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Reawakening student activism

A case study of Malaysia
and Singapore



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Abstract

Malaysia and Singapore share a history of suppression of youth activism by the state, and as a result, this has led to the depoliticisation of young people, who are often labelled as apathetic. However, the changing realities of both countries, such as the instability of the economy, has led young people to engage more in political discussions in recent years. Additionally, with the help of social media, young Malaysians and Singaporeans are able to build networks and bases, educate others, and organise mobilisations and protests against the state, circumventing laws that might otherwise land them in jail. However, the rise of youth activism also entails rising harassment and state suppression of youth activists through surveillance, arrests and threats to future employability. This paper looks at the fragile student movements in both countries and how digital media has played an important role in the reawakening of student youth activism in Malaysia and Singapore.

*Note: *some names of activists were changed as per their request to protect their identities.*

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1. Introduction

The age of digital media and the Internet has changed the face of social movements. Castells^[1] points out the role of the Internet and mobile phones in becoming platforms for debates and political mobilizations. Some scholars argue that they are technologies of liberation^[2] and that it increases political expression and participation, as well as engagement with multiple causes.^[3] There are many ways in which digital media has helped social movements: disseminating information and base-building efforts; empowering members of movements through wider-scale participation;^[4] and facilitating high interaction, which in turn builds trust among peers.^[5]

One of the more glaring changes of protest movements in recent times is that they have become non-hierarchical or 'leaderless'. This was the case with the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter and pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and Thailand. Gismondi and Osteen^[6] note that the Internet allows members of protest movements to shape the movement alongside their peers, while Serhan^[7] points out that organisations have become decentralized with digital media. No longer is the protest movement top-down, having become horizontal, and this new structure will be more difficult to repress with no one person sitting on top.^[8]

Youth activists around the world have not only adapted the use of technology for movement-building and protests but have also paved the way for innovation, often two steps ahead of the state forces who are trying to repress them. In Thailand, for example, one K-pop fan raised 25,000 USD using a K-pop Twitter account she manages to help protesters who were attacked by the police.^[9] Thanthong-Knight^[10] has observed how Thai protest organisers used Facebook to gather votes on whether protests should continue, catching Thai police off guard. Similarly, in Hong Kong, encrypted apps like Telegram and Firechat were used by protesters to disseminate information and strategies.^[11]

This paper aims to look at the way digital media has changed the landscape of student activism in Malaysia and Singapore. The two countries identified both have a history of student activism curtailed for decades, and are part of the Southeast Asian region described by Vadrevu and Lim^[12] as "with youthful population, rising political activism, thriving economies, and growing technology penetration." According to the latest report from *We Are Social*,^[13] "Southeast Asians appear to be the most hooked to the net compared to other regions." The report also found that young people aged 16-24 in the region spend 60% of their waking lives online, and that 99.6% of young internet users use social media at least once a month.^[14] In an interview with Sebastian Strangjo^[15] in *The Diplomat*, Aim Sinpeng^[16] said that social media's arrival in Southeast Asia led to "unprecedented levels of grassroots activism, especially in authoritarian regimes."

This research is a case study, with interviews and desk research combined to analyse the landscape of how digital media and the Internet are impacting youth movements in Malaysia and Singapore. Academic literature, as well as grey literature (news, blogs and think

pieces), were used to gather data about the current situation in the identified countries. Grey literature proved to be important in ensuring that the research captures real-time events happening in the region that are related to the research topic.

The researcher and the Heinrich Boll Foundation tapped into their network of youth activists for interviews. All youth activists that agreed to be interviewed are between 18-35 years old, and are active members of a movement/organisation working on pro-democracy issues in their country. For security reasons, some of the interviewees decided to change their names for this research.

2. Malaysia: Rebuilding youth activism after decades of suppression

Young people in Malaysia have been accused of being politically apathetic. However, this was not always the case. Malaysian youth have been actively engaged in issues of poverty, corruption and abuse of power, particularly in the late 1990s to the early 2000s.^[17] For example, the youth movement was notably active during the *Reformasi* movement from 1999 to 2001, where students campaigned for students' rights and opposed the Iraq war.^[18] The Malaysian government's response to the growing student activism of that period was through spying, raids, harassment and other coercive measures that "undercut both the ability and the will of the students and academic staff to critique socio-political and economic developments",^[19] "resulting in political apathy and stymied activism."^[20]

However, while only 36% of Malaysian youth are interested in politics and only 20% attended election rallies,^[21] they seem to have increased their interest in politics with the help of social media, the Internet and pop culture. Ting and Ahmad^[22] found that news, particularly online, is an important agent of political socialization, especially when mainstream media in Malaysia is highly regulated by the government. Shiratuddin et. al^[23] also found that Malaysian youth now share political views on social media, while Muller^[24] found that Malaysian youth are receptive to political messages found in pop music. More recently, Saidin's^[25] study found that the Internet played a crucial role in inspiring young Malaysian activists to protest against government corruption. For example, by watching the Arab Spring unfold via online channels, Malaysian youth activists believed that they could voice their opposition to the Malaysian regime in the same way that the Arabs did.

Qyira, 27, a co-founder of the organisation Undi18, agrees that Malaysian youth have been apathetic in the last decades due to government repression, but also highlights that youth movements are slowly rebuilding themselves. She explains:

Thirty years ago, Mahathir (Mohamad) introduced the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA). In one stroke, he killed so many student movements across the country. A lot of student youth activism is born in the university movements and many youth revolutions begin when you have a healthy university culture that allows

for discourse. Malaysia didn't have that. Mahathir arrested activists without trial, clamped down on student activists and many were suspended, expelled, and even went to jail. Because of this, student activism came to a halt for many years. When Pakatan Harapan (the opposition) came to power again in 2018, they amended the law slightly, so now student movements are slowly rebuilding itself to rekindle the youth activism scene in Malaysia.

In 2018, section 15(2)(c) of the UUCA, which prohibited students from being involved in politics within campus, was repealed. Whether this change in the law is enough or not remains contentious, as some Malaysian student activists believe that other sections of the law that make it illegal for students to join organisations “unsuitable to the wellbeing of the students or the university” should also be repealed.^[26] While the law still prohibits many actions of student dissent, the recent change is one step towards allowing students to be more politically engaged.

Qyira also believes that social media and the Internet has helped increase political participation, especially driven by the mishandling of the pandemic. Qyira, though she had been campaigning for political reform in the previous five years, did not consider herself an activist before this year. Since then, she has mobilized young people to protest using social media and encrypted apps.

Before this year, I would say I did not consider myself as an activist. I've been trying new methods of advocacy. We've been doing soft diplomacy (engagements, meetings, lobbying). This year Malaysia changed quite a bit. Our country handled COVID-19 badly, many voices were suppressed. There were no avenues to diplomatically engage with the government. Undi18 became a part of People's Solidarity Secretariat and we have been organising street protests this year and online campaigns on how this administration has failed in combating this pandemic. This year, I'm embracing this label.

Social media has been a great tool to mobilize people. We've seen instances where, for example, at the recent big protests, we had a critical mass of a few hundred people who we knew were attending, but the turnout rate was 2,000. We only mobilized online and we used Telegram to remain anonymous. That's one impact where we can see how young people use social media as a tool to disseminate information.

Sarah, 20, an activist who campaigns for human rights advocacies, agrees that social media and the Internet have a considerable role to play in today's youth movement in Malaysia.

As an advocacy page, we create content (infographics, tweets, booklets) on our social media accounts to empower people to take action on issues surrounding us. As part of the #Lawan movement, we encouraged people to trend the Lawan hashtag as a protest towards the current government using infographics, videos and tweets. We have also streamed an educational workshop on YouTube and organised forums through google meet/zoom.

MISI:Solidariti wouldn't have the platform and following it has without the Internet and social media. Conventional methods of activism and advocacy, while respectable and necessary, fall short in reaching certain demographics. The Internet and social media have helped close this gap.

Sarah also mentioned how the Internet has helped them connect with other youth movements in Malaysia and other countries.

...through our social media campaigns, we have been able to cultivate a wide network of NGOs and friends! Social media has made a lot of our work and collaborations possible, especially during this pandemic.

The Internet has also helped me learn and connect with other movements inside and outside of Malaysia. For example, I was grateful to be a speaker on an international forum with activists from Thailand, Philippines and Myanmar. Through video conferences we were able to exchange first-hand our experiences and adversities.

While the UUCA was amended to be less repressive to student activists, with the rise of using social media and the Internet to voice dissent, new laws have been passed that have made it easier for the police to harass those who post dissent on social media channels. Qyira herself has been intimidated by the police, getting police visits at home and the police interrogating her family.

We have two suppressive laws: One is the Sedition Act, which was meant to clamp down on communism, but is now used against activists and political dissenters, and the second one is the Section 233A of the Communications and Multimedia Act which allows the police to take action, arrest and charge you for misusing social media posts that can be offensive, annoying and irritating. This is so vague. This law is often abused to harass activists who post things online.

There's an increase in police intimidation. I've had police visit my family home. We've had police visit our family members for questioning. It's pure intimidation. It's not easy to arrest someone but what they do (and it is totally legal) is just to intimidate and harass you even at home.

Sarah had a similar experience with the police. She narrates:

This government has resorted to the intimidation of activists through the police. A couple of MISI:Solidariti members have been called up to investigations with the police. These intimidation antics have been a huge waste of public funds and time as they have resulted in nothing.

There are laws that persecute what and how you say things. Sections under the Sedition Act and the Communications and Multimedia Act are used to silence and intimidate activists. The draconian Sedition Act is vague in its definitions of 'seditious' and essentially criminalizes all dissent of the State. I for one was arrested and spent the night in lockup under the Sedition Act for a tweet from MISI:Solidariti's account,

calling for the resignation of the then Prime Minister Mahiaddin and to raise a Black Flag in protest.

Sarah also emphasizes that women activists face more danger because of these laws:

I wouldn't say that the law is disproportionate, but its implementation is. There has definitely been an uptick in the number of women being called up for investigation for dissidence. Further, during the vigil we held this past month, the way women were treated was especially rough and unnecessary. Again, we can see with the harassment of Shakila Zen that women are increasingly becoming victims of both online sexual and violent harassment. While this experience isn't exclusive to women, it is certainly women activists who have been experiencing this harassment more so in the recent past.

Qyira offers the same observation about women activists being harassed online, noting that there have been several cases of doxxing and gender-based harassment among their membership. She believes that this culture is a reflection of a wider problem – a deep-seated paternalistic culture that silences women.

When asked about how they protect themselves online, Qyira says there is “no best practice”, citing old Malaysian laws where sexual harassment is not even considered illegal. “The understanding of how women take up spaces and gender equality is a very far-fetched concept and that translates to online spaces as well,” she said. As for Sarah, she said they conduct risk assessments and take precautionary steps to erase digital footprints. However, Sarah acknowledges that dissidence and protests will always carry a risk and all they can do is minimize and mitigate said risks.

The Malaysian youth movement is currently experiencing a resurgence and is rebuilding itself after decades of government suppression. Social media and the Internet have both played a role in allowing young Malaysians to participate more in politics. Both Qyira's and Sarah's experiences demonstrate how these technologies are embedded in Malaysian youth movements and have helped them in educating and mobilizing young people to join protests both online and offline. However, while laws have been changed to allow young people to engage in politics, laws on dissent using the Internet have allowed for an increase in police harassment among youth activists.

3. Singapore: A renaissance of youth activism in a hybrid regime

Singapore's history points to a dynamic and vibrant youth activism, especially during the fight for independence during the British colonial era.^[27] However, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, democratic participation has become delimited and state-controlled^[28] and, in fact, the Democracy Index has scored Singapore poor for political participation.^[29] Ho^[30] calls Singapore's government a "hybrid regime, one that alloys democratic rule with authoritarian governance." Other scholars have described Singapore as a strong state but with a weak civil society.^[31]

In the early 2000s, despite the high information and communications technology (ICT) penetration in the country,^[32] political participation remained low, and the majority of the population remained apathetic and/or afraid to get involved in politics.^[33] Singapore's media censorship laws and regulations not only apply to mass media but to online media as well, creating an environment of apathetic and fearful citizens who think resistance, even online, is futile.^[34] However, the 2010s seem to have seen a shift, with younger Singaporeans who have started using the Internet to engage with politics. In the 2011 general election, Singaporean youth wrote blogs, posted on Facebook and Twitter, and shared political content to their peers.^[35]

In her research, Zhang^[36] found that some Singaporean youth define activism as emphasizing cooperation and working with the government, an emerging new wave of activism among Singaporean youth where promoting social change is maintained but being oppositional to the government is neutralized. Zhang^[37] also found that young Singaporeans who identify as activists see the importance of the role of ICT in building awareness and recruiting young people to join advocacies.

Sean, a young activist in Singapore who works with the alternative media Wake Up Singapore, believes that the notion of an activist working with the state is misguided:

You're right to say that there's a lot of people in Singapore who believe in this idea that you work with and not against the government and that's blatantly misguided. The work of Wake Up Singapore is in direct opposition to what the state does. At every turn, the state is trying to advance a narrative and advance control and that needs to be resisted at every opportunity.

Many Singaporeans think of themselves as an activist even though they are closely aligned with the state. I think that you can't define yourself as an activist if you work with the state. I don't think that activists should ever work with the state, because the state is power and if you're working with the state then what kind of check and balance are you to the state? So I think by definition, a priori, I think an activist is somebody who is sceptical of the state.

Hannah*, another youth activist in Singapore, says she understands that the term 'activist' is politically charged and why there is a reluctance to identify with the term. She considers herself an activist, but would rather use the term "community organiser".

I am an activist because I speak on issues, but I identify more as a community organiser because a lot of my activism is with other people and is about how we build movements and cultivating power in people, bringing people together to see how we can address issues. Sometimes the term activist can fall prey to the idea of individual saviour. In my line of work, I want to connote that it's not just me, I don't work alone and that I work with people. I identify myself as an activist but I call myself a community organiser.

When asked about the political apathy of young Singaporeans, both Sean and Hannah* believe that the state was able to suppress any political upheaval by making Singaporeans work to improve their socio-economic situation. From a developing country, Singapore, which has little land and no natural resources, became the richest country in Southeast Asia and has enjoyed this stability through a free-market economy combined with strict government policies and autocracy at the expense of personal freedoms, including the repression of unions.^[38]

Sean shares that this repression and emphasis on economic growth has made Singaporeans apathetic and depoliticized:

If you're looking at Singapore in its developmental years, the economic boom of the 80s and 90s, Singapore was in a state where survival and economic progress were front and centre in its prerogatives. When you have a nation that is fed this ideology – even from Lee Kuwan Yew, who says "poetry is a luxury we cannot afford" – it has set the tone for the next 50 years. Poetry, arts, activism, literature have become things that are perceived as things we cannot afford. Apathy comes from this thinking that we need to survive. This idea that we are poor and we need to work to become a first world nation, etc. Because of Singapore's lack of welfare programmes and support networks, it's left Singaporeans indentured, and has left the people in a situation in which politics and activism become out of reach.

Hannah agrees with Sean's sentiments and notes that the older generation feel a sense of gratitude to the government for what it has done in making Singapore a rich nation:

The reason why Singaporeans are politically apathetic is because they are comfortable with their socio-economic conditions and that's how the state pacifies them into de-politicisation. You have a good job, you're earning a high enough salary, so you have nothing to complain about... The narratives that are always pushed on us by a lot of older people is that the current political party has done so much for us in Singapore, they helped us become a first world country. There's that allegiance they feel.

But with the changing realities in Singapore, where young people are facing job insecurity and with social media being used to politically engage the youth on the rise, political dissent is being stirred.

The realities of young people in the country have become dire. Young people are coming into a society that places them in precarious situations. There's no job security, there's not enough jobs. Even within these jobs, there are terrible working conditions which young people won't stand for.

Also with social media, given how much Singapore has restrictions on public gatherings and protests, anything on the physical realm... there's a lot of restrictions on organising yourselves... the digital realm has helped a lot. Social media has become a tool for people to air out their grievances. You really see that there's always a national outcry and response to these situations. Social media has played an important part of this.

For Sean, whose organisation started as a Facebook page sharing political memes, the flexibility and anonymity offered by social media also helps in the increase of young people engaging in political discourse.

It allows you to cut your losses and allows you to decide how much of yourself you want to put on the line. It used to be in the old days, if you were an activist, you would go out and become part of a NGO or go out and make a very public speech. Whereas now in social media, you can choose how public you want to be. There are many pages where we don't know who is behind it. On top of that, it's not that committal. It used to be that you had to join an NGO or a political party and that had certain commitments that came with it. Now on social media you can pause for three months, take a mental health break, step out for a bit, then jump back in. That degree of flexibility encouraged more people to join because it's now on their own terms instead of the terms of an organisation or a political party.

However, this current rise in dissent and political engagement also means a rise in harassment. Both Sean and Hannah* have had experiences in their organisation where their colleagues have been called for police interrogation. In Singapore, anyone can call the police to report you for posting something on social media. But the police aren't the only way activists are being intimidated; Hannah* also talks about surveillance on campus through spies, and how the government stops you from ultimately getting employed through their blacklist.

In university, there is surveillance by university administration. They go around asking professors about specific students and whether or not they're politically engaged in class. They're getting a sense of the work you're doing, who you are, and they even stalk you on social media. We also joke about the presence of spies. How it works is you sign on into a scholarship so they pay for your education. There's one department that's like the intelligence department so whenever somebody says they're a scholar from this government agency, everyone is always suspicious. We have heard of people reporting back to their agencies regarding what's happening within the student activism scene.

You can't even trust every university student, that there might be spies, there might be someone compromising the security of your organisation, that's very scary.

Another mechanism of control is in terms of employers. So a lot of people, especially those in the civil service, have had their employers tell them to stop posting on social media about social issues and it might possibly land them in trouble or even get them fired. We also have what we call a blacklist, so the idea is that the government has this list of people who cause trouble, a list of names of activists. And if you try to apply for any public sector jobs, you'll get rejected.

Hannah's* friend, in fact, got reported to the Prime Minister's office for posting an Instagram video criticising the government, and the Prime Minister's office called her employer to ask for an apology or else get fired. When asked about what they do to protect themselves, Hannah* points to the importance of solidarity among their members, such as creating safety plans, especially if someone is getting interrogated by the police, or standing outside the police station, which all contribute to the feeling of safety.

Like Malaysia, political dissent has been suppressed by the government for decades, making Singaporeans apathetic and depoliticised. However, the changing socio-economic landscape and the rise of social media use by young people points to a shift towards a more politically engaged generation. There is a lot of work to be done in making young Singaporeans see that their individual grievances are part of a larger structural issue, and that collective mobilisation is possible. While the student youth movement in Singapore is just taking off, it needs to be supported in order not to be curtailed again – a challenge in a society that frowns upon activism and sees it as undesirable and a cause of instability.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Malaysia and Singapore have both experienced a suppression of youth activism for decades, resulting in a depoliticised and apathetic public. However, Malaysia's and Singapore's youth movements are currently experiencing a reawakening that can be attributed to the changing socio-economic and political landscape of the two countries. Young people are once again organising, mobilising and engaging in political issues, thanks in part to social media and the Internet, which are playing an important role in engaging young people. There is a gradual shift happening that sees young Malaysians and Singaporeans moving from being apathetic to politically engaged. However, this reawakening also brings with it increased surveillance and harassment from the state. As such, youth movements are in need of support in different areas in order to be strengthened and be sustained.

The following are recommendations to help support young activists in Malaysia and Singapore:

- **Capacity building** – Capacity-building workshops for student and youth organisations are seen as one of the most important types of support needed by youth movements. All activists emphasised the need for capacity building, especially because youth activism was suppressed for a long time and young people are only just learning the ropes of activism. Capacity building is also important to protect activists when facing police harassment – a knowledge of their rights, as well as litigation strategies, were emphasised by the interviewees. There is also a demand to build capacity on 'how to become an activist' and how to sustain this activism for the next generation so that it doesn't backslide again.
- **Spaces for transnational solidarity** – The creation of safe spaces, both online and offline, for young activists in the Southeast Asia region. The activists who were interviewed believe there is a need for spaces where they can learn from activists in other countries, to share knowledge and resources, as well as get inspiration and support on the work they do. Transnational solidarity is also seen by the interviewees as an important part of capacity building.
- **Research** – More research is needed about youth activism in Southeast Asia. Sean notes that "[a] lot of activists don't know what the field looks like. It's difficult to be an activist without data." Research projects such as this paper help give insights into youth activism that can later be used by student movements themselves. We therefore encourage more research projects to be funded by universities or international organisations.
- **Finance** – Financial support will be crucial for the youth movements in order to continue doing their work. Some interviewees note that being in the movement can take a toll on their employment prospects, and that the salaries within the youth movements themselves are not enough to live on. Finance is also needed to support their campaigns and/or help towards bail when they get arrested.

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