



BACKGROUND PAPER

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Youth Political Participation in ASEAN

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1. Introduction

Recently, the subject of youth participation in politics has come to the world's attention. Many international institutions have turned their focus on youth in politics; for example, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 in 2015 on Youth, Peace and Security to encourage the Member States to take into account involving youth in the decision making process at all levels - local, national, and international institutions as well as youth inclusion in prevention and conflict resolution[1]. In addition, some international institutions such as the International Institute for Democracy and Election Assistance (IDEA), the European Commission and the UNDP published a handbook on how electoral bodies could increase youth participation in the electoral process [1].

Currently, there are about 213 million youth aged from 15-34 years in Southeast Asia equal to 19% of the total global youth population and approximately 34% of the total population in ASEAN[2, 3] which has made youth the largest cohort of the total population in ASEAN. This figure suggests their participation and/or representation in many sectors is needed, and their presence can influence society and the economy as well as the politics in the Southeast Asia region. It is also observed that within the last three years youth in ASEAN have been more engaged in politics. For example, two newly established political parties, one in Indonesia (Indonesian Solidarity Party) and one in Thailand (Future Forward Party) are led by youth and have gained popularity in the current elections[4].

Another interesting aspect reflecting the increase of youth political participation in ASEAN is that 46% of the eligible voters registered in 2018 were youth in the general election in Cambodia[5], while nearly half of the eligible voters in Indonesia were youth aged from 17-35[5] in the general election in 2019. The figures suggest that youth groups are a potential segment in the electoral process in the two countries which can bring success to political parties to compete in the election. However, youth participation in ASEAN remains low in the political process compared to the older cohorts, and they have not fully realized their important roles as democratic citizens[6].

In the light of this, the paper provides an overview on general information on the youth profile in ASEAN, and examines youth engagement in politics in ASEAN. It then looks into why youth political participation remains low. Lastly, the paper looks at what parliament can do to increase participation of youth in politics. The paper is mainly based on secondary data; that is, on literature related to youth political participation in ASEAN from reports, media and academic papers.

2. ASEAN and Youth Profile

Before moving to the ASEAN youth profile, the paper provides a picture on the socio-economic situation in ASEAN. The reason to examine the socio-economic situation is because it is believed that socio-economic status can influence or shape the politics of the country as well as youth engagement in the politics. For instance, if most of people, are living below the poverty line, participation in the politics is not priority of these people including youth, rather, having food for them and their family is.

2.1 Key Socio-Economic Indicators in ASEAN

ASEAN has become the world's fifth largest economy[7]. The combined population of the ten countries in ASEAN was 642.1 million, equal to 8.5% of world's population in 2018. The number of females is a little higher than males (male per 100 female is 99.4)[8]. GDP at current price was 2.8 trillion US dollars which accounted 3.5% of world GDP, whereas people living under the poverty line was 14.7%, and the employment rate was 4.1%[8]. However, the low-rate of unemployment does not reflect the quality of jobs [8], because, in the developing world¹, especially in poor households people tend to take any job regardless of working conditions.

¹ Most ASEAN members are developing countries.

2.1.1 Socio Demography in the Ten Countries in ASEAN

When looking at socio-demography by countries in ASEAN (Table 2.1), the population of Indonesia is the largest (about 262 million), while the smallest is Brunei (about 420,000). Among the 10 countries, Myanmar is the country with the highest rate of population living below the national poverty line, accounting for 32.1% followed by Lao PDR and Philippines at 23.2% and 21.6%, respectively. However, when looking at the population living below Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)² \$1.9, Cambodia was at the highest rate which was 24% followed by Lao PRD at 22.7 (%).

Table 2.1 Key Socio-Demography by Countries in ASEAN

| Country | Population (000) | Sex Ratio (male per 100 females) | Population living below national poverty line (%) | Population living below PPP\$1.9 (%) | Unemployment rate | Access to safe drinking water | Infant mortality rate | Life Expectancy |
|-------------|------------------|----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Brunei | 421.3 | 108 | N/A | N/A | 6.9 | 100 | 8.8 | 77.2 |
| Cambodia | 15,717.7 | 95.1 | 14 | 24 | 0.2 | 64.8 | 26.3 | 69 |
| Indonesia | 261,890.9 | 101 | 10.9 | 6.5 | 4.1 | 72 | 22.2 | 69.2 |
| Lao PDR | 6,752.8 | 100.6 | 23.2 | 22.7 | 0.7 | 77.5 | 48.9 | 66.7 |
| Malaysia | 32,049.7 | 106.9 | 0.4 | 0 | 3.4 | 96.5 | 7.1 | 75.3 |
| Myanmar | 53,388 | 92.5 | 32.1 | 6.4 | 0.8 | 80.2 | 40.1 | 66.6 |
| Philippines | 104,921.4 | 101.8 | 21.6 | 8.3 | 2.7 | 92 | 21.5 | 69.1 |
| Singapore | 5,612.3 | 96.1 | N/A | N/A | 1.8 | 100 | 2.2 | 82.8 |
| Thailand | 67,653.2 | 94.3 | 8.6 | 18 | 0.9 | 97.8 | 10.5 | 75.3 |
| Viet Nam | 93,671.6 | 98.1 | 7 | 17 | 2.1 | 98 | 17.3 | 76.3 |

Source: ASEAN Statistical Leaflet 2018

In terms of life expectancy, Singapore has the highest life expectancy at 82.9 years, while Myanmar has the lowest at 66.6 years. The variation in life expectancy could probably lead to different definitions of youth. For example, if a county's life expectancy is low, the youth age segment could be in a group whose age is younger than that of a country with a high life expectancy. Again, the unemployment rate in all ASEAN Member States (AMS) was low, with Cambodia having the lowest (0.2%), and Brunei the highest (6.9%) (See Table 2.1). Nevertheless, a low rate of unemployment rate does not necessarily reflect the quality of the job.

2.1.2 Economic Indicators by Countries in ASEAN

Table 2.2 indicates that among the ten countries, Indonesia had the highest GDP at current price, followed by Singapore and the Philippines, respectively. Brunei's GDP was the lowest one in ASEAN, but its GDP per capita was the second highest in ASEAN which was 28,985.8 US dollars after Singapore's which was at 57,722.2 US dollars. Notably, each person in all AMSs had more than one cellular phone, except in Lao PDR where only half of population use cellular phones. This is an important indicator reflecting how people in each country can access information with the fast development of social media. It could reflect of how they can be involved in politics through new technologies which is discussed later in this paper.

Table 2.2 Key Economic Indicators by Countries in ASEAN

| Country | GDP at Current Price (US\$ million) | GDP per Capita (US\$) | Total FDI inflow (US\$ million) | Share of Service Sector in GDP (%) | Trade in goods balance (US\$ million) | Internet Subscribers per 100 persons | Cellular phone users |
|---------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
|---------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|

² It is an economic term used to compare absolute purchasing power of countries' currencies on specific goods.

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------|-------------|----------|----------|------|------------|------|-------|
| Brunei | 12,211.7 | 28,985.8 | 460.1 | 37.9 | 1,673 | 90 | 127 |
| Cambodia | 22340.3 | 1,421.3 | 2,732.2 | 39.3 | (3,006.4) | 69 | 118.2 |
| Indonesia | 1,013,926.3 | 3,871.6 | 23,063.6 | 47.2 | 11,825 | 32.3 | 173.8 |
| Lao PDR | 17,090.2 | 2,530.8 | 1,695.4 | 39.4 | (1,171.7) | 30 | 54.1 |
| Malaysia | 317,251.6 | 9,898.7 | 9,447.2 | 52 | 22,689.5 | 88.9 | 106.2 |
| Myanmar | 65,607.1 | 1,228.9 | 4,340.7 | 42.5 | (5,381.6) | 80.1 | 131.2 |
| Philippines | 313,875.4 | 2,991.5 | 10,049.4 | 57.5 | (39,628.5) | 55.5 | 110.4 |
| Singapore | 323,954.2 | 57,722.2 | 62,016.7 | 67.1 | 65,559.1 | 84.4 | 148.2 |
| Thailand | 455,703.8 | 6,735.9 | 9,100.9 | 58.1 | 13,930.7 | 52.9 | 176 |
| Viet Nam | 223,837.1 | 2,389.6 | 14,100 | 38.8 | 3,305.9 | 46.5 | 128.1 |

Source: ASEAN Statistical Leaflet 2018

2.2 Youth Profile in ASEAN

The three pillars of ASEAN's Vision 2025 are political security, economy and socio-culture, and all of which provide focus on youth development directly and indirectly[2]. In support of this, AMS has developed an ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2016-2025. However, due to different histories, culture, religion, society, economy and political system, youth status varies accordingly.

For instance, all of the AMSs have their own youth policy, and there is no standardized definition of youth among the AMSs. While the UN defines youth as a person aged from 15-24, the AMSs define different age ranges of youth determined by their own laws and regulations. Youth in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia and Philippine is defined from 15-30, while youth age in Thailand and Brunei is defined as 18-25 and 15-40, respectively. It also varied in terms of candidacy and age for voting. The age for candidacy in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar is 25 for the lower house, while the candidacy age for the lower house in other countries of AMSs is 21. For the upper house, the candidacy age range requirement is from 30 to 40 years in the AMSs.

Furthermore, Table 2.3 which lists the youth development index (YDI) for 2015³, indicates that Singapore had the highest index which was 0.94, while the YDI of Lao PDR was the lowest (0.36) among the AMSs. The higher YDI index is mainly due to high secondary school enrolment and a high gross enrolment rate in tertiary education. As reflected in Table 2.3, the secondary school enrolment and gross enrolment rate in tertiary education in Singapore was 105.85 and 88.88 respectively.

In addition, it is observed that youth in all AMSs make up a large share of the total population. Youths' share in relation to total population of AMSs is more than 23% except in Singapore accounting for only 14%. Youth unemployment rate has a very low rate and varies among the AMSs.

Table 2.3 Key Indicators Related to Youth in ASEAN

| Country | Range of youth age | Youth Development Index in 2015 | Candidacy Age | Voting age | Secondary School Enrollment in 2019 (%) | Gross enrolment rate in Tertiary in 2019 (%) | Youth unemployment rate (%) in 2020 (Age 15-24) | % of youth to total population (15-29) in 2015 |
|----------|--------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|------------|---|--|---|--|
| Brunei | 15-40 | 0.76 | • 21 (LH) | NA | 92.09 | 31.47 | 29 | 26 |
| Cambodia | 15-30 | 0.38 | • 25 (LH) • 40 (UH) | 18 | NA | 14.7 | 1.14 | 31 |

³ Youth Development Index ranks 0 to 1, where 0 mean the worst and 1 is the best.

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------------|------|------------------------|-----------------|--------|--------------------|-------|-----------------|
| Indonesia | 16-30 | 0.53 | • 21 (LH) • NA (UH) | 17 | 78.73 | 36.31 | 17.63 | 25 |
| Lao PDR | 15-30 | 0.36 | • 21 (LH) | 18 | 60 | 14.45 | 1.66 | 29 |
| Malaysia | 15-30 ⁴ | 0.73 | • 21 (LH) • 30 (UH) | 18 ⁵ | 83.74 | 43.06 | 11.71 | 31 ⁶ |
| Myanmar | NA | 0.56 | • 25 (LH) • 30 (UH) | 18 | 68.43 | 18.81 | 4.34 | 27 |
| Philippines | 15-30 | 0.55 | • 25 (LH) • 35 (UH) | 18 | 84.04 | 35.47 | 6.30 | 28 |
| Singapore | 15-35 | 0.94 | • 21 (LH) | 21 | 105.84 | 88.88 | 9.68 | 14 |
| Thailand | 18-25 | 0.48 | • 25 (LH) • 40 (UH) | 18 | 115 | 49.28 ⁷ | 4.09 | 23 |
| Viet Nam | 16-30 | 0.66 | • 21 (LH) | 18 | NA | 28.63 | 7.22 | 25 |

Source: First ASEAN Youth Development Index 2016 and World Bank Data

3. Youth Political Participation

3.1 Political Participation Concept

The concept of political participation has been a topic of interest for political scientists for decades, and the term has been elaborated in different ways. The paper puts forward some definitions as follow:

Milbrath explained the meaning of political participation as the behavior that affects or is intended to influence the government's decision[9], while **Huntington & Nelson** defined political participation as activities which citizens design privately to influence the decisions of government[10]. On the other hand, political participation also refers to "those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and, directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy"[11]. Or this can be further interpreted that political participation is any activity that a group of civil societies such as an association or non-government organization working on advocacy of government on any policy area. Similar to the above definition, **Kaase & Marsh** conceptualized political participation as voluntary activities of individual citizens or a group of people to directly or indirectly influence political choices at differently levels of the political system[12].

Furthermore, according to **Ekman & Amna** and **Lamprianou**, political participation can be categorized into two types which are formal and informal [13, 14]. These scholars interpreted formal political participation as activities within the political system or institutional political framework of a country which could include joining a political party, voting, running a campaign, lobbying, attending political meetings etc. Whereas, informal political participation was interpreted by them as activities outside the political system of the country including civil disobedience, supporting or opposing specific issues or policy areas through demonstration, advocacy, or through media including social media. Their interpretation of political participation is considered to be similar to the explanation by **Galstyan** that the political participation is divided into different types which are traditional/conventional and non-conventional forms[15]. **Galstyan** elaborated that traditional forms of political participation were elections and membership in a political party, where non-conventional ones are petitions, demonstrations and movements[15].

Based on the discussion above, this paper describes the concept of political participation as activities or behaviors of citizens individually and collectively that directly or indirectly influence the government's decision or policy process at all levels through both conventional and non-conventional forms. The conventional form of political participation refers to activities within the political system or institutional

⁴ Before 2019, it was from 15-40.

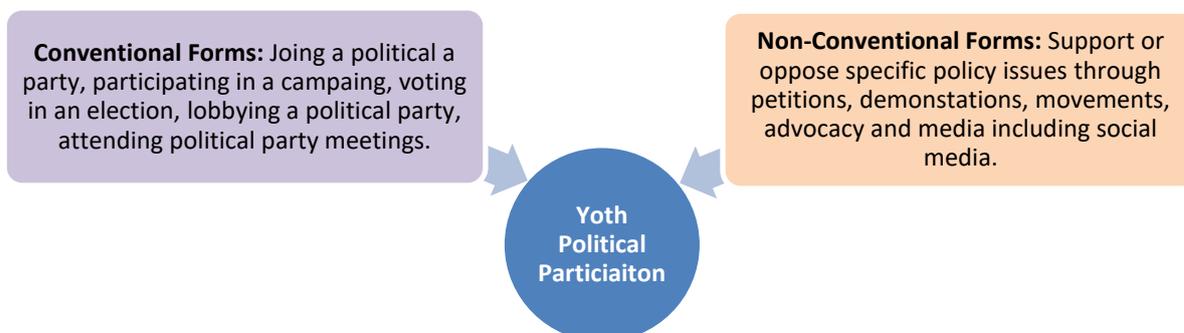
⁵ Before July 2019, the voting age in Malaysia was 21

⁶ Age from 15-30

⁷ The figure represented in 2016

political framework of a country such as, joining a political party, participating in a campaign, voting in an election, lobbying a political party, attending political party meetings, whereas non-conventional forms refers to participating in activities outside the political system to support or oppose specific public policy issues through petitions, movements, advocacy, or media including social media.⁸

Figure 3.1 Concept of Youth Political Participation



The combined definition above is used as indicators to reflect how the status of youth political participation in ASEAN which is discussed in section 3.3 below:

3.2 Political System in ASEAN

As noted above, due to the different cultures and histories, AMS have a diversity of political systems. In ASEAN, as indicated in Table 3.1, four countries have kings, six are republics, and one a federation[16]. The political party system ranges from no party (Brunei), to single party (Lao PDR and Vietnam) and to multi-political parties (Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore). The countries uphold the multi-political party principle conducting a general election within the specific mandate to rule the country. Furthermore, among the 10 AMSs, seven countries constitutionally apply a parliamentary system (Parl-Sys) which includes Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei), while three (Indonesia, Myanmar and Philippines) apply a presidential system (Pres- Sys). The main difference of these two systems is the method of selecting the head of government. In the parliamentary system, the head of government and his/her cabinet is selected by the elected parliamentarians, whereas in the presidential system, the head of government and the parliament are selected in the different elections. Furthermore, the parliaments in six countries are bicameral parliament, and four are unicameral parliament.

Table 3.1 Political System in AMS

| Countries | No party | Single Party | Multi-parties | Monarchy | Republics | Federation | Parl-sys | Pres - sys | Bicameral Parliament | Unicameral Parliament |
|-------------|----------|--------------|---------------|----------|-----------|------------|----------|------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Brunei | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Cambodia | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Indonesia | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Lao PDR | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Malaysia | | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Myanmar | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Philippines | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Singapore | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Thailand | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Vietnam | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |

Source: Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia. 2020. *Atlas of Parliamentary Diplomacy*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

⁸ Since the topic of this paper is about 'Youth Political Participation; the term *citizens* above refer to *youth*

The election does not happen only at the national level, but also at the sub-national levels to elect councils for each tier of sub-national government and the mayors/governors such as in Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines under the decentralization policy.⁹

The political system depicted above is the main entry point for youth political participation in the AMSs through conventional forms at both the national and sub-national levels. In other words, youth cannot only participate in politics by voting to elect the parliamentarians and presidents at the national level, as well as the councilors and mayors/governors in the local elections, but also stand as candidates to be elected through their political parties. In addition, they can participate as a member of a political party, a worker in an election campaign of political party and so on.

3.3 Current Situation of Youth Political Participation in ASEAN

Generally, by nature, youth like to be informed, try new things, and are sensitive to issues their country is facing. Youth in ASEAN have become the largest age cohort of the total population, and as such, if political parties in AMS wish to gain their support they need to be aware of the issues that concern this segment of the population.

Next, the paper looks at how youth in ASEAN participates in politics in both conventional and unconventional forms:

3.3.1 Conventional Forms

As noted above, conventional forms of political participation refer to those activities in the political system or institutional political framework of a country which are; joining a political party, joining a political party campaign, participate in the election, lobbying a political party, and attending party meetings. Due to the limitation of available data, the paper discusses only three conventional forms: youth in national elections, youth-led political parties and youth as a parliamentary member.

- **Youth in the Election at the National Level**

Since the AMSs have diverse political systems, to some extent, youth participation varies accordingly. It has been observed that youth in ASEAN has played an important role in politics, mainly because their age cohort is the largest group of eligible voters which can lead to power shifts in countries. As already noted, the definition of youth varies by countries in the AMSs and therefore, it is difficult to compare the standard age of youth participation in elections in AMSs.

However, this paper tries to show the share of youth as a percentage of total eligible voters who have participated in recent elections from different sources in respective countries where multi-political party elections were held (from 2018 to 2020) to give an approximate picture of how active youth are in conventional political participation. There are only seven countries in the AMSs conducting elections contested by a number of different political parties such as: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore.

Table 3.2: Percentage of Youth as Total Eligible Voters in the Recent Election by Country

| Country | Share of Youth to Total Eligible Voters | Source |
|-----------|--|--------|
| Cambodia | 46% (2018) | [17] |
| Indonesia | Nearly half of Eligible voters (Age 17-35 in 2019) | [17] |
| Malaysia | 41% (2018) | [18] |
| Myanmar | 13% (Age 18-22 in 2020) | [19] |

⁹ In Cambodia, only councilors are elected, while mayors/governors are appointed. In Thailand, only in some special administrations such as in Bangkok, is the mayor elected.

| | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|------|
| Philippines | 33% (Age 18-35 in 2019) | [20] |
| Thailand | 15% (Age 18-25 in 2019) | [21] |
| Singapore | N/A | N/A |

Table 3.2 shows that the share of youth participation in relation to total eligible voters in recent elections in Cambodia (2018), Malaysia (2018), Philippine (2019) and Indonesia (2019) was 46%, 41%, 33% respectively and almost 50% in Indonesia. Whereas, in Myanmar (2020) and Thailand (2019), there were 13% and 15% respectively. Notably, Malaysia’s parliament has recently approved a lower voting age from 21 to 18 years old, thus there will be 7.8 million new voters added in the general election in 2023 [22]. It is also noted that the small share of youth to total eligible voters in Myanmar and Thailand probably resulted from the youth age being 18-22 in Myanmar and 18-25 in Thailand. If youth age is from 18 to 35, the share would be a larger one as in other countries in the AMSs.

The figures still reflect that the youth group is significant and could lead to power shifts in AMSs through the electoral process. In other words, the political party that receives support from youth, could have a more favorable outcome in an election, and it is, therefore, a target cohort for political parties.

The survey done by (Redhill, 2019) across seven countries in the AMSs which includes Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia of 2,000 youth showed that more than 80% of youth respondents of each country are enthusiastic about voting in the next election, except in Myanmar where youth expressed enthusiasm at 67% [23]. The reason that youth in Myanmar is less enthusiastic maybe they are not aware of the importance of elections as this country just opened for democracy during the last decade after a long period of time under military control. However, at the time of writing this paper, Myanmar has again been under the control of the military since 01 February 2021.

Given the above, it can be argued that youth in AMSs are not apathetic to regarding politics.

- **Youth-Led Political Party**

Voting for a political party is one thing, participation by youth, on the other hand, is another matter. However, it is observed that there has been a movement by youth in some countries, to establish and led political parties.

In the case of Cambodia, according to the study done by the Youth Resource Development Program Organization (YRDP) in Cambodia with a sample of 1,484 (female: 755) youth in five geographic zones in Cambodia,¹⁰ 89% of respondents agreed that political parties should have more consideration of youth issues and provide opportunities to them for their future development through involving them in politics [24]. This figure suggests that youth in Cambodia were interested in increasing their involvement in politics. In addition to the above study, there is other evidence showing political interest, with the establishment of the Cambodian Youth Party (CYP) in 2015 led by youth. In the press conference launching the party, the leader of the party said that the reason CYP was being established was due to the youth interest, and if the party won the election, the party would make youth employment policy a first priority [25].

The rise of youth in politics was also observed in Indonesia. A youth-led political party was established after the election in 2014 and drew significant attention in Indonesian political arena. The party was the Indonesian Solidarity Party led by a 35-year-old mother of two children who used to be a journalist and TV presenter. Two thirds of the party’s members, approximately 400,000 members, were young people whose age was less than 35 [26]. The establishment of party aims to improve youth and women’s representation in the policy

¹⁰ 76% of the sample were youth who completed high school, under graduate and graduate schooling.

making process. PSI participated in the parliamentary election in 2019. However, the party did not win any seats in parliament.

The same phenomenon was also seen in Thailand, with the Future Forward Party (FFP) being established in 2018 aiming to represent Thai youth. The party won the third place in the 2019 election and beat other political parties which had a long history in Thai politics like the Democrat Party. Many media and scholars believed that three million votes for the FFP were from young voters, mainly those from generation Z[27].¹¹ According to the survey done by Super Pool in August 2019, 81.9% of age the group less than 20 years old and 67.4% of age group from 20-30 voted for the FFP. However, the party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court of Thailand in early 2020, and its leaders were banned from entering politics for a decade. Nevertheless, Thai young people still hold uprisings, which is discussed details later in the paper.

Regarding Malaysia, it is expected that youth will play a key role in shaping politics in the 2023 election as the number of eligible youth voters will increase as the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18.

Given the above, it can be assumed that youth engagement in politics in AMSs will keep rising. They do not only participate in politics passively, but also actively (e.g., establishing political parties).

- **Youth as a Parliamentary Member**

Table 3.3 illustrates that, the percentage of lower house members whose age is under 30 within eight countries in ASEAN was still quite low from the lowest, zero to the highest, 2.86 percent in 2018. Referring to the percentage of lower house members aged under 40 among the eight countries, Singapore was the highest accounting for 21.74% followed by Indonesia at about 19% while Thailand and Cambodia were zero and 11.48%, respectively.

The percentage of upper house members in Myanmar aged under 40 was 21.43%.

Table 3.3: Members of Upper and Lower Houses under age 30 and 40 (percentage) in 2018

| Country | Single and Lower Chamber | | Upper Chamber | |
|------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| | % of MPs under age 30 | % of MPs under age 40 | % of Senator under age 30 | % of Senator under age 40 |
| Cambodia | 0 | 11.48 | 0 | 0 |
| Vietnam | 1.81 | 12.30 | N/A | N/A |
| Indonesia | 2.86 | 18.86 | N/A | N/A |
| Malaysia | 0 | 12.16 | 1.61 | 9.68 |
| Singapore | 0 | 21.74 | N/A | N/A |
| Myanmar | 0.23 | 13.36 | 0.5 | 21.43 |
| Thailand | 0 | 0 | N/A | N/A |
| Philippine | 1.71 | 15.75 | 0 | 4.17 |

Source: [1]

The data above suggests that the number of youth representatives in the political institutions at the national level in ASEAN is quite low, even though youth make up the largest share of eligible voters who have registered for elections.

3.3.2 Un-conventional Forms

As described above, youth political participation through un-conventional forms refers to activities outside the political system to engage in specific policies or issues through petition, demonstration, advocacy,

¹¹ Refers to those whose birth is between 1996 to 2000.

movement or media, mainly through social media. Again, with data limitations, the paper only focuses on two aspects of youth in AMSs participating in politics through unconventional forms which are: political participation through social media and protests/demonstrations.

- **Political Participation via Social Media**

During the Arab Spring revolution in 2011, the internet and social media were drawing the attention of politicians, researchers, academics and other commentators and was one of the main enabling factors causing citizen engagement, and provided wider space for youth political participation. Youth have used social media platforms to express their views and undertaken political activities outside of the normal political system.

Up to now, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, FB Messenger, blogs, and others are strategic tools used for interaction between politicians and citizens. Table 3.4 indicates that six AMSs have social media penetration of more than 50% and four that were under 50%. However, the rate of social media penetration has been growing year by year. The most active social media platforms in AMSs are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.

Table 3.4: Internet and Social Media Penetration in ASEAN

| Country | Internet penetration (%) | Social Media Penetration (%) | Annual Growth of Social Media (%) | Most Active Social Media Platforms (%) | | | | |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---------|-----------|----------|--------------|
| | | | | Facebook | YouTube | Instagram | WhatsApp | FB Messenger |
| Brunei | 95 | 95 | 11 | - | - | - | - | - |
| Cambodia | 50 | 43 | 43 | - | - | - | - | - |
| Indonesia | 50 | 49 | 23 | 41 | 43 | 38 | 40 | 24 |
| Lao PDR | 35 | 35 | 33 | | | | | |
| Malaysia | 79 | 75 | 9 | 70 | 69 | 49 | 68 | 47 |
| Myanmar | 34 | 34 | 29 | - | - | - | - | - |
| Philippines | 63 | 63 | 12 | - | - | - | - | - |
| Singapore | 84 | 83 | 9 | 70 | 71 | 44 | 73 | 42 |
| Thailand | 82 | 74 | 11 | 75 | 72 | 50 | 17 | 55 |
| Vietnam | 67 | 57 | 20 | 61 | 59 | 32 | - | 47 |

Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute [28]

Youth in Cambodia was first seen to actively participate in politics outside the country’s political system during the 2013 election through social media, mainly Facebook. According to the online survey by **Thun** of 105 Facebook users, aged from 18 to 35, it showed that Facebook was a key element of their participation in politics. Furthermore, a survey of 401 new media users who were between 18 to 34 done by **Chan**, found that Facebook and internet was the common platform for them to express political opinions[29].

In Thailand, social media was becoming the main strategic tool in the political campaign during the election in 2019. Since its establishment, FFP has strategically used social media to mobilize supporters, mainly young people. In an interview with 22 of Generation Z respondents in Thailand, they expressed that FFP’s online communication tools which were Facebook and Twitter played an important role to motivate them into political engagement[27]. Currently, even when the country is locked down due to Covid 19, youth in Thailand is still active in political engagement through social media.

Similarly in Indonesia the Indonesian Solidarity Party has used social media for its political campaign to compete in the election. A study done by **Silviani et al**, indicated that social media was a main tool to

promote political communication of PSI in delivering its message[30] with the use of Facebook and Twitter to promote its activities.

From the above, it may be assumed that youth in ASEAN are seeing social media platforms as the main strategic tool to provide them with a wider space to participate in politics within their own countries. They can easily express their political opinions by this means.

- **Voicing Opinions**

In addition to using social media to express their views, youth also directly engage in politics by openly voicing their opinions on policy which can be seen recently in Myanmar and Thailand.

Youth in Cambodia also participated by voicing their opinions on specific government policies. For example, some youth in Cambodia participated in politics through garment workers' unions who mostly have young members. They tried to influence the government through complaints and negotiation to ensure garment workers' welfare is promoted.

Through the discussion above, there appears to be less apathy among youth when it comes to participating in politics in AMSs, both through conventional and unconventional forms. However, their representation as members of parliament in both chambers is still quite low.

4. Barriers to Youth Political Participation in ASEAN

Through the discussion above, it shows that the growing trend of youth involvement in politics in ASEAN has been significant recently after the rapid growth of technology including social media. However, youth political participation, especially their representation in the political institutions of their country remains low. This indicates that there are still barriers for youth in ASEAN to engage in politics. It is difficult to identify the common barriers to youth political participation for the 10 countries with different economies, political systems, cultures and religions plus data limitations. However, this paper tries to highlight some barriers which limit youth to actively participate in politics in some countries in ASEAN.

Firstly, there is the issue of cultural norms of hierarchy, where age and position is very strong in Cambodia[33]. That is, the lower position has to follow decisions made by the higher without question, and youth needs to listen and respect the elders; the decisions are left to the elders [33]. This cultural norm might also be a common practice in other countries in ASEAN, because Asian culture encourages young people have to listen and respect their elders. In addition to this, gender norms might be a key challenge for youth, mainly female youth, in participating in elections. For example, the PSI party in Indonesia is headed by a young woman, and half of its members are women. Unfortunately, the party has not gained a seat in parliament which is relatively common in Indonesian politics where voters value male over female candidates[34]. Cultural norms including gender discrimination have not encouraged an enabling environment for young people, especially female youth, to be involved in decision – making including political decisions.

Secondly, the political and public health environment has limited space for youth participation in politics. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, governments in ASEAN have prioritized addressing Covid 19 rather than others. For example, rallies, protests or demonstrations have been banned in some instances. This has limited the discussion among youth about politics. Furthermore, while increasing the use of social media and internet by the youth activists to engage in politics, there have been increasing restrictions from some governments in AMS including the arrests of the young activists leading to reduction of posting and sharing their views on the social media[36].

Thirdly, the low participation of youth in ASEAN could be a result of the poor economic level of their family, where earning to survive is more prioritized than participating in political activities.

Lastly, limited education and experience could lead ASEAN youth to be reluctant in participating in politics. They do not have confidence to speak or to stand as candidates. A supporting and encouraging mechanism is needed to ensure youth obtain sufficient capacity to meaningfully participate in politics.

5. Roles of Parliament to Increase Youth Political Participation in ASEAN

Although there has been progress of youth political participation in ASEAN both in conventional and non-conventional forms recently, it still remains low. Their participation in decision making is low, and they are an underrepresented group in elected bodies. While youth is the largest share of population in ASEAN, their representation in parliament is very low ‘exacerbating the democracy deficit.’¹² Youth in ASEAN are also facing further issues as reflected in section 4 which requires more policy actions taken by all stakeholders to address. Parliament could play a very significant role to promote youth participation in politics in ASEAN. According to a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2018 on Youth Participation in National Parliaments, parliament can promote youth political participation through various mechanisms which are as follow:

First, Members of Parliament of AMSs through their political party could encourage the party to establish a youth wing. If it already exists, the MPs could encourage their party to provide greater support to them through actions such as nominating candidates to compete in the election at both national and sub-national levels, and providing space to engage with the leadership of the political party as well as having them participate in nominating candidates. Gender considerations could also be taken into account in youth candidate nominations.

Second, MPs could consider a youth quota for parliamentary seats. Inclusion of gender could also be promoted. However, when gender and youth quotas are included for consideration, the quota for young and older women needs to be taken into account. The quotas established for these two groups should be differentiated; otherwise, the two groups would be still underrepresented in the elected bodies due to double counting.

Table 5.1 shows youth quotas of selected countries. For example, it shows that the reserved seats for youth (aged under 35) quota in the parliament of Rwanda is 7.7%, and gender parity is required for reserved seats for youth. Whereas, the Philippines and Nicaragua take a mixed approach, creating a single quota for youth and gender. In the Philippines, the quota is imposed by the law on all political parties (legislated quota) where 50% of the candidates in the proportional representation party lists shall be from different sectors, including youth. While in Nicaragua, the quota adopted by political parties combines a 40% quota for women and youth together. In another approach, the youth and gender quotas are applied in a parallel but separate fashion as in Mexico, the electoral law requires gender parity among the candidates, but apart from that, quotas for youth have also been adopted by two political parties (30 % for women and 20% for youth). See details in the **Table 5.1** below

Table 5.1: Youth Quotas in the Parliaments of Some Countries

| Country | Quota type | Age group | %Quota | Gender | % under age 30 | % under age 40 |
|------------|------------|-----------|--------|----------|----------------|----------------|
| Rwanda | Reserved | Under 35 | 7.7% | Embedded | 1.3 | 22.5 |
| Philippine | Legislated | Unknown | 50 | Mixed | 1.7 | 15.8 |
| Nicaragua | Party | Unknown | 40 | Mixed | 1.1 | 14.1 |
| Sweden | Party | Under 35 | 25 | Separate | 12.3 | 34.1 |
| Mexico | Party | Under 30 | 30, 20 | Separate | 7.6 | 35.7 |

Source: [1]

Even with the youth quota in some countries, it is observed that youth representation for those under age 30 is quite low. One of the reasons for this might result from candidate nomination where not many

¹² This term is used in the IPU in its study on youth participation in National Parliaments in 2018.

candidates under 30 are nominated to compete in the election. Another reason may be that the required candidacy age is a bit higher; for example, the required candidacy age for Senator in Cambodia is 40.

Third, while most chambers in AMSs have women’s caucuses, youth caucuses have not been established. Parliament could take the opportunity to set up youth caucuses to deal with issues affecting youth, especially those concerning social welfare and political participation, and advocate for solutions. **Table 5.2** shows youth caucuses that have been established in parliaments of selected countries.

Table 5.2: Youth Caucuses in the Parliament in Some Countries

| Country | Caucus |
|-------------------|--|
| Australia | Parliamentary Friends of Youth Mental Health |
| India | Parliamentary Forum on Youth |
| Israel | Caucus to Promote Youth Policies |
| Sweden | Parliamentary Network for Youth Perspectives in Politics |
| Republic of Korea | Resources/Youth Plan 2.0 |

Source: [1]

Lastly, MPs, especially parliamentary committee members in AMSs which are responsible for youth issues could encourage government to take more actions to improve the situation for youth in AMS in both rural and urban areas in order for them to have equal opportunity to access decent employment, good education, and other youth social welfare issues through its public hearing process and/or adopting/proposing laws which benefits youth, as well as raising awareness on the importance of youth representation in politics.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, youth political participation in ASEAN has recently come to the attention of AMSs. The demographic evolution has made this age group the largest share of the population and, in turn, they have become the cohort that can have an influence on all sectors including politics in ASEAN. They actively participate in the politics in ASEAN through both conventional and non-conventional forms.

Conventional forms include participating in elections, joining political parties and establishing their own political parties.

Youth in ASEAN also participate in politics through non-conventional forms. Through the rapid development of technology, it has provided more space for youth in ASEAN to actively participate in politics and they have used social media to express their political views. Additionally, youth have also actively participated in politics through demonstrations to voice their opinions on government policies.

Though political participation of youth in ASEAN is improved significantly, their presence in elected bodies is very low, even though they are the largest share of the total population. This may be a result of cultural norms of hierarchy and gender norms rooted in Asian society, economic factors, low education and less experience. The higher age candidacy requirements may also be the reason why youth have trouble becoming parliamentarians.

Members of Parliament can contribute to promoting youth political participation through their three main functions (representation, legislation and oversight). They can encourage their political party to establish a youth wing, provide them with an opportunity to be involved in the nomination of candidates, and appoint them to decision making levels within the party including providing them with sufficient resources to undertake their activities. MPs could also introduce a youth quota policy with gender inclusion and establish a youth caucus in parliament. Finally, MPs could adopt/propose laws and policies which improve youth social welfare, and raising awareness among political parties and parliament about the benefits of youth political participation.

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