3.9 percent of the country's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). An additional 9,000 Baht (US\$200) per capita were apportioned for education.

### Youth Employment

Half of the young people from ages 13 to 24 are part of the labor market where they often have to work more than 40 hours a week. Of these, 50 percent worked in household agriculture. However, this number is steadily decreasing with the expansion of the commercial, service and industrial sectors. About 40.9 percent of workers in urban districts are migrants from the rural areas. 84 percent of boys and girls in the labor force worked six days a week and often did unpaid overtime. Nine out of ten did not get compensation when they were sick or injured.

Young workers suffer from health problems more frequently than non-working young people. Due to harsh working conditions, they are vulnerable to diseases such as the respiratory complications, skin problems, digestive disorders, and problems with eyesight and hearing. Many lack self-confidence. Most of them do not have good relations with their supervisors. These young workers are extremely tense, as they have so little time to rest and no opportunities to enhance their skills. More than half of these young people want to continue studying, while three out of four hope to find better-paying jobs with paid holiday leaves.

Table 3 provides data on employment rates by educational attainment and gender. In absolute numbers, more young men than young women were employed in the year 2000.

Table 3: Youth Employment by Educational Attainment (2002)

Education level	Total		Females		Males	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	33,060.9	100.0	14,616.2	100.0	18,444.6	100.0
1. Uneducated	1,177.0	3.6	682.8	4.7	494.2	2.7
2. Under Primary Level	12,893.5	39.0	5,910.1	40.4	6,983.4	37.9
3. Primary School	7,473.9	22.6	3,119.0	21.4	4,354.9	23.6
4. Secondary School	4,302.4	13.0	1,657.5	11.3	2,644.9	14.3
5. High School	3,299.8	10.0	1,290.0	8.8	2,009.9	10.9
- Elementary	2,233.4	6.8	908.0	6.2	1,325.5	7.2
- Vocational	1,050.7	3.2	374.5	2.6	676.2	3.7
6. Tertiary	3,811.6	11.5	1,914.0	13.1	1,897.6	10.3
7. Others	16.4	—	10.9	0.1	5.5	—
8. Unidentified	86.2	0.3	32.0	0.2	54.2	0.3

Source: Employment of Thai People Survey, Office of the National Statistics, 2002

## 2. National Youth Policy

In terms of legislation, there are a number of different acts in Thailand that affirm the youth's potential in development, such as the National Youth Promotion and Coordination Act of 1978.

The National Youth Bureau (NYB) was established on 11 September 1978 by virtue of the National Youth Promotion and Coordination Act. The NYB, under the Office of the Prime Minister, is the office that coordinates the national youth policy of the Thai government. It cooperates with other youth-related ministries and youth organizations, such as the National Council of Child and Youth Development (NCCYD), which is a major non-governmental coordinating body at the national level.

There are twelve ministries tasked with undertaking projects to promote and develop the children's and youth sector. At the departmental level, there are 48 agencies. The NYB is the central body for setting policies and national plans of action. The measures for national youth promotion and coordination set by the NYB can be summarized as follows:

- 1) *Center for Information, Research and Academic Study:* The NYB is the national center for information concerning children and youth. It undertakes research on problems of the youth and children and produces academic studies on child and youth development.
- 2) *Development Plans and Policy:* The NYB formulated the National Youth Policy, the Long Term Policy and Plan for Children and Youth Development (20 years) and the National Children and Youth Development Plan (5 years).
- 3) *Promotion and Implementation:* The NYB renders support to initiatives on children and youth development and ensures effective program implementation, both at the governmental level and in cooperation with the private sector. In doing so, it emphasizes the promotion of national awareness, discipline and morality.
- 4) *Youth's Rights Protection and Related Social Services:* The NYB supports the protection of youth's rights and encourages social services in support thereof.
- 5) *Coordination:* The NYB is the central coordinating body for national youth promotion and development, both locally and abroad.
- 6) *Training:* The NYB organizes training programs on children and youth development.

- 7) *Public Relations and Publicity*: The NBY is also the center for public relations and publicity for youth-related activities.
- 8) *Follow-up and Evaluation*: Through follow-up and evaluation of work on child and youth development, the NYB compiles relevant information and data for the formulation and improvements of future plans.

In the year 2000, the government initiated a reform process on youth development in Thailand. It is significant to note that the government recognized the rights of national youth movements to organize themselves on a non-governmental basis, for both political and non-political purposes. Problems faced by youth in difficult circumstances were specifically addressed. Emphasis was placed on strengthening the functions of family and community, starting with early childhood education. It was the first time that the development of policy involved two parallel processes: (1) a governmental review and (2) people's participation through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The two processes converged during the later stages of the planning process.

A similar process was initiated in formulating the Youth Development Plan: (1) the government process, coordinated by the National Youth Bureau; and (2) the non-governmental process, aimed at formulating an action plan at the grassroots level.

The government process proceeded from an analysis of the "desirable human qualities" identified in the government's 8<sup>th</sup> five-year plan. Subsequently, the strategies for developing the youth's desirable qualities were discussed in a series of ten workshops attended by government officials, NGO workers, academics, media representatives, political figures, youth and community leaders. A subcommittee, comprised of a similar set of stakeholders, reviewed the draft plan.



The non-governmental process began with a survey of the youth situation at the provincial level. 18 provinces were selected for the survey, conducted by experts and local NGOs. In the preparatory phase, the following activities were carried out: training of local NGO workers, determination of scope and framework of the survey, and the preparation and pre-testing of questionnaires. Interviews with 200 youth leaders in each province were conducted to find out about their views on the youth's situation and suggested solutions to the problems encountered. The exercise was also aimed at raising awareness of the importance of local-level data collection as a basis for preparation of the youth development plan. As a result of the survey, the need for the demarcation of roles as well as collaboration between central and local-level government and NGOs in tackling different issues was highlighted.

On January 15, 2002, the government consolidated the National Youth Policy and the Development Plan for Youth and Children. This is a long-term plan from 2002 to 2011. These two measures call for the following:

1. Promote and support the important role of the family in raising the capacity of children and young people;
2. Support local governments, educational institutions, religious institutions, professional organizations, the media, and other private sector groups to collaborate in youth development;
3. Encourage both governmental and private sector groups to provide services for the youth, based on transparency and non-discrimination;
4. Advocate for timely enactment and implementation of youth development policies;

5. Support the systematic monitoring and evaluation of youth development by means of relevant indicators;
6. Assist in the provision of services in accordance with basic rights, both in terms of quantity and quality;
7. Support young people in analyzing information, generating ideas, taking responsibility, and making principled decisions in order to adapt to a changing world;
8. Promote the youth's capacity to utilize modern technology; and
9. Promote youth participation of the youth in building communities and advancing international friendships.

In 2003, the National Youth Bureau was merged with other agencies, in line with the government's bureaucratic reforms. The Office for Youth, Children, Disabled and Elderly Support, is henceforth the government body tasked with the formulation and coordination of youth policy through the following tasks:

1. Develop measures and mechanisms for youth's security and protection at the community and national levels;
2. Foster understanding and knowledge on youth concerns;
3. Enhance youth capacity to participate in the development process in recognition of the youth's role in the changing world;
4. Coordinate all sectors in society as a network of development partners for youth development;

5. Gather resources and expertise for youth protection and security; and
6. Identify monitoring and follow-up mechanisms for improved implementation.

Despite all these efforts, the national policy-making for the youth has not always been a smooth, continuous process. Policies for young people are often unclear and vague, and coordination among government bodies remains poor. Much work is done through children and family camps to strengthen capacity and family relationships.

Institutions dealing with youth concerns are weak and inefficient. There is still much room for learning, understanding, and strategizing when it comes to addressing the needs of the children's and youth sector. Due to this limitation, coming up with creative approaches and activities for the youth is difficult.

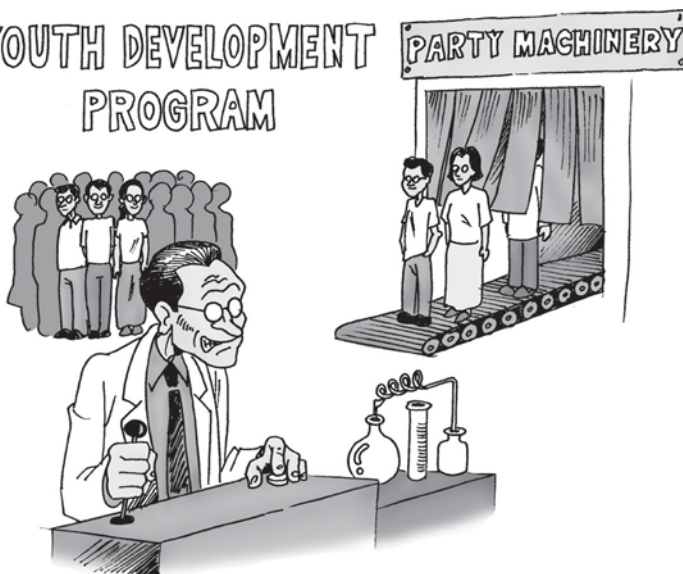
### 3. Youth and Parliament

In Thailand, the right to vote is accorded to those 18 years old and above. Members of parliament must be at least 25 years old. This denotes that there is no youth participation in the parliament when taken into account the definition of youth used in this paper.

Despite efforts at getting young people involved, many are disinterested in politics. The right to vote is not taken seriously. One way to address this situation is to widen access to different sources of information and encourage young people to share their ideas among each other.

Political parties have youth development programs in line with their respective interests and activities. These are aimed at

# YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



generating votes and improving their parties' image, as well as developing young politicians who will serve the party in the future. The Democratic Party has thus developed the Young Democrat Group. The ruling Thai Rak Thai Party also has continuous networking activities for young people. The Anti-drug Youth Network and the Young Small and Medium Entrepreneurs are just two examples of the Prime Minister's youth groups. These projects target young people for the political base of the Thai Rak Thai Party.

## 4. The Youth's Political Expressions through the Ages

Aside from participation in formal processes as described above, young people in Thailand have found many other ways of expressing themselves politically through the ages.

From the 1930s to 1990s, young people joined forces with labor groups and marginalized sectors of society towards achieving justice. Young intellectuals and activists worked with other movement groups such as NGOs, academics, politicians, journalists and middle class groups. Following are some highlights of these political expressions.

### 1932 to 1971

Siam's absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932. The aftermath saw intermittent civilian-influenced governments overpowered by stern authoritarian rule and militarism.

The establishment of Thammasat University in 1934 marked the rapid increase of intellectuals in Thai society. Many prominent members of the Thai civil administration and activists alike were educated at Thammasat. Over the years, Thammasat students have become known for their activism and have played a major role in Thai politics.



In 1937, young and well-educated people supported the nationalist government headed by General Piboon Songkram. Young people also took part in *Seree Thai* movement that resisted Japanese occupation in 1945.

University students played a significant role in heightened public protests in the 1950s. In 1952, this also resulted in the expulsion and arrest of five students. The coup in 1957 was followed by one of the most autocratic rules in modern Thai history.

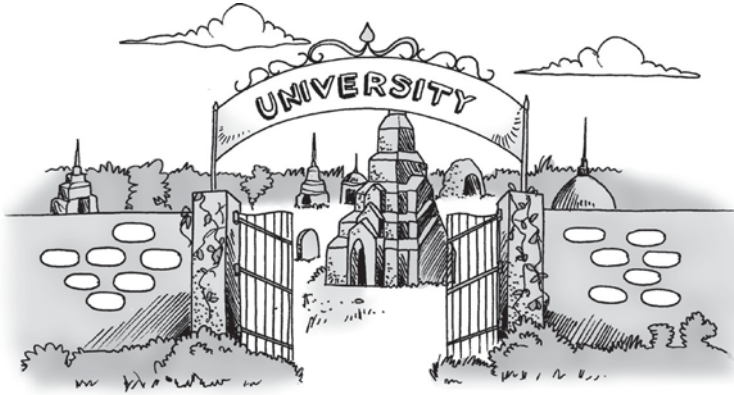
## The October 1973 Uprising

The suppression of intellectuals, students, journalists and writers that ensued was based on fierce anti-communism. These segments of society were branded as “insurgents” and communist supporters, accused of intending to abolish the monarchy, the nation and religion. The government therefore fostered the *Sai Lom Saeng Dad* culture of “wind and sunshine” on campuses. This initiative encouraged students to pay more attention to entertainment and the “lighter side of life,” rather than politics.

The *Sai Lom Saeng Dad* culture was heavily criticized in the period following the death of Colonel Sarit Tanaratch, who ruled Thailand from 1957 to 1963. New writings that tackled social problems, poverty and war came into circulation. Political groupings on campus were revived, leading to the formation of the Thai Student Association. In 1973, the Thai Student Association—supported by farmers’ groups and labor unions—led public protests demanding the enforcement of the constitution after the dismissal of parliament. As a consequence, hundreds of protesters were killed at the hands of the military and thirteen people were arrested in an uprising that ensued on 14 October 1973.

### 1973 to 1976

The uprising in 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 inspired Thailand’s “golden age of democracy,” witnessing the unprecedented involvement of people in public life. Students actively participated in finding solutions to social problems and new democratic impulses spread to the rural areas. There were calls to amend the constitution to broaden suffrage by lowering the voting age to 18 years and above.



However, this flourishing of democracy was too short a period to take firm root. By 1976, tensions between democratic movements and conservative military groups escalated. The government provoked the people's movement, which eventually resulted in a massacre of students and protesters at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976. The bloody slaughter was a crime by the state against the Thai people. The ultra-rightist authoritarian regime that came to power in a military coup thereafter imposed a ban on all groups and activities vaguely associated with politics. The freedom of association was curtailed and educational institutions were transformed into quiet places. Student activists fled to the jungles to join the Communist Party of Thailand.

### 1978 to 1991

By 1978, the government of General Kriangsak Chamanant implemented a semi-democratic institution. The Prime Minister granted amnesty to political prisoners and restored political rights. Student groups and associations were revived once again. In 1984, groups of students from 14 universities established the Student Federation of Thailand, uniting socially committed students for

change. It was a period of rare political stability, only to be followed by more ups and downs.

## 1991 to Present

In February 1991, a military coup was staged. Following elections in March of 1992, the military forced parliament to appoint army head General Suchinda Kraprayoon as prime minister. Opposition was strong. Street protests intensified and by May 1992, escalated into violent clashes, leaving some fifty fatalities. The uprising was an organized effort by a political movement composed of students, intellectuals and business elements. Elections were held to install a new government. A new constitution was drafted through a broad consultation process in 1997, Thailand's most democratic constitution to date.

Although political awareness reached new heights, young people's political involvement waned after the May uprising. One factor is fear. Another factor is increased consumerism, brought about by sweeping globalization and capitalism. Thailand experienced miraculous economic growth in the 1990s, which was only dampened by the Asian crisis that hit the country in 1997. Young people have become more concerned with ensuring their economic well-being rather than addressing social questions. The Federation of Thai Students still takes part in the broader people's movements, but the general perception is that young Thais are mostly pre-occupied with their own lives.



## 5. Current Challenges

### Decline in Student Activism

Students become involved in clubs and associations (sports, drama and social volunteering) out of their wish “to do things other than studying” and to spend time with friends. A 2004 survey found that only five to ten percent of university students join student clubs. Student activities are merely seen as a means to enhance one’s ability to work in groups. Many feel that membership in clubs is a good addition to their curriculum vitae to improve their qualifications for future job applications.

These university student groups do not take part nor initiate any political activities. Voluntary work and social involvement are barely part of the mandates of these student groups. The National Public Health Foundation has been trying to organize students for apprenticeships in rural areas. However, discussions among students revealed that volunteering is seen as an “unprofitable” endeavor.

This trend is even evident in Thammasat University, the educational institution that pioneered in student activism. Prof. Dr. Surapon Nitigraipot, the Chancellor of Thammasat reflects: “I think student activities have changed with society. Today’s students try to graduate soonest [to prepare] for working life. They have their own lives, more time for themselves, with less time thinking of others... It is a manifestation of individualism. Similarly, in a forum on the student movement in 2003, Dr. Komart Jeungsathiensap pointed out that “... universities are not knowledge management institutions [anymore]... Classes do not differ from factories where students are canned, then released into the market, without realizing their fullest capacity [as members of society].”

## Education Policy: Liberalization Under Pressure

The government put in place plans to liberalize all public universities. This means that state subsidies on university education will be cut over a 10-year period. All universities will have to manage their own budgets, human resources, facilities, and other requirements on their own. This new policy has created many uncertainties, as tuition fees will definitely increase. As a response to this policy, university teachers and the Federation of University Students all over the country have demanded a reversal of these government plans.

An anti-liberalization movement has emerged from these efforts. The movement organizes public forums and has submitted protest letters to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education and university chancellors. It is important to note that this movement is made up of few representatives who have failed to gain broad support for their actions. However, some disagreements among university boards have surfaced. The delay in liberalization of some universities can be attributed to the efforts of the movement.

Students active in the movement are being kept under surveillance by authorities. Many face unfair treatment—ranging from being placed under investigation, probation or being removed from the university enrolment list altogether. The removal from the enrolment list is the gravest treatment. This is what happened to students from Khonkean University in the Northeastern part of the country.

## The Push and Pull of Capitalism

Educational institutions these days are aimed at producing students who present the future human resources of private corporations of Thailand's market economy. This leads to the impression that university students are being molded by the demands of capitalism, which affects various classes differently.

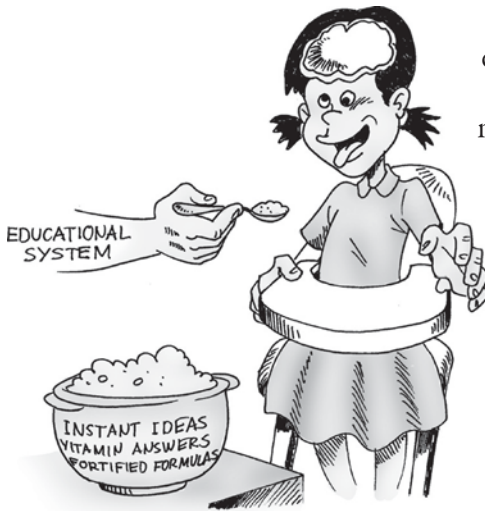
The onslaught of globalization and growing influence of Western culture make young people vulnerable to the negative effects of consumerism. Young people, especially those from the middle and upper classes who can afford modern technology, are more and more preoccupied with being "trendy" and keeping up-to-date with brand names, rather than being concerned with the social impact of globalization.



Young people from the lower social classes, including slum dwellers, try to better their status by aiming for higher positions. These young people from poorer families often deny their roots and take on new values to ensure their social mobility.

## Thai Society

Many Thais, including young people, accept that inequalities and social injustices can never be solved. This belief can be attributed to the deeply rooted belief in karma and respect in authority, wealth and power. Although there is more political space available to young people today as compared to their past generations, politics remains outside their purview. They are detached from social issues and unaware of how they might contribute to society.



The “archaic” Thai educational system places more emphasis on memorization rather than teaching students how to think for themselves. Teachers pass on “instant ideas” and encourage “packaged answers” instead of allowing students to think aloud and debate issues among themselves. As a result, many young people find

it difficult to understand the complexities of recent social developments and examine these critically. Youngsters often feel lost or do not see the importance in participating to political processes—unless they are directly affected. They lack ideas on how to change policies that affect their life economically, politically and socially.

There are only very few young people who are enthusiastic about current affairs and joining social movements. However, a lot of these socially active young people eventually find work in the private sector and abandon activism. Sometimes, young activists

are singled out as black sheep or deviants and accused of acting only to gain attention. This is an alarming trend.

Thai society is not critical of its own societal structures. In Thailand there is no tradition of meaningful interaction between the government and its citizens. People generally do not criticize government for its shortcomings. This complacency is mirrored in Thai's taste for television entertainment shows over reading critical pieces on current affairs. At the same time, there is also a strong perception that the mainstream media is totally under the control of the current government. Radio and television stations that broadcast views against the government are threatened or banned. Nowadays, Thai people seem to be kept blind deliberately.

## Conclusion

After the 1992 uprising, Thai democracy flourished. The Thai state, by tradition highly centralized, was subjected to profound decentralization measures and a new democratic constitution was put in place. Today, young people have more freedom than any generation who came before them.

Yet in reality, the power and rights of the people continue to be undermined. There remain only a few groups—NGO workers, academics and student activists—who dare to criticize the current government's policies. Although student groups are free to organize joint actions, universities' rules and regulations often present obstacles to social involvement. Social budgets have been cut, and often examination schedules deliberately coincide with students' social activities.

The incumbent government under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has not favored people's movements. His administration has endeavored to silence the voice of the people

and the efforts of civil society. The government's populist policies are not based on instituting structural changes. All policies are top-down strategies, in isolation from any citizen pressure from below. Thaksin's strategy is to gain the support of the poor at the grassroots level through dole-outs. The Thai Rak Thai party enforces its policies, including those on youth development, through budget incentives.

Thai society has long been experiencing problems between different social classes. The problem is evident in the management of natural resources, which pits the rich against the poor in both urban and rural areas. The state and capitalists represent the elite, while laborers, farmers, fisher folks, highland communities and slum dwellers embody the lower class. The people's political participation can only be realized by profound changes that bridge these social divides. Democratic development is more than just the conduct of general elections. It entails fundamental, even revolutionary structural changes, so that people from all classes can get involved in the policy-making process. Without such a transformation, the values of equality, freedom and sustainability will not be realized.

The youth are the future of the society. Their social consciousness and political awareness are crucial to society. However, globalization and the adherence to capitalism and a liberal economy have exacerbated poverty, community disintegration and consumerism. Society has become individualistic, and collective actions have lost their significance, as people are more concerned with struggling for their own lives. Young people therefore have an important role to play in changing society for the better, a place where all people can live together happily.

Youth participation today is the mirror of tomorrow's politics. Strengthening youth participation today is the key to a livable society.