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Rhizomatic Protest, Generational Affinity and Digital Refuge: Southeast Asia's New Youth Movements

Yatun Sastramidjaja

INTRODUCTION

Across Southeast Asia, already weak democracies are being eroded by the reconsolidation of authoritarian regimes and concomitant shrinking of civic space for dissent. At the same time, the region witnesses the rise of a new generation of activist youth, pioneering new movements that mount a significant challenge to authoritarianism and the political norms sustaining it. In doing so, they experiment with digitally mediated modes of action, which facilitate inclusive participation and allow them to forge new linkages across national and sectoral borders, hence generating new assemblages of protest that extend across or beyond the region, bound together by shared imaginations of generational struggle.

These characteristics reflect the “rhizomatic” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) nature of contemporary youth movements. Rather than sprouting from the single “root” of national histories of student mobilisation, they form a

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heterogeneous assemblage with multiple origins, expanding in multiple directions and connecting nodes of youth activism in novel ways. One effect of rhizomatic connections is cross-fertilisation of protest issues and repertoires, as activist youth in different locations and social positions learn from each other's experiences, and adopt and adapt each other's tactics, imagery and protest discourse. This spurs new solidarity networks based on a strong sense of generational affinity—of belonging to the same generational resistance to authoritarianism and sharing the same political values—which heightens their resilience to the repression, criminalisation and delegitimation of their protest in each of their countries. It allows them to take refuge in shared virtual “spaces of hope”—i.e., spaces that enable “utopian imaginings” and sustain the hope that change *is* possible (Harvey, 2000)—and through these spaces carry on their struggle.

However, the rise of *digital* authoritarianism across the region—i.e., the use of digital technologies and cyber-controls to facilitate authoritarian governance (Dragu & Lupu, 2021; McDermott, 2022; Sinpeng, 2019)—is also threatening those spaces. Repressive cyber-laws, cyber-surveillance and attacks by regime-affiliated cyber troops are making it difficult to sustain protest even online. How activist youth navigate these threats, while striving to give substance to the values they fight for, demonstrates their potential not only to counter the shrinking of civic space, but also to reconfigure norms and practices of democratic citizenship.

To assess this potential, this chapter discusses the cases of Indonesia (2019–20), Thailand (2020–21) and Myanmar (2021–22), and the affinity networks evolving among them. In these countries, tens of thousands of youth have taken to the streets, and countless more to social media, spurring a broad resistance to authoritarian governance. Violent repression made them rely all the more on digital spaces, especially as the protests coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Reliance on digital spaces confronted them with a cybersphere already colonised by digital authoritarianism. Yet, activist youth continually find ways to dodge cyber-repression, while leveraging digital connectivity to collectively reimagine the democratic futures they wish to see within their generation.

DIGITALLY MEDIATED YOUTH RESISTANCE

Recent anti-regime protests have spotlighted a new youth culture of protest in Asia (Farrelly, 2021), which evolved since the early 2010s, in conjunction with the popularity of social media, and partly inspired by the “Arab Spring” uprisings and the Occupy movements that spread from Wall Street to other parts of the world. Within Asia, Hong Kong's 2011–12 Occupy Central with Love and Peace and 2014 Umbrella Movement were especially influential in shaping new protest cultures, establishing digital mediation as a vital part of civil resistance to authoritarianism. Beyond instrumental uses of social media, this digital mediation spurred novel participatory modes of protest (Lee &

Chan, 2016), engendering an “insurgent public sphere” that spread beyond the movement’s boundaries and life-span (Lee et al., 2015), and further expanded to, and blended with, emerging protest cultures elsewhere in Asia.

In Southeast Asia, this new protest culture marked a break with the historical tradition of student movements that had pioneered key political events—from anti-colonial struggles, to regime overthrows in Indonesia in 1966 and 1998, and in Thailand in 1973, and the People Power uprisings in the Philippines in 1986 and in Myanmar in 1988. Despite this legacy, in recent decades the role of student movements declined due to their suppression, pacification and normative delegitimation in the context of state consolidation (Weiss, 2011; Weiss & Aspinall, 2012). Pockets of anti-authoritarian student activism persisted, but in countries such as Cambodia it was practically eliminated in tandem with the co-optation of youth by regime-affiliated mass organisations (Norén-Nilsson, 2021a). In other countries, such as Indonesia, student movements lost their appeal due to the weight of their “rootedness” in national history; this positioned them in a mythologised role in accordance with the official narrative of the nation-state, which limited them to fixed repertoires of action tied to a circumscribed elitist student identity (Sastramidjaja, 2019). Those fixed roles and repertoires no longer appealed to succeeding young generations, whose political identifications greatly diversified.

The youth driving Southeast Asia’s recent protests share two formative experiences: they grew up with the contradictory demands of a post-developmental neoliberal climate blending awkwardly with illiberal governance, and they were born into the age of digital communications. In the past decade, Southeast Asian governments have invested heavily in the digital economy as a key engine of future growth, ideologically grooming youth for a role as “high-quality human resources” that will accomplish their nation’s “Industry 4.0” ambitions. However, the promise of a high-quality economy contrasts sharply with precarious labour conditions in the growing start-up and “gig” economy and other private sectors marked by flexibilisation, as well as with the poor public facilities and illiberal climate that frustrate young people’s notions of quality lives. Rampant corruption and an anachronistic political culture that has failed to evolve beyond its old regime origins further deepen young people’s political disaffection and estrangement from governing elites. At the same time, state investments in digital infrastructures entail that ever more youth, not only in the metropolises, grow up with access to digital communications. “Being digital” thereby becomes an intrinsic part of their identity and everyday life, especially as the boundaries between being “online” and “offline” dissolve with the rise of affordable smartphones.

Digital connectivity is known to stimulate heightened civic engagement among youth (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013), if only by facilitating familiarity with the social and political issues filling their social media feeds, especially when shared and discussed by peers. It thus facilitates alternative, organic forms of political education that make the political feel more personal. Particularly, online exposure to youth-driven protests in different settings and

locations attunes them to an array of contemporary *generational* concerns with justice and rights, and associated narrative frames—e.g., “youth for climate justice”, or “youth against dictatorship”—which also help them to make sense of grievances in their own surroundings. This enables “new political imaginaries”, which predispose youth to novel forms of political engagement and action (Bessant, 2014).

Accordingly, contemporary youth protests share a set of innovative characteristics. This includes fluid modes of organisation based on peer-to-peer mobilisation, participatory modes of action that alternate and blend virtual and physical protest repertoires, the linking of local and global actors and audiences, and eclectic imaginaries of cultural as well as political change (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Lim, 2018; Soep, 2014). The “rhizomatic” rather than “rooted” nature of the protests—which lack a single leadership, or single tradition to follow—creates the sense of an organic community, congregating around a unified purpose of “change” that transcends particular goals and targets (Lim, 2017). This allows them to circumvent the social and political fault lines that have hitherto hampered democracy efforts, particularly so in Southeast Asia’s deeply divided societies. Ultimately, they do not merely target specific policies or political elites but question the very foundations of authoritarian regimes, including their oligarchic power base in the nation’s economy and hegemony of political norms and culture. This makes them all the more threatening to these regimes.

Hence, these protest movements often meet with strong repression. This includes cyber-repression, as Southeast Asia’s cyber-laws are used increasingly to prosecute regime critics and stifle dissent (Sombatpoonsiri and Luong, 2022). In addition, ruling elites attempt to buttress their power by means of cyber-propaganda, both through regime-affiliated digital news media (Norén-Nilsson, 2021b) and the deployment of cyber troops to manipulate public opinion, delegitimize protest and attack opponents on social media. Either in the form of obscure army divisions, as in Thailand and Vietnam, or shady networks organised by political brokers that employ masses of fake account operators, as in Indonesia and the Philippines, cyber troops that target civilian opposition are found in seven ASEAN countries, including the aforementioned countries, Cambodia, Malaysia and Myanmar (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Southeast Asia’s cybersphere is increasingly unsafe for dissent, which poses a challenge to digitally mediated movements. The ramifications were especially felt in Indonesia, where mass protests in 2019 and 2020 were subdued by police repression as well as cyber-laws and cyber troops, which also contributed to the suppression of protests in Thailand in 2020–21 and in Myanmar in 2021.

Yet, in all three countries, the clampdown failed to silence protesters, who continue to find refuge in digital spaces. Moreover, activist youth demonstrate an evolving capacity to enact digital connectivity not only to articulate protest, but also to reconfigure political norms and practices in ways that are not easily suppressed. As discussed in the following sections, the protests in Indonesia

represented a “coming out” of the new protest culture in the region, highlighting not only digital mediation (which previously also shaped Malaysia’s Bersih 2.0 and 3.0 protests in 2011–12) but also youthful autonomy and critique of systemic injustice. The subsequent protests in Thailand further developed the possibilities of digital mediation, building on lessons learned from Hong Kong to heighten resilience to repression. Finally, the protests in Myanmar—and its instant embeddedness in the #MilkTeaAlliance—portended the revolutionary potential of Southeast Asia’s rhizomatic youth movements by starting to break down barriers to inclusive democratic futures.

INDONESIA’S HASHTAG-DRIVEN RESISTANCE

In August 2019, four months after President Joko Widodo’s (“Jokowi”) re-election in April, Indonesian social media began buzzing with calls for action, using the hashtag #ReformasiDikorupsi, “reform corrupted”. The hashtag referred to the bill for revision of the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which would transform Indonesia’s hitherto autonomous anti-graft body into a closely monitored government agency. But it also referred to other contested policies. This included the bill for revision of the Criminal Code, which critics viewed as a veiled curtailment of civil liberties, due to articles that marked blasphemy, defamation and insulting the state or the president’s honour as criminal offences, carrying heavy sentences, and further penalised “immoral” acts in the private sphere, including extra-marital consensual sex and co-habitation. As the hashtag gained momentum in September—building towards the outgoing parliament’s final session on 30 September, in which the contested bills would be ratified—it became clear that the netizens sharing it were not only concerned about those pieces of legislation. Many cited broader injustices and power abuses, indicating their discontent with Indonesia’s democracy. On social media, their grievances converged in the notion that Indonesia was about to “return to authoritarianism”.

Many of these netizens once held high hopes for Jokowi’s agenda of “total reform”. A majority of young voters supported him in the 2014 presidential election, and previously the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election, believing in his capacity to break once and for all with the relics of the New Order (1966–1998) and bring about real change. However, many lost faith once Jokowi’s promise of social justice and human rights agenda was sacrificed for his neoliberal economics and pragmatic alliances with the old elites. By 2017—following the imprisonment of then Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, Jokowi’s former ally, on charges of blasphemy—young people’s hopes that progressive change could come from the government evaporated. Thus, in the April 2019 elections, Jokowi received less enthusiastic support from young voters, although many still elected him on the ballot, seeing him as the “lesser of two evils” compared with his rival Prabowo Subianto, a former New Order general and known human rights offender, whose alliance with fundamentalist Islamic

groups made progressive Indonesians anxious. After the election, in October 2019, Prabowo still received a key position in Jokowi's Cabinet as the Defence Minister. It left young voters all the more appalled with the political establishment. By then, however, they had made their opposition loud and clear in Indonesia's first social media-driven protest movement.

The online warming up for action proved to have tremendous effect. In the last week of September, tens of thousands of youth staged nationwide protests against the two contested bills and other policies; it was the largest protest since the 1998 student protest (Sastramidjaja, 2020). While the majority of protesters in September 2019 were students, the protest was not initiated by student organisations but by a loose coalition of non-governmental organisations, which in recent years had experienced a marked rejuvenation in their membership and a variety of activist youth collectives that had emerged since the mid-2000s around specific issues and identities *as* youth. Since none of these groups claimed leadership, it lowered the threshold for first-time protesters to join the action, online and on the streets. To encourage their participation, activists used popular cartoon figures and funny memes in their online calls for action. Such gentle stimulation combined effectively with ordinary youth's desire to express their discontent; many were genuinely worried about the prospect of a return to authoritarianism, even if they had never experienced authoritarian New Order rule.

The press dubbed the protest *Angkatan* (Generation) of 2019—using the term commonly reserved for Indonesia's major student movements of the past, and framing it as the heir to the Angkatan 1998. However, students on the ground rejected the notion of such lineage; some protest signs even mocked the Angkatan 1998, criticising its members' absence in the protest and their "betrayal" of the struggle for reform, as many former student activists of that generation had joined the ruling establishment. Rather than identifying as a traditional student movement, the students on the streets felt they represented a novel type of movement. One viral meme captured the sentiment well: it pictured two gloved hands striking fists—one fist represented the "serious students", the other "meme-loving-students"—to create a cartoonish bang with the statement "Reject the Criminal Code bill!" While the "serious" group, or activists, contributed political expertise and in-depth understanding of the disputed legislations, the "meme-loving" group contributed tech-savviness, fresh ideas and creative skills, providing the mass energy for the multi-mediated protest. This merging of peer-to-peer strengths, as the meme suggests, creates extraordinary power.

The mass turnout was indeed spurred by online peer mobilisation, which also affected the character of the protest. Rather than a disciplined mass of students, a heterogeneous multitude was out on the streets, bringing their own protest signs that were filled with popular culture references and the internet humour of a digital generation; many of the signs featured added hashtags that implied viral intent. Those eye-catching signs amplified the spectacle of the protest, while making it identifiable to ordinary youth. One group

that stood out in this multitude were “K-poppers”, known for their fanatic engagement with Korean pop fandom on social media. Online, they helped to raise #ReformasiDikorupsi and related hashtags onto Twitter’s trending topics. On the streets, they contributed unique protest images and slogans, such as “I ♥ BTS [K-pop band] but I ♥ justice even more. #K-Poppers won’t remain silent!” Across Asia and globally, the K-pop fandom is known to frequently engage in advocacy and activism, using their mass presence on social media to boost online protests or to raise funds for offline movements through fan-based crowdfunding (Andini & Akhni, 2021). However it is less common for K-poppers to join protests physically. Their visible presence on the streets in Jakarta and other Indonesian cities—and soon also in Thailand and Myanmar—thus signalled a coming out of the “new youth culture of protest” in Southeast Asia.

Other young netizens that took to the streets also added new flavours to the protest. This included the adoption of one-liners seen in youth protests elsewhere in the world—often written in English, or combined with Indonesian—indicating affinity to global dispositions of contemporary youth activism. Examples include: “Error 404: democracy not found”, “I’ve seen better Cabinets at IKEA”, or “RUU KUHP & RUU KPK [Criminal Code & KPK bills] is so fucked up, even introverts like me join the protest [in English]. #RejectRUUKPK&RUUKUHP [in Indonesian]. #WeStand-WithKPK” [in English]”. Many protest signs also contained explicit sexual references, expressing anger at the impingement on sexual freedoms proposed in the Criminal Code bill, or at the government’s stalling of the anti-sexual violence bill, which was another main protest issue. The prevalence of these signs seemed to correlate with the substantial presence of young women in the protest, as well as LGBTQ activists. Indeed, as a prequel to this protest, the same issues had been raised in the Women’s March Jakarta rally in April 2019, which had emphasised intersectional solidarity among women’s, LGBTQ, human rights, labour, environmental and indigenous struggles. The explicit character of that rally now echoed in this protest. For example, one sign stated, in English, “I don’t need sex, the government is fucking me right now”, adding an Indonesian-language hashtag, #JanganMauDiperkosaNegara, “refuse to be raped by the state”. Such bold statements—considered highly improper in Indonesia’s public sphere—served to scoff at government policy and to signal generational ideological distancing from the conservative ruling elites. By transgressing the norms of propriety, they manifested their embodiment of opposing political norms and refusal to have their bodies disciplined by repressive legislation.

Due to the eclectic nature of the protest, cheeky protest signs blended organically with serious political messages, which helped inexperienced participants grasp the extent of the protest. For example, one sign listed multiple grievances, implying these were all connected: “Women are raped; KPK is weakened; Forests are razed; Papua is colonised; Land is sold out to investors; Farmers are evicted; Workers are exploited; Privacy is at risk; Democracy is

undermined; Will the people be silenced? NO. RESIST!!!” As this illustrates, a notable characteristic of the protest was that it conjoined various issues into a single cause of resistance, thus exposing the underlying systemic injustice. This was also apparent in the nine demands issued by the Yogyakarta-based Alliance of People’s Mobilisation, listed under the hashtag #GejayanMemanggil, “Gejayan calling” (referring to a junction linking various universities in Yogyakarta, which in 1998 was the scene of deadly clash between students and security forces):

1. Stop all repression and criminalisation of people’s movements;
2. Withdraw all military units, thoroughly investigate human rights violations, and fully open up democratic space in Papua;
3. Tackle disasters and protect its victims; arrest and put on trial tycoons and corporations responsible for forest fires; revoke their Land Cultivation Permits and stop issuing new permits to large plantation corporations;
4. Revoke the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission;
5. Revoke the Law on Sustainable Agricultural Cultivation Systems;
6. Immediately ratify the Bill on the Eradication of Sexual Violence;
7. Revise problematic articles in the Criminal Code bill, and review them with the involvement of various civil society groups;
8. Reject the Defence Bill, Employment Bill, Cyber Security Bill & Minerals and Coal Bill;
9. End and investigate all human rights violations and put perpetrators to trial.

The juxtaposition of these issues under a single hashtag indicated that, given the systemic links between them, protest on any of these issues implied resistance on all others. This message resonated with the uncompromising disposition of contemporary youth cultures of protest, hence young participants readily embraced it. However, it was difficult to digest for the traditional student movement, represented by the national union of Student Executive Bodies (BEM) that was dominated by Islamic organisations with ties to political parties. For the BEM union, at least two of the demands crossed the line: the issue of the anti-sexual violence bill (which conservative government and opposition parties framed as “sexual liberty” bill), and the issue of Papua, where the army waged bloody operations against separatists and activists branded as “terrorist”. After the first days of the protest, the BEM union withdrew its support.

Activist students continued the protest, but their participation was soon discredited by disinformation being spread about them, including rumours of secret funding from political actors seeking to topple Jokowi’s government (Savirani & Ersada, forthcoming). In fact, the protesters purposely refrained from targeting Jokowi, arguing it was irrelevant who was in power as long as the system of power—including the corrupt political culture that

served to protect oligarchic interests—remained intact. Still, rumours about the protesters' questionable motives persisted, as did rumours that questioned the KPK's integrity. Cyber troops were at work to amplify these rumours and discredit the protest.

CYBER PROTEST VS CYBER TROOPS: ACCELERATION AND REPRESSION

One week before the KPK Law revision was ratified, social media saw a sudden surge in the hashtag #KPKTaliban; cyber troops were spreading the rumour that the KPK was a “hotbed of Taliban-like extremists”, which justified government control (Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto, 2022). Concurrently, KPK members and activists protesting the revision became targets of cyber-terror; many received anonymous phone threats, were trolled on social media, or had their phones and social media accounts hacked (Wijayanto & Sardini, 2022). Some activists were arrested for violating the Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law.

The cyber-repression occurred in tandem with the violent dispersion of the street protests; at least five university and high-school students died in clashes with the police. The violence effectively deterred participation; by October the protests dwindled. However, in Jakarta, one group persisted: high-school pupils from non-prestigious technical schools, who were not afraid to face the police. The police labelled them “rioters, not demonstrators”, who were allegedly incited by fake WhatsApp messages to create “anarchy”, which justified police action. Yet, rather than rejecting the teenage “rioters” as alien to the movement, activists hailed them as heroic symbols of a militant new generation. This was attested by a news photograph (taken by photojournalist Garry Lotulung and published in *Kompas* newspaper, on 25 September 2019) of a high-school protester, later identified as Lutfi Alfiandi, shielding himself from tear gas with the Indonesian flag. It became the movement's iconic image, which went viral on social media until long after the protest ended, especially as Lutfi was arrested for allegedly desacralising the national flag and sentenced to four months prison. On social media, the image served to remind peers that the struggle had only begun. Indeed, Lutfi himself shared the photo on his Instagram account, with a message of hope that this collective action by school youth will keep them united in solidarity to create a better future.

Following minimal concessions from the government, which deferred a decision on the Criminal Code, the focus shifted to the Omnibus Bill for Job Creation, which was announced in Jokowi's inaugural speech for his second term on 20 October 2019. Aimed to streamline legislation on labour and investment, the bill was strongly criticised by labour unions, civil society organisations, and activists overall, fearing its detrimental impact on labour rights (in particular for working women) and the environment due to provisions on the flexibilisation of layoff rules and minimum wages and loosened requirements on industries for environmental impact assessment (Lane, 2020). Activists

began planning for fresh protests, rallying under the hashtags #TolakOmnibusLaw, “reject the Omnibus Law”, and #MosiTidakPercaya, “vote of no confidence”.

When the action plans were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, activists quickly adapted by accelerating protests online. Twitter actions were especially popular, as Twitter’s trending topics offered a useful platform for mass expressions of dissent. For example, on 23 March 2020, a concerted Twitter action successfully raised the hashtags #TolakOmnibuslaw, #MosiTidakPercaya and related hashtags onto Twitter’s global top trending list, with around one million tweets for each of these hashtags. Netizens joining the action also used the linked hashtags #LockdownDPR, “lockdown the Parliament”, and #dirumahaja, “just stay home”, denoting “protest from home”, thus cleverly playing on the pandemic to indicate that it did not stop the resistance. Other Twitter actions similarly integrated the pandemic into protest discourse, with such slogans as “Omnibus Law and COVID-19 = Common Enemy: #CancelOmnibusLaw and #FocusOnHandlingThePandemic”. By September 2020, messages rejecting the Omnibus Law overwhelmingly dominated the cybersphere.

The significance of nurturing online resistance was attested in October 2020, when nationwide street protests again erupted following the parliament’s hastened passing of the Omnibus Bill on 5 October. On social media the protest surged to around half a million anti-Omnibus Law messages per day, largely owing to K-poppers’ efforts. However, this time, the authorities had prepared a strategic response. As revealed in a leaked telegraph from the National Police Chief, dated 2 October, the police were instructed not only to heighten vigilance at urban risk areas to nip “anarchic action” in the bud, but also to increase cyber-surveillance and to “operate counter-narratives against issues that discredit the government”, and use “media management” to make the public “disagree with protest actions”. The effectiveness of this response was demonstrated within three days of the protest.

On 8 October, an incident occurred in Jakarta that discredited the entire movement; bus stops were vandalised and some were set on fire. News reports instantly blamed the incident on “anarchist” protesters. On social media it prompted widespread disapproval from netizens, who previously supported the protest. A later investigation by the independent media channel NarasiTV found that the vandalism was incited by unidentified men who were unlikely to be protesters; activists suspected that they were incognito intelligence agents seeking to justify repression. This suspicion was never proven, but the Jakarta “riot” did justify a clampdown. Simultaneously, a concerted cyber troop operation was launched. From 10 October, social media saw a sudden surge of pro-Omnibus Law hashtags such as #OmnibusLawBawaBerkah (Omnibus Law brings blessing) and #OmnibusLawUntungBuruh (Omnibus Law benefits workers). By 16 October, the pro-Omnibus Law narrative had drowned out the anti-Omnibus Law protest on social media. This was also the effect of the cyber troops’ online attacks on activists; besides

doxing, trolling and intimidating activists on social media, cyber troops framed them as “hoax-spreaders”, making them liable to prosecution under the ITE Law (Sastramidjaja & Rasidi, 2021; Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto, 2022).

Thus, activists learned the hard way that social media was not the activist playground they took it to be, but an unsafe space for dissent. This had a chilling effect on political expression generally. In one survey conducted on 24–30 September 2020, about 70 per cent of the respondents indicated that citizens had become more fearful in the past year to publicly express their opinions; 73 per cent felt it was difficult to demonstrate at that time (DetikNews, 2020). The swift clampdown on the protests in September 2019 and October 2020 validated such fears. Given that the stifling of civic dissent is one indicator of authoritarianism, the Omnibus Law conflict proved to be a turning point in Indonesia’s post-New Order oligarchic regime consolidation. The scale at which the state deployed its power and resources to neutralise opponents in the cybersphere and control the narrative of government policy was unprecedented. It indicated increasing sophistication in the state’s capacity to mobilise digital instruments as effective “authoritarian innovations” (Curato & Fossati, 2020).

However, regimes cannot fully control the narrative; and activist youth, while lacking the power and resources, are no less sophisticated in utilising digital affordances to sustain oppositional narratives while dodging cyber-repression. Moreover, they benefit from the rhizomatic nature of their resistance. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) theorised, a rhizomatic assemblage has four characteristics: connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity and “asignifying rupture”, or the quality of being unbreakable—even as parts of the rhizome break off or are interrupted in their growth, it continues to spread in any possible direction, finding new gaps, routes and spaces to sprout. Similarly, while suppressed for the moment, Indonesia’s youth resistance is not subdued. Its resilience stems not only from being leaderless—which makes it less vulnerable to co-optation as happened to student movements in the past (and some labour unions after the Omnibus Law protest)—but particularly from its embeddedness in expansive assemblages of contemporary youth activism that include both the millions-strong K-popper cyber-army and local grassroots movements, whose young activists become nodes in networks that extend beyond national borders, and hence beyond state control.

“BE WATER”: RHIZOMATIC FLOW FROM HONG KONG TO THAILAND

Indonesia’s #ReformasiDikorupsi protest in September 2019 did not go by unnoticed to peers engaged in similar struggles elsewhere. Solidarity statements abounded—notably from Hong Kong, where the 2014 Umbrella Movement had morphed into a radicalised resistance against the Extradition Bill and China’s encroaching control. Strikingly, Hong Kong activists expressed their solidarity not simply in written formal statements but in the

form of graffiti spray-painted across the city; slogans such as “Stand with Indonesia” and “Solidarity with Indonesian labourers, farmers, students” thus became part of Hong Kong’s protest landscape alongside their own slogan of resistance: “Give me democracy/freedom or give me death”. This juxtaposition manifested a sense of affinity that went beyond solidarity, indicating they were essentially fighting the same struggle. The feeling of affinity was mutual, as illustrated by a viral image created by a young Indonesian artist, picturing two activist youth from Hong Kong and Indonesia (significantly, the Indonesian was not a student but a schoolboy), striking hands under the text: “Fulfill our demands, not one less!!”, with the hashtags #StandWithHK and #ReformasiDikorupsi (Fig. 29.1). Despite different political conditions, activist youth in both countries felt they were similarly resisting encroaching authoritarianism that would detrimentally affect the freedoms and futures of their generation. The Asian connection further reinforced the sense of generational affinity, a sense of political and cultural kinship and common destiny.

It was not the first time that Hong Kong’s youth resistance spurred transnational peer connections across the region. In 2016 the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA) was founded as an alliance between activist youth from the Umbrella Movement, the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan, the anti-junta New Democracy Movement created in 2014 in Thailand, and groups from South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, with observers from Myanmar and other countries. Their aim was to “reclaim the social, cultural and political narrative” from authoritarianism (Phoborisut, 2019; Solomon, 2016), by fostering strategic collaborations among activist youth across the region. However, apart from initial meetings and incidental

Fig. 29.1

Peer-produced image of generational activist affinity (Source Efi Sri Handayani, Twitter, @efi_sh, 18 October 2019)



posts on social media, this network remained dormant. By 2019 the attempt was overtaken by the reality of new waves of mass protest.

This new wave started in Hong Kong, where protests erupted since March 2019 that were more militant and more decentralised, diversified and digitally mediated than seen in 2014. Various new repertoires were used, including non-violent direct action tactics, flash mobs and pop-up protests, mainly in response to growing repression and surveillance (Holbig, 2020). The strategy was encapsulated in the movement's saying: "be water", adopted from Bruce Lee's martial art philosophy (or the Taoist philosophy of flow). It meant taking a fluid, amorphous approach that allowed for quick adaptation to volatile situations, making the protest unpredictable. Digital communications in the protest was similarly decentralised and fluid, as protesters moved away from established social media platforms, using new platforms like the encrypted messaging app Telegram and LIHKG, a Hong Kong-based Reddit-like forum where users can endorse posts they support; participants could post suggestions for action, and be voted up or down by peers. To prevent police tracking of the conversations, mass Telegram channels and LIHKG forums were broken up into smaller and ever-changing groups. As activist Baggio Leung characterised the protest culture, "It's just like a machine or a self-learning AI that can run by themselves" (Su, 2019).

This strategy was adopted by the 2020–21 protest in Thailand, where a new generation of activist youth had emerged in the wake of the 2014 military coup, as a new progressive force that rejected both the colour-coded polarised politics of Thai parties and the elitism of the student movements of the past (Haberhorn, 2015). Between 2014 and 2019, they regularly staged protests, calling for democracy and reform of the *lèse majesté* law that was frequently used to mute dissent. To circumvent the ban on political activities these early protests took the form of symbolic action, such as silent readings of George Orwell's *1984* in public, raising the three-finger salute adopted from the movie *The Hunger Games* (about an uprising against a dictatorial regime), occasional flash-mobs, candle vigils for detained activists, or singing actions (Lertchoosakul, 2022; Phoborisut, 2019). Furthermore, countless Thai youth joined cyber-actions, triggered by the junta's proposal in late 2015 for a Single Internet Gateway, modelled after China's Great Firewall; netizens responded with online petitions, Twitter hashtag actions and DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks on regime websites until the proposal was cancelled. Instead, the Computer-Related Crime Act was passed in December 2016, providing a new tool for surveillance, censorship, and prosecution of activists. But this did not deter netizens; in the following years hashtag activism took flight, often with the use of euphemistic hashtags to dodge the computer crime act and *lèse majesté* law (Sinpeng, 2021).

A turning point for youth resistance was the electoral success of the new progressive Future Forward Party (FFP) in the March 2019 general election—largely owing to young voters—and its subsequent dissolution in February 2020 for alleged violation of the election law. This triggered the largest

youth protest in Thailand since the 1970s, which instantly transcended the specific issue of the FFP's plight; the protest became a mass performance of the younger generation's disposition for political change, as reflected in the name of one of the new protest collectives: Free Youth. Initially the protest was limited to university rallies, until the COVID-19 lockdown since mid-March 2020 pushed it fully online. On social media, it snowballed beyond activist circles, and K-poppers again helped to catapult protest hashtags. Once the lockdown ended in mid-July, tens of thousands of youth, including school students, swarmed the streets of Bangkok and other cities in strikingly youthful mass demonstrations. Here, too, the protest was spurred by online peer mobilisation, integrating virtual and material protest repertoires with frequent references to popular culture. Even more conspicuously than seen in Indonesia, the participation of young women (including school girls) and LGBTQ activists strongly affected the political and visual discourse of the protest (Matthews, 2022). Visually, cosplay and drag outfits added vibrant colour to the protest. Politically, from the premise of intersectional resistance, protesters called for radical egalitarianism, both in terms of gender equality and social justice, thereby rejecting the patriarchal, dynastic and militaristic power hierarchy in Thai society.

Taken by surprise, it took the regime until mid-October to respond; the street protests were harshly dispersed and student leaders were arrested and prosecuted under the computer crimes act or the *lèse majesté* law. But this did not quell the youth resistance, which had learned from the “be water” strategy of their Hong Kong peers. Pop-up actions organised through decentralised online decision-making became common, using polls on social media to collectively decide on the course of action; for example, the “care” emoticon could be used to vote for a resting day, or the “wow” emoticon to urge: “keep going!” Telegram was used to announce action locations last minute. While this allowed them to continue public protests under increasingly repressive conditions, other tactics learned from Hong Kong helped them defend against police repression; when facing tear gas, they too used umbrellas, helmets and gas masks for protection. After months of such ad-hoc action fatigue kicked in. Activists then flocked to the new social media app Clubhouse; this audio-based, invite-only platform for real-time conversations that could not be recorded became a haven for free political speech as it was difficult for authorities to control (Sirivunnabood, 2021). It marked a partial retreat from the streets, but by August 2021 a series of new protests were staged in Bangkok, lasting until October. These protests were radicalised and more confrontational than before, partly due to the mass participation of less privileged students and school youth who, similar to their peers in Indonesia, did not shun clashing with the police (Lertchoosakul, 2022). As in Indonesia, the hardening of the action led to waning public support, which was compounded by concerted cyber-campaigns to influence public opinion and delegitimize the protest.

THE MILK TEA ALLIANCE AND MYANMAR

But the youth resistance continues, and it has rekindled transnational affinity among peers across the region. Besides solidarity statements—with the hashtag #StandWithThailand being spread online or as urban graffiti by peers in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and elsewhere—it gave rise to the #MilkTeaAlliance, a social media-based movement for democracy and human rights. Created in April 2020 by netizens from Hong Kong, Thailand and Taiwan (originally as an anti-China meme), the #MilkTeaAlliance quickly became a popular platform for online youth resistance, expanding to Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Malaysia, India and other countries where youth are fighting authoritarianism. Different from the earlier NOYDA initiative, the #MilkTeaAlliance is a manifestation of a rhizomatic assemblage expanding organically on youthful energies of affective connectivity. As a virtual collective performance of generational solidarity and affinity, it connects multiple nodes of resistance; as such, it could have real value to those fighting the struggles on the ground. For one thing, it provides “a way of knowing that one’s struggle is seen and supported elsewhere in Asia—of affectively catalyzing collective sentiment and action” (Dedman & Lai, 2021: 100).

The significance of the #MilkTeaAlliance became especially clear during the uprising against the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021. Immediately, Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar accounts were created on Twitter and other platforms—flooding social media with news updates, live videos and background information, tagged with the hashtag #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar that mirrored the existing #WhatsHappeningInHongKong and #WhatshappeningInThailand hashtags—and youth across Asia staged solidarity rallies under the banner #MilkTeaAlliance. Myanmar’s anti-coup movement was joined by citizens from all walks of life. But online and on the streets, a new generation of digital natives was at the frontlines of the resistance; they were the first generation that had experienced political and economic liberalisation since childhood, and they were determined to defend their freedom (Thant, 2021). The youthful character was especially manifest in the first weeks of the protest, which featured a motley merging of protesters—including cosplayers, LGBTQ protesters, and working-class and ethnic minority youth. Exuding a playfulness reminiscent of the earlier protests in Indonesia and Thailand, they used theatrical performances and witty protest signs (often written in English) to display their rejection of the coup and their innate ideological difference to the old military rulers (Jordt et al., 2021). The hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance helped to spread the protest images and messages in the global cybersphere, while the hashtag #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar was used to amplify performances of traditional resistance in rural areas (Ibid.). Marginalised and underexposed voices thus came to be embedded within the rhizome of youth resistance.

The attitude of this youth resistance changed once confronted with ruthless military violence. Refusing to be intimidated, protesting youth turned into

fearless freedom fighters, yet without losing their playfulness. The icon for this brave new generation was the 19-year-old Kyal Sin, nicknamed Angel. A born-in-the-struggle-activist, she was shot dead at a protest on 3 March 2021, while wearing a T-shirt with the text “Everything will be OK”—a text signalling this generation’s sense of irony and their persistent hope for better futures. Photos and artwork of Angel wearing this T-shirt went viral, and printed images of her became one of the attributes carried in demonstrations.

As the junta showed to be impervious to international pressure, the crack-down turned increasingly violent; according to local human rights groups, by mid-August 2021 more than 1000 citizens were killed. Yet, activist youth refused to surrender, and digital mediation helped them to keep going. While finding strength in continued expressions of solidarity—as peers across Asia, Latin America and elsewhere shared the hashtags #StandWithMyanmar, #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar and #SaveMyanmar on their social media, along with advice on how to help from abroad—Myanmar activists became adept at using digital media and technologies to dodge the repression. For example, VPN (Virtual Private Network)-secured channels were used to organise and live-broadcast flash mobs and pop-up rallies at secret locations, while digital data hacks (and volunteers on the ground) were used to map military locations and movements to evade them during these rallies; secured online payment systems were used to organise fundraising and money transactions, as the junta blocked revenue streams to the resistance; social media were used to signpost regime-affiliated businesses to boycott; and encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal were used to coordinate among the many pockets of resistance in the cities and the countryside.

Although an unknown number of urban activist youth have fled to the jungle to join armed resistance groups, the vast majority upheld the principle of non-violence. Besides attempting to sustain the protest, they began to reimagine the meaning of democracy and democratic citizenship in a post-junta world, which they are convinced can materialise in the foreseeable future. In doing so, they made the unprecedented move of rejecting “the Bamar Buddhist nationalist narrative that has gripped state-society relations and facilitated the military’s ideological control over the political landscape” (Jordt et al., 2021: 2), substituting it for an inclusive ideology that espouses full citizen rights and social justice for all, including the nation’s oppressed ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. The #MilkTeaAlliance, which includes many Burmese overseas students and exiles, helps in this effort by facilitating online polls and discussions on more inclusive futures (Chia & Singer, 2021). Similar discussions are ongoing in Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia and other places with nodes in the rhizomatic network, in which they also learn from reading and participating in each other’s conversations.

“LET’S END IT IN OUR GENERATION”

Despite increasing cyber-repression, digital connectivity still enables the evolution of novel modes of resistance, while allowing embattled youth movements to take refuge in virtual spaces of hope. Voices that are repressed in one country are channelled through transnational assemblages of resistance, where they intersect with other suppressed and subaltern voices, turning into a collective battle cry that transcends national restrictions. Like a rhizome, these assemblages are “unbreakable”. They expand in multiple directions as activist youth forge new linkages with nodes in activist networks elsewhere, not only because digital technologies allow them to do so, but because of an innate drive to connect and multiply as a means of survival. This drive is founded on a powerful sense of generational affinity—of fighting the same struggle as youth whose futures are at stake, and as young citizens with the capacity to reimagine and remake this future.

Digital mediation allows them to explicate this generational struggle as a fundamental critique of the hegemonic political norms that sustain authoritarianism. As illustrated by the intersectoral and intersectional issues raised during the protests discussed in this chapter, youth have an astute understanding of the systemic links between patriarchal, capitalist and militarist norms that simultaneously facilitate human rights violations, curbs on civil liberties, institutional corruption, environmental depletion and pollution, labour exploitation, gender-based violence and sexual oppression, and securitisation of the cybersphere. Moreover, they understand that regime change alone will not end these injustices, and that a cultural as well as political revolution is needed to substitute authoritarian norms for their generational values and aspirations for an inclusive democracy and equality.

One common saying that travels through these networks is: “Let’s end it in our generation”. It is a saying filled with hope, and where there is hope there is the effort to create something new. Hence, besides dedicating themselves to fighting authoritarianism, activist youth engage in various local initiatives to prefigure the futures they wish to see, taking inspiration and learning from similar initiatives by peers elsewhere. In doing so, they give shape to significant micro-level transformations in political norms and practices. Therein lies the most significant counterhegemonic potential of rhizomatic resistance.

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