Thailand’s 2020s Youth-Led Anti-Government Movement from The Lens of High School Students

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Abstract

The current Thai youth (aged 12-18) have grown up in a series of political change and polarization. In 2020, resentment towards the junta government exploded in student-led protests revived not only at the university but also high-school and middle-school levels. This paper investigates political and economic factors that provoke the movement. In particular, we highlight the Thai youth’s aspirations for their political participation through the lens of 691 Thai high school students together with the analysis on relevant literature. This paper qualitatively analyzes 691 letters written by Thai high school students from diverse backgrounds to reflect upon their hopes and fears for Thailand’s political future and explain why their civic engagement is personally, socially, and politically important.

Keywords: high school; political conflict; social movements; youth participation; Thailand

Introduction

Following a massive wave of protests in Hong Kong, Thai youth protesters have taken to the streets to demand democracy, freedom of speech, and an end to political repression. While in Hong Kong it was the Chinese Communist Party tightening its grip on the semi-autonomous city; in Thailand, it is the junta government and harsh lèse-majesté laws. To offer an interpretation of Thailand’s youth-led protest movement, this paper provides a background of events through readings of the movement’s wider literature. It discusses factors and aspirations for Thai youth’s political participation including, political, economic, and socio-cultural factors. To this end, we assigned a non-graded homework called "A Letter to Bridge the Divide" to approximately 700 high school students representing Bangkok and three regions in Thailand. High school students were asked to write letters to friends, teachers, or adults who hold different political views. The youth feel that not only do they have a distinct voice and point of view that should be taken seriously, but also that it is completely within their prerogative and fundamental rights to express their political views and try to shape the future.
Background of the events

Current Thai youth (aged 12-18) have grown up in this political change and polarization. Resentment towards the junta government, and its alleged silencing of dissidents, had been brewing for seven years. This dissatisfaction exploded in protests, many at university campuses in March 2020 (‘Student Flash Protests’, 2020). After the COVID-19 lockdown, student-led protests revived not only at the university but also high-school and middle-school levels. These students express their solidarity with anti-government protests in creative ways, such as wearing white ribbons and raising the three-finger "Hunger Games" salute during the national anthem (Wongcha-um, 2020). A hashtag that translates as #WhiteRibbonAgainstDictatorship was used nearly 1 million times on Twitter in August 2020 (‘Thai Students “Hunger Games” Protests’, 2020). The situation escalated after a mass rally on October 14, 2020, when the government declared a state of emergency in Bangkok. Protests continued daily despite the ban, leading to a crackdown by the Royal Thai police on October 16, 2020 using water cannons on Pathumwan junction (Neuman, 2020). A series of warrants and arrests of student leaders inflated youth anger and pushed high-school students to be more politically active (‘The names of 15 student protest leaders’, 2020). Yet, protests by the youth have upset some teachers and school administrators. In response, several schools sent out official letters prohibiting their students from participating in the protests. A school announced that students who do not comply would have to withdraw from the school (‘Rajini School’, 2020). Many high schools have reaffirmed their policy to remain neutral in political matters, prohibiting political gatherings on school grounds.

Much research remains to be conducted on Thailand’s 2020-2021 youth participation in politics. McCargo (2021) has conducted surveys on the current wave of youth activism. More in-depth studies by Lertchoosakul (2021) and Sinpeng (2021) throw light on different aspects of the movement. Lertchoosakul (2021) interviews both university and high school students at protest sites and finds that dissatisfaction of the education system, corruption, and inequality in Thai society are the main reasons driving the protests. On the other hand, Sinpeng (2021) analyzes the use of Twitter in the current political movement. She argues that social media is mostly used to air grievances and categorizes the tweets into six topics: democracy, youth rights, education, government opposition, the economy, and the Thai Monarchy. Our study, which engages students outside the protests and off Twitter, offers an important and complementary perspective to these two pieces of work. We also expand the focus from just on the students to the generational conflict between them and the adults in their lives.

Methodology to investigate youth aspiration for the political participation

We reached out to high school teachers from different provinces in Thailand to assign "A Letter to Bridge the Divide" as non-graded homework. Each student writes a letter to teachers, parents, adults, or peers who hold different political views while reflecting upon their hopes and fears for Thailand's political future and why the movement is important to them. The students have the right to opt-out of the research or leave the homework blank without consequence. The recruitment process does not exclude the participants based on their gender,
class, or race. The teachers manage the homework assignments and send them to the researchers. Therefore, the high school students' personal data are anonymized.

A total of 691 letters were submitted. The students behind these letters come from various regions and different grades in high school (Table 1). Thailand is divided into five main regions: central, north, northeastern, eastern, and southern. While we do not have data from the northern and southern regions, we believe that our dataset is sufficiently diverse to offer an adequate snapshot of the country's various opinions and perspectives. In fact, only roughly 5% of our sample is from Bangkok, which gives our study a decided advantage in understanding and giving a voice to students outside the capital, who may have been previously overlooked in the recent coverage of students' political activism.

Voices from the youth: Reasons for their participation

In this section, we identify the factors Thai high school students engage in youth participation. These include political and economic factors. It is important to note that not all students are supportive of the protests. Roughly around 27% of the letters indicate their neutral stance by writing: 'I'm not taking sides;' "I'm neutral and reasonable;'"I understand that a lot of my friends want to express their stances. I think it's their right to do so. I don't think we can always agree, but we have to respect each other. It's only natural in a democratic society." Less than 3% are supportive of the government.

Political factors

Over 232 students (33.5%) across all four regions point to "mismanagement" or "inability to run the country" of the Prayut government as the main factor for their civic participation. They list various reasons for this assessment, including the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, scandalous political figures, and restricting freedom of speech.

The students believe that the Prayut government is incompetent in handling the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, a student from the northeastern region criticizes the delay in imposing travel restrictions at the start of the pandemic when Thailand was still welcoming large numbers of foreign tourists. According to another student from Bangkok, the government's economic relief measures are not wide-reaching enough, leaving many poor without necessary aid.

Moreover, 111 high school students (16%) are concerned with widespread corruption, lack of transparency in the government. Among general corruption claims, two of the most frequently cited examples of corruption are the widely-disputed results of the 2016 referendum and 2019 election. A student argues that the vote in favor of the new constitution in the 2016 referendum is dubious and unjust. People who campaigned against the constitution were threatened with prison sentences under the government's vague charges (‘Thailand Constitutional Referendum’, 2016). Similarly, multiple students cast doubt on the legitimacy of the 2019 election, especially on the 250 Prayut-appointed senators who all cast their vote for Prayut as Prime Minister. This has led many students to discredit the democratic elements of the current regime and conclude that their fight to topple the Prayut government is a fight for true democracy. As one high school student put it: "We are fighting against dictatorship. The
government is not fair. It has a constitution that was designed to help the dictatorial government hold on to power."

Another common rhetoric is to point to ministers who have had scandals but are still in power. For instance, a student refers to Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan’s many luxury watches, which he claims to have borrowed from a friend (Nanuam, 2018). The same student asks, “Do you like having a drug-dealing minister who claims that [heroin] was flour?” This comment is about Thammanat Prompaw (Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives), who was jailed in Australia for importing heroin, but later declared that he was only transporting flour (‘Australian Report’, 2019).

Economic factors

Another commonly listed factor in students’ letters is prolonged economic hardships. A student states, "of course it is about the economy." Many point to the fact that the current government has been in power for six years, and they feel that their families are worse off than before the coup, citing low agricultural prices and high costs of living. A student brings up news of individuals who, unable to pay their creditors, tragically committed suicide.

74 students (11%) specifically identify rising inequality one of the main problems of the status quo. A student from Bangkok summarizes the issue as, "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer." Lertchoosakul also touches upon inequality as a driver of student political activism. Her interviewees tend to focus on unequal access to education, while our participants are more cognizant of various types of inequality (Lertchoosakul, 2021, p. 8).

Our research demonstrates that Thai youth are becoming increasingly aware of this inequality and demand better redistribution of the country's resources. The youth point to old buses, timeworn public transport, and poorly paved sidewalks and roads as signs that the state neglects rural areas. For instance, a student from Rayong province writes, "You [the government] should use the money you spent on submarines to improve our extremely old buses." 13 students from rural provinces ask why they do not have a similar infrastructure to the BTS sky train and subway (MRT) like Bangkok even though they pay the same taxes as those in the capital. Though the BTS was constructed and is operated by a private company through a government concession, the MRT is managed by the Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand, a public organization. The students are questioning not only Bangkok's economic dominance, but also the political economy that allows a disproportionate amount of the country's resources to be spent in the capital.

This line of thought demonstrates that the students see a relationship between politics, economics, and quality of life. They believe that if their political participation can make the necessary modifications happen in managing the country's resources, economic inequality could decrease.

Implications and Conclusion

To conclude, this study investigates Thai high school students' civic participation and analyzes their motivations and justification for this participation through their own written words. The results demonstrate that the students see many deep-rooted issues with the status quo and believe that their political activism can make essential changes to the Thai political
landscape. The youth also feel that not only do they have a distinct voice and point of view that should be taken seriously, but also that it is completely within their prerogative and fundamental rights to express their political views and try to shape the future in which they will have to be adults.

As in recent years, youth participation has become highly apparent across Asia and throughout the world. Youth have been the vanguard of organizing grassroots and online movements to effect national change at all levels. From Greta Thunberg, Hong Kong’s Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill strike, United States’ #BlackLivesMatter rallies, to the recent Myanmar’s Spring Revolution against the military coup d'état, the youth have been catalysts for the political and social change. The youth believe strongly that youth civic participation is vital. Thus, they must play a role and have the right to voice their opinions and concerns. The youth believe that they have a right to speak out against what they perceive as inappropriate, whether it is corruption, ineffective use of tax money, economic inequality, or social disparities. Even the students who don't necessarily agree with the protest also have the right to show their stance. To achieve a truly democratic society, youth must practice their fundamental rights to express their opinions. Their point of view and political voice deserves to be heard by those in power though they cannot cast a ballot.

The implications of our study are thus wide-reaching. For Thailand, public figures who have come out to question whether high school students truly understand national issues can rest assured that the students hold complex and justifiable political opinions and views of the world. Those in power should, therefore, at least heed if not welcome the youth’s political opinions and let them truly have a voice in society. Other countries must also recognize the importance of listening to the voices of young people as they are capable, competent, and the future.

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Table 1. Descriptive data of participants.