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Democracy Renewal in Southeast Asia?

Tentative insights from wider historical and contextual comparisons.

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Abstract. Does the recent wave of "Gen-Z-protests", including in South and Southeast Asia, signal the emergence of fresh democratic counter movements against the effects of yesterday's global neoliberalism and capsized democratisation, as well as against the worldwide conservative reactions against these dynamics, which the 'old' progressive movements have failed to match? This essay aims at tentative answers for further discussion by comparing the characteristics of the "Gen-Z-protests" with the insights from the comparative research on democratisation that I have been involved in since the 70's as well as from recent case studies on the roots and character of the current global autocratisation. The short answer is a cautious *yes*, there are signs of progressive counter movements, but also a critical *no*, as the activists rarely neither address the core deficits of the old democracy movements nor initiate convincing alternatives.

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Why conservative instead of leftist alternatives to global neoliberalism?

The third wave of democracy is no more – autocratisation is. Spearheaded by despotic and exclusionary-cum-nationalist actors like Putin, Trump, Netanyahu, Modi, Duterte and Xi, along with fellows in both Europe and the South, as well as global tech-oligarchs like Musk, in need of state protection. With exceptions like Myanmar, the conservative reaction against the ills of neoliberal globalisation has even become powerful with popular support. So why is it that the broad left has failed to provide stronger resistance and better alternatives?[1]

The short answer from comparative case studies of the world-wide rise of the conservative nationalism (in in terms of autocratic rule of nations and subjects, delineated by historical empires, race and culture), and attempts at resistance, is that the "old" progressive actors have been partly associated with the negative aspects of globalisation. But the more fundamental answer is that the new political economy has undermined the classical perspectives and thus based alternatives. Even the global wave of liberal democratisation rarely enabled people themselves to enter organised politics and make a difference with new visions and reforms. It is mainly the lack of alternative reforms and democratic influence that have opened for conservative nationalism.

What has been undermined? Most classical alternatives were rooted in social democracy – analytically defined in the same way as we talk of, for example, liberalism. Hence, we refer to a perspective and strategy, not parties and leaders. Because leaders and parties

[1] My arguments in this respect are based on the conclusions in Törnquist (2021), Törnquist et al. (2025) with an summary in English in Törnquist (2025) and further references in these works.

with social democratic labels adhere of course to its fundamentals to a greater or lesser extent – just as actors with other markers, from liberal leftists and greens to reformist communists.

The aim of social democracy is, as Olof Palme put it, to replace capitalism and imperialism with democratic socialism in terms of sustainable development based on as much social justice as possible and with liberal democratic means.[2] In a historical perspective the principal arguments about how to achieve this boil down to two driving forces, two sets of reforms and five strategies – which have now been weakened. The driving forces are interest-based popular movements against exploitation and subordination, and the democratisation of power and governance based on equal citizenship and human rights. The reforms are on the one hand about rights-based welfare, on the other hand about broad social (and these days sustainable) growth pacts between labour and capital. The compatible political strategies are to win elections and gradually replace capitalism from above, to tame it through reforms, to protest it (for example through unions), to avoid it with alternatives of once own (such as cooperatives), and to gradually transform it by not only taming the wolf but also breeding it into a working dog.

How come that these views and strategies been undermined?[3]

Keynesianism overtaken by authoritarian shortcuts and global neoliberalism

The historical preconditions for social democracy through democratisation and institutionalisation of class struggle were reinvented and strengthened in the Northwest after World War II by international and most fundamentally national keynesian regulations, enabling fordist combination of production and demand, i.e. that those producing the cars could afford to buy them. However, it was not only Nazism and fascism that had been defeated. Ages of colonial domination were also coming to an end – but little was done in favour of similar democratic development in the "third world" as in the Northwest.

Attempts were there, from within the South. For example, the world's largest and third largest democracies were built in India and Indonesia respectively. And leaders like Nehru and Sukarno were in the forefront of the non-aligned movement. But from the mid-50's, the predominant idea, in the context of the cold war, was instead to foster shortcuts to progress. On the one hand the recipe from the West of building strong state institutions ahead of democratisation – so-called politics of order, which would back up middle classes and private investments. On the other hand, the idea from the East of state- and party driven primitive accumulation of resources for strategic investments – so-called non-capitalist development. Ironically however, both camps were short of progressive agents of change to implement their models, thus often having to rely instead on authoritarian

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i2Ws1X5DSA

[3] Aside from Törnquist et al. (2025) and Törnquist (2025) see also Törnquist (2021)

officers and strongmen, with associated technocrats, bureaucrats and businessmen. Who hijacked the state. While popular democratic movements were subordinated and repressed (in Indonesia at least some 500.000 people were mass slaughtered).

The only successful case of "politics of order", Singapore, was exceptional by being able to draw on rent-seeking and exploitation in the neighbouring countries, and the supposedly socialist technocrats in charge never turned democratic. Similar dynamics nurtured the authoritarian developmental states in East Asia, resting on a history of more solid institutions than elsewhere in the South, plus western backing of national campaigns against China, and state direction of big private investments in export-oriented sectors – increasingly in cooperation with transnational cooperations. This propelled the new international division of labour, which in addition to OPEC's increasing oil prices (generating more speculation than imports) led to stagflation and structural change in the North. All together challenging the social democratic fundamentals of internationally regulated national keynesianism and fordism.

Deindustrialisation in the North could at best be handled by state supported restructuring and upgrading of the economies by climbing the "value added ladder", along with active labour market policies, education and social security, for example like in Sweden. Yet it was insufficient. Keynesianism and fordism must also be internationalised. But the attempts in the 70's in this regard – by Willy Brandt, Olof Palme and likeminded leaders in the UN at "North-South Partnership" and a "New International Economic Order" – failed. Because of resistance by capital, special-interest oriented unions in the North and the developmental states and oil sheiks in the South. Thus, the field was wide open in the 80's for the rise of global neoliberalism. Which in turn also undermined the democratic state capacity to reorganise production and provide sufficient social security. Mitterrand's ambitious social democratic project in France, for one, collapsed in 1983. Olof Palme adjusted to his minister of finance who deregulated the credit system. And the vulnerable new states in the South were affected even worse.

Ironically, it was the developmental export driven party-states in East Asia that benefitted most from the neoliberal globalisation. While in contrast, Gorbatjov's social democratic oriented reforms in Soviet Union were let down in favour of liberal chock therapy and elitist democracy. Which resulted in the chaotic and kleptocratic dynamics that led to popular support for Putin's autocratic oligarchy with conservative nationalist outlook.

Meanwhile liberals and associated social democrats in the West who suffered from hubris after having won the cold war, and followers in eastern Europe and the global South who wanted to hang on, tried instead a "third road", combining neoliberal economics with new public management driven welfare. This was certainly popular among people with capacity and knowledge to benefit from the financialisation of development. But it further undermined the classical social democratic instinct to regulate structural change and to provide re-education and social security for the unfortunate small producers,

professionals and labourers. Short of alternatives, many of the latter became receptive instead of conservative nationalist protection.

Capsized democratisation

The liberal wave of democracy – which arose with the fall of fascism in Portugal and Spain in the mid-70's, and rolled on to Latin America, Eastern Europe, parts of Asia and Africa – provided more freedom of action for social democratic aspirations after decades of repression. But there were also severe obstacles. Deregulations and privatisation under neoliberalism increased inequality and the power of the affluent, while reducing the scope of democracy and the capacity of the state. The idea that trade and privatisation would generate democratisation in countries even China proved utterly wrong, their regimes benefitted instead from global neoliberalism.

Moreover, economic growth remained uneven within the framework of the increasingly neoliberal international division of labour. So even if broadly defined working classes increased, they remained fragmented in terms of employment and other conditions. Which caused numerous problems of broad unionisation and alliances, even under less repressive rule than in for instance China and Vietnam. There were certainly dynamic efforts at alternative social change and democratisation through social movements and civil society organisations. But it was more demanding to build broad popular movements for common interests than to nourish (and raise funds for) actions on separate issues which rarely converged. So, generating common platforms and strategies remained an uphill task. In addition, anti-corruption campaigns often focused more on the big fishes than on the problems of common people and their participation in social audits. And decentralisation did not foster democratisation in the absence of reforms to alter the balance of power and guarantee representation of vulnerable sections of the population. Perhaps worst, the new democracy-oriented rules of the game were typically negotiated within the establishment, rarely enabling the popular movements and aspirations to enter mainstream politics and make a difference.

On top of it all, the supplementary strategy in favour of international humanitarian interventions derailed entirely when prioritising "regime change" and the "war against terror". The result was instead popular support for conservative national resistance against the interventions. And the inflow of high numbers of migrants and refugees in the North nourished the proponents of conservative nationalism.

Are the Gen-Z-protests altering the situation?

With those challenges for the classical alternatives in mind, the obvious question is whether the new Gen-Z-protests is a significant sign of hope against the rise of conservative nationalism?[4]

[4] I have mainly relied on media reports, premium journalism, opinion pieces and analyses in the BBC, Al Jazeera, The Hindu, Jakarta Post and Rappler, in addition to reports in ESSF news and analysis from

The new activists' inspiration from a popular Japanese anime and manga series on TikTok about "Straw Hat Pirates" under the Jolly Roger banner with skull and crossbones might not be entirely convincing for seasoned students of the historical pirates' double-edged swords. But the huge generation below 30 years (constituting more than 50 percent of the population in countries Indonesia and Nepal, and about 70 per cent in Africa) obviously differ in outlook from the elderly who have also suffered from the ills of neoliberalism and often linked up instead with strongmen leaders and conservative nationalist ideologies because of losing trust lost trust in yesterday's radical ideas. The youngsters have obviously also lost trust in the old radicals but tend to denounce the entire establishment, including the new conservative strongmen, as well as the classical ideas of strong leadership, organisation and reforms, opting instead for non-hierarchical networks and populist action, even insurgency.

The new protests are not unique. Similar young peoples' movements opposing abusive and incompetent autocrats and demanding jobs and better standard of living include for example those in North Africa and the Middle East during Arab Spring in 2011 and the waves of protests in Thailand since the 1990's. The more recent cases comprise the young people who rallied the streets in Chile in 2019 against neoliberalism in general and increasing prices on public transportation and education, but who also demanded a rights-based constitution, which enabled rethinking leftist leaders winning the subsequent elections. Almost at the same time the huge demonstrations in Sudan with young women in the forefront brought down the dictatorial regime and paved the way for a transitional government. Yet they were unable to prevent the return of competing armed groups with international sponsors, now propelling a devastating civil war. And as the mullahs in Iran had hijacked the revolution against the Shah and suppressed the subsequent dissidents, brave young women managed in 2022 to utilize weapons of the weak (including opposing the dress code) to shift the paradigm and inject new hope, even if they were of course being repressed. To end on a more positive note, the massive popular *Aragala* protests in Sri Lanka against the oligarchy and its corruption, nepotism and mismanagement of the economy and pandemic led to the fall of the regime.

The current broader wave of Gen-Z-protests evolved in 2024. In august the prime minister in Bangladesh resigned and fled to India, away from massive protests against nepotistic quotas for government jobs, on top of years of increasingly autocratic rule and mismanagement of neo-liberal economic policies. An expert-led government is now being backseat-driven by the military and Muslim leaders. During the following months, a new united front in Sri Lanka based on the popular movements that brought down the old regime in 2022 was more successful and won both presidential and parliamentary elections. In Serbia young activists sustain impressing protests against the corruption and

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social movements around the world, Indoleft news service, plus summaries in Wikipedia. As for my notes on the Arab Spring, Tunisia, Iran, Bangla Desh, Sri Lanka, Chile, Thailand and generally on Africa, I am also most thankful for being able to benefit from the insights of the co-authors in Törnquist et al. (2025); c.f. Törnquist 2025.

mismanagement of the regime since the 2024 deadly collapse of a railway station. In Kenya young people continue to rally against increased taxes as well as corruption, high cost of living and police brutality. Similar patterns apply to the recent protests in Peru, Marocco, and certainly in Madagascar where the regime was toppled by the young activists along with dissident army officers. Young activists in Kathmandu, Nepal – who had mobilised for some time against increasing corruption, nepotism and inequality – responded equally drastic with full scale riots to the regime's closing down of social media. Only the military was able to gain control and to install an expert led government in some consultation with key-activists. Meanwhile the massive rallies and protests in the Philippines since September against corruption in flood control projects are now partly hijacked and may be overtaken by rival political parties and related organisations. Finally in Indonesia, widespread demonstrations have built up since 2019 against, firstly, the weakening of the anti-corruption work, secondly, the omnibus labour law to foster investment at the expense of labour standards and environmental regulations, and thirdly, the increasing influence of the military in public administration and the rewiring of the country's history in favour of the rulers. In 2024 the protests turned militant with youngsters in the forefront, culminating in August-September 2025 with partial riots, initially in Central Java against drastic tax increases and then in Jakarta and elsewhere in response to lawmakers' outraging new perks and police brutality.[5]

Alternative to the conservative reaction?

The Gen-Z-protests have thus altered the situation in several contexts with the common characteristics of having a substantial generation of youth and being badly affected by both neo-liberal globalisation and conservative reaction. Hence, similar movements may occur in several other cases too, but do they constitute an alternative to the conservative momentum?

A somewhat more detailed review of the protests' based on qualified media and expert reports suggest that they do turn against both the remnants of global neo-liberalism and the new conservative politics. In addition, they partly do this in more innovative ways than the classical radical movements.

The first conclusions are supported by the fact that the critique of corruption, kleptocracy and rulers' incompetence is always in the forefront and deemed to be effects of neoliberalism – including when also having affected old Maoist and Leninist leaders like in Nepal. Accusations of nepotism are also frequent, as in Bangladesh against the quota for government jobs to regime related people. And critique of appalling nouveau riche habits as well as increasing inequalities is equally common. Next comes bread and butter issues such as the high costs of living, including for housing, education and transportation, plus unfair taxation. The issue of jobs and unemployment, especially

[5] In addition to the media reports and activists' accounts mentioned in fn. 2, I have also benefitted from Aspinall (2025), Rafiqa Qurrata Ayun, Ary Hermawan and Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir (2025), and Mochammad Naufal Rizki (2025).

among young people, including those with education, are also prioritised. And the demands in this respect are rarely accompanied with conservative nationalist critique of immigrants and refugees. On the contrary, activists often care for the rights and interest of migrant labourers, especially friends who have had to leave their home country.

Critique of autocratic rule is certainly also common but less prominent than opposition against bad governance. In contrast to the conservative nationalist position there is however no doubt about the importance of human rights and of course critique of police brutality – while there seem to be less critique of the military, perhaps for tactical reasons. Similarly, there is much critique of criminal gangs and extortion, and this is more commonly blamed on well-connected gangsters than on vulnerable sections of the population, including migrants, refugees and hbtqi-communities. In these and the other issues, the activists seem to foster joint actions along civil society groups, unions, groups of informal labourers and other social movements.

The third conclusion about innovative resistance is about the young generation's ability to challenge the tech moguls and conservative leaders' dominance in social media, using it for quick and flexible information and communication, often in satirical and humours ways – at least outside totalitarian countries like China. In contrast to old centralistic leadership and certainly secret cell-systems, this also support leaderless yet efficient networking in "rhizome movements", which are hard to repress and can find effective ways of adapting to local situations, utilising "weapons of the weak" and sustaining themselves economically. At best, this also means that the new movements are less dependent on patronage from political and other elites than earlier, who in return may manipulate and abuse them.

There are certainly possibilities for competing elites to sponsor, take advantage of, hijack and even instigate protests among dissatisfied people and often youth. Examples include some of the protests against corruption and abuse of power in India and Brazil in face of elections in 2014 and 2019 when Narendra Modo and Jair Bolsonaro rose to power. The same may apply to the recent movements against criminality in Mexico and corruption of flood control systems in the Philippines. And there are also continuous warnings against similar dynamics to occur in Indonesia. But it is hard to find evidence suggesting that the Gen-Z-protests in general have been manipulated in their initial stages.

Pro-democratic alternative?

Even though most of the Gen Z-protests thus signal the rise of a genuine and innovative countermovement against both the ills of global neoliberalism and the dominating conservative reaction against it, the remaining question is if the movement is also pregnant with democratic alternatives. This is not only about the immediate results, which have not always been impressive, like during the Arab Spring and recently in Indonesia. The more important question is about organisational and political alternatives.

It is one thing to stand up against the ills of global neoliberalism, corruption, autocratic rulers, inequalities, subordination and more – plus to put forward specific demands such as for jobs, housing, welfare and justice – but quite another to suggest reliable alternatives in terms of governance, reforms and democratic organisation.

In short, there are few signs that the Gen-Z-protests address the major problems which undermined the "old" progressive movements and have prevented effective alternatives on their part. With reference to the brief review in the initial sections of this essay of the factors undermining the old left, there are six major unresolved issues.

Firstly, the protests' limited popular base. There may be widespread sympathies, but it is not apparent and certainly not organised. In addition, militancy and instances of riots often scare "ordinary people" away. This is in-spite of the important new capacity to reach out widely through social media. A common expression in Indonesia during the struggle against Suharto's "floating mass" politics to prevent independent organisation was that the opposition unfortunately consisted of equally "floating democrats". In many ways, this challenge still applies, in other contexts too.

Secondly, the limited roots in interest-based organisation relates to the problem of uneven development and thus fragmented labour movement – which calls for broader alliances on issues of common interest. Yet, there are few signs among the new generation of activists of really addressing the task, aside from highlighting upsetting issues to rally around.

Thirdly, the same apply to the unresolved problems of co-ordinating and synthesising the many separate issues that civil society movements and social movements focus on.

Fourthly, the obvious need to generate trustworthy common platforms, reform agendas and strategies to unify and rally people behind remain unresolved and often even ignored. The young activists tend to stop short of this, rather generating long lists of often unconnected demands and populist mantras.

Fifth, the previous insights of the prime importance of avoiding informal "direct" connections and negotiations with leaders as well as counterparties in favour of developing as transparent and democratic as possible representation seem to be ignored. This is in-spite of its well-known significance, for example in the initially successful negotiations during the Arab Spring between the activists and the rulers in Tunisa, as well as in the commonly celebrated democratic decentralisation and participatory planning in Kerala, and of course in the partnership governance during the heydays of Scandinavian social democracy.

Finally, therefore, there are also few signs among the Gen-Z activists of broad political project in terms of comprehensive alternative reform proposals on better democratic representation and governance, as well as of sustainable welfare based economic development as a platform for broad alliances. One partial exception is the formation in Chile after the popular protests in 2019 of *Apruebo Dignidad* (AP), the centre-left coalition

of left-oriented parties with roots in social movements that won the elections in 2021. Another is the centre-left coalition of parties and movements *National People's Power* (NPP) that was established in Sri Lanka after the popular protests in 2022 by rethinking leaders, including in the previously chauvinist Maoist party (JVP), and which paved the way for the landslide victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024.

Unfortunately, the young Chilean president Gabriel Boric and his government subsequently failed to offer a realistic democratic framework for all the social movement delegates who were invited to implement the main election promise of drafting a new rights-based constitution. This also undermined the government's chances of implementing its reform agenda, The conservative rightists have thus got a new lease on life. And the NPP-based government in Sri Lanka is up against numerous challenges such as to handle the huge foreign depts to China and the IMF. Still, the forming of AP and NPP along with broad alliances and democratic agendas points to the perhaps most crucial missing links in the transformation of the new protests into agents of building democratic alternatives to the rise of conservative nationalism.

Yet, the main dynamics of the other protest movements seem to be that of firstly mobilise on the basis of networks and students' communities, plus in the streets – essentially substituting for the lack of a homogenous working class in common workplaces; secondly, to intensify the actions and convince reform oriented sections of the military to abandon the strongmen in power, in favour of a transitional government of experts who are on speaking terms with key-activists; and thirdly to expect the new government to later on initiate elections – in face of which the activists hope to have selected leaders and formed competitive parties. But where if ever did this succeed?

In my understanding, this simplified common model reminds less of the 1986 successful but broader people power revolution in the Philippines than of the script for the *Malari* protests and riots in Jakarta in January 1974. *Malari* was initiated by students who earlier supported General-cum-President Suharto's physical elimination of the reformist-communists and their relatives, and then the autocratic New Order regime against left-populist President Sukarno, aiming at a Singapore-like "politics of order" – but who subsequently turned critical of stalled democratisation, increasing corruption and cooperation with extractive transnational companies. The students (Hariman Siregar turned most famous) used the centrally located Salemba university campus in Jakarta as a consolidated base, plus mobilised as many people as possible in the streets in conjunction with the state visit of the Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka. The expectation was that the conflict would escalate and that dissident army leaders like General Sumitro would stand up against President Suharto, thus paving the way for political liberties and less extractive and kleptocratic economic development. The plan collapsed, key student leaders were imprisoned, General Sumitro was forced to resign, and Suharto's rule was strengthened.

During the current wave of Gen-Z-revolts similar and even worse dynamics have unfolded in Sudan, and one may fear that there will be yet other hopefully less devastating cases of military backed consolidation of oligarchic rule, perhaps, for example, in Bangladesh and Nepal. Other worrying cases include the growing influence of the military and autocratisation in President Prabowo's Indonesia. And the initially genuine protest movement in the Philippines seems now to be hijacked by competing dominants actors.

Towards a conclusion

It took about ten years after the *Malari* debacle of young students' revolt along with supposedly dissenting officers before the opposition movement in Indonesia arrived at the alternative understanding of the prime importance if dual democratisation against Suharto's autocratic New Order: the Athenian focus on equal citizen relations of power in contrast to oligarchic control of public resources – and the modern liberal political equality in the governance of public matters. One may hope that it will not take as long for the new movements to both reinvent this perspective, which essentially proved correct, *and* address the major problems (recalled in the above) that hold back its full potential.

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Continuous reports and analyses on the Gen-Z-protests in *Al Jazeera, BBC, The Hindu, Jakarta Post* and *Rappler*, in addition to reports in *ESSF news and analysis from social movements around the world*, *Indoleft news service*, and summaries in *Wikipedia*.