

Editorial: Inequalities and Representation in Southeast Asia

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Social media again hit the headlines of media outlets in South and Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, citizen-driven “lifestyle checks” online extended state-announced inspection into officials’ and their families’ assets, unveiling the intricacies of state corruption (Presto, 2025). In Nepal, TikTok clips similarly put the lives of “nepo kids” on public display, fueling growing resentment toward the ruling elite and prompting young people to the streets after a wide-spread social media ban which they perceived as a government attempt to curtail their freedom of expression (Pein, 2025). In Indonesia, where digital platforms operate under tight state regulations, TikTok temporarily blocked its “live” feature when protests flared up in response to the widely circulating footage of delivery hail rider, Affan Kurniawan, brutally run and driven over by an armored police vehicle during protests in Jakarta in late August (Arshad & Soeriaatmadja, 2025). These recent events show how social media are deeply involved not only in people’s daily lives – from luxurious to precarious – but also in their moments of political upheaval and even revolutions.

In the midst of political unrest, scholars from the region have been quick to shift away from an overemphasis on social media, highlighting that protests are not about social media but about “social injustices” (Joshi & Brieffies, 2025). All countries where protests erupted expose high poverty rates and fraud in the handling of public funds. In the Philippines, the focus on state contractors’ excessive wealth is directly linked to pending flood control projects and the recurring suffering of thousands living in typhoon-impacted regions (Presto, 2025). Discontent over nepotism, devouring political programs, and corruption has been boiling in Indonesia (Lengauer, 2024; Aspinall, 2025) and culminated in public outrage over a ministerial decision to grant MPs additional allowances of up to USD 3.000 on top of their already inflated salaries just when cases of food poisoning associated with the state-promoted “free lunch” program were beginning to mushroom. In the meantime, youth – who form major portions of the population in South and Southeast Asian countries – are striving to make ends meet. Many of them find themselves in precarious employment conditions, working way below health and safety standards, as workers overseas or in the precarious gig economy at home (Daniels, 2024; Yasih, 2020). Budget cuts, rising taxes, and stagnating wages leave even those with otherwise stable employment in the educational sector concerned about their own and their family’s futures.

The protests have been as much about corruption and inequalities as about representation. Young people saw their voices underrepresented in the already aging government of

Bangladesh which they toppled about a year ago. In Ladakh, where protests recently escalated involving a clash with the police and the death of at least four protesters, people have been demanding constitutional safeguards and the right to elect their own government since 2019 (Sharma, 2025). In Nepal, power has been circulating between a few powerful figures, with no adequate reform to reduce the economy's overwhelming reliance on remittances from Nepalese workers overseas (Joshi & Briefies, 2025). In Indonesia, protesters have been denounced as those small people (*rakyat kecil*) who would become content, once they have enough to eat on their tables. But the list of reforms young Indonesians foresee for their country is much longer and social media are now the place, where such lists are designed and negotiated, or where representatives are selected (Kharel, 2025), sometimes mimicking formal political procedures, sometimes subtly scorning them.

The reason to broaden this review beyond Southeast Asia and to look into the events of neighboring countries is largely the composition of protesters on the streets as well as representations circulating in media. Young members of Gen Z, now in their twenties, have been leading mass protests and using social media to disseminate information about protest sites and organize political action in the aftermath. The reappearance of the pirate flag of a popular manga series "One Piece" across regional borders also signalizes a common language, and a common anti-authoritarian narrative that resonates with young people's hopes and struggles. Just as the image baffled authorities the first time it began reappearing on vehicles, house fronts, and social media profiles ahead of Indonesia's Independence Day (also known as *Hari Merdeka* or Freedom Day) (Guzman, 2025), so were authorities quick to scapegoat undesired elements of society for inciting violence and infiltrating otherwise peaceful forms of protest. The conventional "double-edged sword" argument of social media recurred as technology again showed to facilitate both civil and uncivil action (Kharel, 2025), both freedom and surveillance (Abdi, 2025).

In a recent publication interrogating the relationship between social media and politics in Southeast Asian countries, Merlyna Lim (2024) advances the argument that "social media platforms were not inherently designed for political purposes" (p.7), at least not for the procedural, deliberative forms of reasoned communication that are formally associated with democracy and civic engagement. Leaning on Jodi Dean (2009), Lim argues that social media support particular relationships and organizational models that predominantly follow platforms' capitalist logics where data is utilized to create revenue. However, she also stresses that "users are not simply passive subjects" (p. 8) who fall prey to the same exploitative relationships they wish to evade. This ability to play with social media and reverse dominant logics is most visible in acts of solidarity and support, such as the tipping of delivery riders from overseas, or the donation of food and first-aid kits via the delivery platforms at times of public upheaval when orders decline (Baharudin, 2025; Ibrahim & Wong, 2025). Another example is delivered by scholars Min Htin Kyaw Lat and Lieke Fröberg in their article "Digital Strike: Monetizing Online Engagement and Content for Myanmar's Spring Revolution" featured in this issue.

This is not a prelude to a special issue on social media, social movements, or inequalities, although these themes have been explored in numerous individual contributions (e.g., Guntarik & Trott, 2016; Haug, 2017; Jaehn, 2023; Puder, 2019) and several special issues of ASEAS (e.g., Helmke & Gerstl, 2008; Lengauer, 2016; Parvanova & Pichler, 2013) over nearly two decades of publication activity. Some contributions, such as Schaffar and Praphakorn's (2021) article on the #MilkTeaAlliance, offer glaring insights into the kind of political and youthful dynamics of protest we read about in the news today. Equally, the contributions in this open issue broaden the lens of protests to examine underlying political and social dynamics in the region. The issue

opens with a research article on a new form of social media campaign that does not rally around the voices of protesters but instead capitalizes on time. It then moves to an in-depth investigation of a political history-making project involving two ethnic minority groups in Thailand, followed by an examination of the legislative representation of indigenous peoples in the Philippines. A fourth research article discusses how legal systems and social norms in Malaysia impede the development of urban living solutions otherwise understood as sustainable and community-based.

The first article by **Min Htin Kyaw Lat** and **Lieke Fröberg** (2025, this issue) situates their examination of online mobilization in the volatile context of Myanmar's Spring Revolution that began in early 2021 and the ongoing civil war. The article's innovative aspect lies in highlighting the reversal of the usual logic of online political content on social media: Instead of using political content to generate monetary benefits, seemingly nonpolitical content (e.g., audiobooks, apps, blogs) is produced to raise funds for Myanmar's Spring Revolution. This "digital strike" model from Myanmar demonstrates how citizens donate time rather than money, transforming the online advertising economy into a collective fundraising tool for resistance movements – an original form of algorithmic resistance and resource mobilization.

In "History-Making: The Communist Party of Thailand's Attempt to Shape Hmong and Lua Narratives", **Ian G. Baird** (2025, this issue) examines how the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) sought to create a unifying historical narrative for two key ethnic minority groups – the Hmong and the Lua – during the height of armed conflict in northern Thailand from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. The article focuses on a little-known CPT initiative to document and rewrite the histories of these groups in a way that would strengthen solidarity, foster ethnic harmony, and align with the Party's broader political agenda. Drawing on oral testimony from a Hmong participant involved in the project, Baird reveals how the CPT attempted to integrate minority perspectives into a cohesive, politically acceptable history while still exerting ideological control. The article argues that the CPT viewed ethnicity as both a potential source of division and a tool for mobilization, and thus sought to manage ethnic relations strategically through history-making. The research highlights the complexities of ethnic minority agency within state and non-state projects of history-making and offers new insights into the CPT's engagement with upland minority groups, a topic with broader relevance for understanding political mobilization, propaganda, and memory politics in the region.

Shivane A. Dolo's article (2025, this issue) sheds light on the inherent limitations of the legislative representation of indigenous peoples (IP) in the Philippines. Combining the rigorous empirical study of legislative records and other documentary sources with her innovative conceptual approach of examining multiple dimensions of representations, Dolo illustrates that the very few elected IP representatives have ultimately failed to enact any substantial law to elevate the social, economic, political, and cultural marginalization of indigenous communities in the Philippines. Thus, formalistic or descriptive representation does not necessarily lead to substantial representation but often remains largely symbolic. Importantly, this article empirically confirms widely held beliefs that the party list system in the Philippines has become captured by elites, whether they are formally indigenous or not. These well-elaborated insights, coupled with the author's recommendations to establish a culturally more sensitive mechanism of representation, constitute an important contribution to the study of democratic representation in multiethnic societies in general and of the politics of indigeneity in Southeast Asia in particular.

Imran Rautan and associates (2025, this issue) explore why ecovillages, understood as sustainable, community-based alternatives to conventional urban living, remain relatively rare in Southeast Asia despite their potential to address intertwined crises of environmental

degradation and socioeconomic inequality. Focusing on Malaysia, the authors apply the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory to examine the barriers to ecovillage adoption. Based on semi-structured interviews with ecovillage members, sustainable community developers, eco-farm founders, and researchers, the study identifies five major obstacles: a lack of perceived urgency regarding sustainability issues; a dominant, money-oriented economy; restrictive government policies and rapid urbanization; limited awareness and knowledge; and socio-economic dynamics. The authors argue that while classic DOI factors, such as perceived benefits and value alignment, remain relevant, their influence is shaped by broader external conditions, like governance structures, economic priorities, legal systems, and societal norms. This research is highly relevant for Southeast Asia, as similar challenges exist beyond Malaysia, notably in countries like Indonesia and Thailand.

This open issue also features the reviews of two recently published books: **Michael Kleinod-Freudenberg** (2025, this issue) reviews Ian Storey's (2025) *Putin's Russia and South-east Asia*, which is a timely analysis of Russia's relations to ASEAN and its member states; and **Nguyen Minh Tien** (2025, this issue) presents a review of Tiffany Rae Pollock's (2024) *Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry*, which offers a captivating ethnographic account at the intersection of entertainment and migration.

Finally, this issue also includes a network report by **Daniela Paredes Grijalva** and associates (2025, this issue) on a workshop that took place in September 2024, celebrating long-standing relations and collaboration between the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Vienna and the Department of Anthropology of Universitas Gadjah Mada.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.