Chapter 5: Researching the criminalization of young people's dissent: insights from Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Young people comprise almost a third of the total population of Southeast Asia, making them a powerful force in shaping local, national and regional agendas (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2021). According to the ASEAN, Southeast Asian youth are the region's future leaders and change-makers and there is ostensibly a strong commitment to providing them with meaningful opportunities to influence policies that shape their lives (ASEAN, n.d.). Yet civil society spaces in many Southeast Asian countries are shrinking. The 2022 CIVICUS Civil Society monitor categorised most countries in the region as repressive of people's fundamental human rights to organise – especially of young people (CIVICUS 2022). Authoritarian-style governance continues to de-legitimise young people's action and repress protests, especially those that target governments and elites. These responses violate young people's rights to organise, protest and shape social agendas in these countries.

Elsewhere, we have demonstrated that many young people in the region use a variety of tactics, platforms and strategies to push back against repression (Karunungan 2021; Millora 2022; Millora and Karunungan 2021). When powerful actors threaten their voices, research and experience show us that young people can hold their ground, creatively navigate constrained civic spaces and find ways to recalibrate their actions.

Drawing from secondary data and interviews with young activists in Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, this chapter explores emerging patterns of strategies of criminalising young people and student activism in Southeast Asia. As many young people in the region find new ways of fighting back, we argue that states and other repressive agents also change their tactics – finding new mechanisms for control while, at the same time, solidifying tried and tested mechanisms designed to limit social actions. This includes everything from systematic surveillance through the use of technology, infiltrating universities with spies, creating 'blacklists' to influencing young people's prospective employment and imposing draconian policies that criminalise youth and student activists.

This chapter builds on previous studies of movement repression (Earl 2003, 2011; Earl, Maher and Pan 2022; Ellefsen and Jämte 2022; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020; Power 2012) by

focusing on Southeast Asia. The region is currently seeing the (re)emergence of youth activism and the rise of authoritarian-style politics that limit these movements (CIVICUS 2022). This situation makes Southeast Asia a dynamic context to understand how movement repression changes and shifts. This chapter's regional focus pays attention to how cultural practices and contextual realities influence movement repression – reminiscent of what has been described as 'soft repression'. As will become clear in this chapter, the state and social elites have weaponised societal beliefs and young people's vulnerabilities in one way or the other, to frustrate youth organising.

We first explore how movement repression is understood and studied in the current literature. Then, we describe the methodological approach and considerations of this chapter. A brief overview of activism in Southeast Asia follows before delving into the key tactics and strategies of repression we found in the research: use of policies and promoting ideologies, digital media and surveillance, and labelling and delegitimization. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of these repressive actions for young people's political participation in the region as well as further research in this area.

Understanding repression of movements: implications for young people's activism

A significant amount of research on the repression of social movements has revealed the many ways the state and other actors seek to manage, mute or subdue activists' action (Della Porta and Diani 1999; Earl 2003, 2011; Curtice and Behlendorf 2021). For Earl (2003), efforts to repress these movements have multiple dimensions: the repressive agent (who does the repressive action), the character of the repressive action and whether that action is observable. In a well-known article, Della Porta and Diani (1999) described two models used to secure public order. The 'escalated force' model is often characterised by coercive practices such brute force and dispersion of protests. The 'negotiated control' model, on the other hand, prioritises giving attention to peaceful protests and priority is given to good communication between protesters and the police along with strategies intended to avoid the use of coercive force. As Della Porta and Diani (1999) argue, controlling activism does not always involve brute force or dispersion of protests. At times, it can involve negotiation and the use of policies and law that require organisers to obtain permission, (such as obtaining 'police clearances' and 'escorts' prior to demonstrations (O'Brien and Deng 2017; Curtice and Behlendorf 2021; Millora, 2022).

Soft Repression

There are also more subtle forms of repression – known as 'soft repression' (Ferree 2004; Linden & Klandermans, 2006; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020) that could be overlooked when focussing on more overt actions (e.g., deployment of large numbers of police during protests) (Boykoff, 2007). While considerable media and academic attention is given to more overt form of repression of dissent, other tactics such as arbitrary arrests, the use of torture, and disappearance (Ellefsen & Jämte, 2022), are covert practices that are extremely effective in curtailing protests - even before they start.

An example of soft repression is what O'Brien and Deng (2017) refer to as 'relational repression'. Drawing from research on state control of protests in China, they observed how actors "turn [sic] repression into a highly charged conversation with family members, neighbours, or old friends, and use people who have a hold over the protester to deliver the state's message to desist" (p. 6). 'Relational repression' is a strategy that uses social and familial ties to mitigate protests in communities – making it more pernicious and less obvious (O'Brien and Deng, 2017).

Soft repression can also include the weaponization of cultural norms and traditional assumptions about the 'proper' role of children and young people in their families and in the wider societies. While these kinds of softer approaches vary in different countries and communities, Theis' (2007, p. 8) research in Southeast Asia and the Pacific points to how 'children's relative lack of power, adult attitudes towards children, and limitations on children's political and economic rights' limit their participation in decision-making.

Labelling and the power of discourse

Labelling is also a powerful tool used to intimidate, stigmatise, and stereotype activists. Greer and Reiner (2013) argue that labels can shape public perceptions about some forms of action described as something other than political:

> For an act to be 'criminal' (as distinct from harmful, immoral, anti-social, etc.) it has to be labelled as such. This involves the creation of a legal category. It also requires the perception of the act as criminal by citizens and/or law enforcement officers if it is to be recorded as a crime. The media are an important factor in both processes…(p. 3)

Thus, labelling young activists as particular kinds of persons, such as vandals, criminals, and terrorists, influences the way they are seen and treated. For example, media stereotyping and labelling amplifies the perceived 'danger' of youth activists (Power, 2012) creating public panic. With the advent of social media, such labels can even be more pervasive and can travel quickly within the public domain.

Apart from immediate dangers to young people engaged in certain political action, like arrest and imprisonment, those repressive responses by the state and others can also have long-term effects (Pickard, 2019). In Egypt, some young Cairene activists were depoliticised after being subjected to violence during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, giving more attention to their private lives than to activism (Matthies-Boon, 2017). In Palestine, Barber (2001) found that some young people who joined the Palestinian Intifada (uprising) in the late 1980s to early 1990s, and were then subjected to political violence, became depressed and turned to what were described as 'anti-social' behaviours. These examples demonstrate that 'early exposure' to violence and repression as a response to their social action can affect further (non)participation and lead to mental health problems.

Repression's compounding effects

Repression can also further exacerbate the vulnerabilities and the symbolic violence that young people are already experiencing. For instance, young people already face ageist bias such as claims that they lack the experience needed to be political or that their political action prevents them from achieving 'proper' adult status (della Porta, 2019; Power 2012). Young people born after-1982 in Taiwan and Singapore, for instance, were represented by their enemies as the 'strawberry generation' because they were accused of bruising easily, lacking resilience and were incapable of hard work (Woodman, Batan and Sutopo, 2021). In a context where such derogatory stereotypes prevail, it becomes easier to further stigmatise, intimidate and devalue their political work.

Young people have already been found to be suffering disproportionately during economic crises (International Labor Organization [ILO] 2020) and state-sponsored repression may further emphasise this material loss. In Southeast Asia, young people's life prospects are chronically threatened by everything from the privatisation of education to high levels of unemployment (YouthCo:Lab, 2013). While this situation provides new reasons for young

people to organise (e.g. against unfair labour laws), limited economic resources also frustrate young people's activism, as many need to maintain and/or look for jobs to sustain themselves (Millora, 2022). As many young people in the region try to keep their balance on this tight rope, threats and intimidation can push them over the edge, putting many of them at even more disadvantage.

Collecting data on youth criminalisation: methodological considerations

This chapter draws from findings from two relevant reports that we authored (Karunungan, 2021; Millora and Karunungan, 2021). These studies involved applying a case study method (Stake, 1995) to a number of countries, using a combination of desk research and semi-structured interviews with activists from wide ranging contexts. In this chapter, we focus on Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. These countries were selected because they are 'telling cases' (Mitchell, 1983) that illustrate and elaborate on some of the key issues arising from the criminalisation of youth and student political action. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a couple of youth activists in each of these countries. Recognising that real-time events and their analysis are equally as important as published and peer-reviewed articles, we also used 'grey literature' like news, blogs, and think pieces in our research.

The case studies were analysed to identify emerging patterns in the repression of youth and student political dissent in the region. We acknowledge that different social and political circumstances in these countries will affect how young people experienced the repression of their movements. Where relevant, we have explained the extent to which these political environments might have led to differences in young people's experiences in each country. We recognise that producing reports that would be the basis of further advocacy work in this area might run the risk of exposing young activists and their work to unwelcome scrutiny. A number of student and young activists we contacted were reluctant to be interviewed and a couple of them withdrew at the last minute for fear of potential consequences. Thus, we ensured the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data: all names are pseudonyms with no specific descriptors that might identify the participants. All raw data was only accessible to the researchers and transcriptions were stored in password-protected laptops and hard-drives. Before conducting the interviews, we also worked closely with the participants to select the interview medium (e.g. written, video/voice interview, online) which they felt was safe and which they were comfortable with. This included the language they

preferred using. For a number of Thai students, for instance, we arranged for a translator who was briefed about the ethical protocols of the research.

Youth activism in Southeast Asia: a brief overview

In Southeast Asia, a region that has seen numerous political upheavals over centuries, students and young people have often been at the forefront of social movements in the region. As mentioned, there is a long history of student activism in these countries. Student movements in the Philippines were key players in anti-colonial struggles and have since become embedded in the countries' political landscape such as the 1960's-1970's fight against the Marcos dictatorship (Abinales, 2012). Thailand, the only country that was not colonised by European powers also experienced waves of student activism post-World War II - a period marked by political instability and violence (Kongkirati et al, 2012). Thai students heavily influenced by Marxist and socialist ideas, led a pro-democracy movement that toppled the military regime in 1973 (Kongkirati et al, 2012). Even countries like Malaysia and Singapore, whose governments successfully limited student activism for decades, are seeing the re-emergence of student movements (Karunungan, 2021). According to Weiss (2005), the spying, raids, and harassment experienced by activists at the hand of the Malaysian government led to political apathy and stymied activism in the country. In Singapore, under the authority of Lee Kuan Yew, democratic participation was delegitimised and state-controlled (Ho, 2019).

As in other parts of the world, the advent of digital media is also changing student movements in Southeast Asia. Digital media serve variously as a hub for information dissemination, a platform for debates and mobilisation, and as a space for large-scale participation by activists (Castells, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Indeed, digital technology has helped sponsor a non-hierarchical, decentralised 'leaderless' protest movement. More recently, social media were used heavily in pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and Thailand. It has also been observed that social media in Southeast Asia has led to "unprecedented levels of grassroots activism, especially in authoritarian regimes" (Stragnjo, 2020, n.p.).

We see the legacy of these earlier protest actions and student movements live on in our times, with continuing waves of student protests in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and

Singapore. In the next section of this chapter, we discuss the emerging patterns of criminalising young people and student dissent in these countries.

State policies and 'distracting' discourses

Across the Southeast Asian countries reviewed in this study, we observe how many states have introduced new policies to directly manage and control youth movements. In July 2020, the Duterte administration introduced the Anti-Terror Law in the Philippines, that permitted warrantless arrests that meant police could hold individuals without charge (Ratcliffe, 2020). This legislation targeted "speeches, proclamations, writings, emblems, banners, and other representations" that were said to incite terrorism (McCarthy, 2021, n.p.). While the government says the law is crucial for fighting insurgency (McCarthy, 2021), student activists, who are the usual victims of 'red-tagging'[15] by the state, argue that this legislation is a response to the growing dissent against Duterte's populist regime (Millora and Karunungan, 2021).

In Thailand, a similar law, Article 44 of the Interim Thai Constitution, that aims to "suppress" or "disrupt" "any act which undermines public peace and order or national security" (International Commission of Jurists, 2016, n.p) was used to suppress activists. According to one of our interviewees Chaiya (pseudonym), the law has been used to harass young people. In 2020, student activists Panupong Jadnok and Parit Chiwarak were arrested and charged with sedition after joining a peaceful protest in Bangkok (Article 19, 2020).

Apart from implementing restrictive policies, states also attempt to control young people's political action by actively promoting 'ruling' ideologies that downplay the role of dissent. Reflecting on the history of activism in Singapore, Ethan, a local student activist, pointed to ways Singapore's government has been promoting the nation's socio-economic wellbeing:

> ...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 …. When you have a nation [of people] that is fed this ideology – even from Lee Kuan 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 [is] 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.
> – Ethan, Singapore

By promulgating this representation of the nation and its people, the government, according to Ethan, 'set the tone' and sold a narrative that a functional working society is one that is socio-economically sound and where activism has no space. Hannah, another young activist in Singapore, agrees:

> 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 depoliticisation. You have a good job, you're earning a high enough salary, so you have nothing to complain about... The narrative that is 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.
> – Hannah, Singapore

What is more, the government draws on this vision of socio-economic progress to design more coercive forms of repression. An example of this is the government's practice of 'blacklisting' young activists, who are included on a list compiled by government and sent to potential employers:

> 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, Singapore

We also see how gender comes into play when states harass young activists. Young women activists have been targets of misogynistic attacks and worry about other issues such as sexual harassment and rape when they are put in jail. In Malaysia a young activist called Qyira notes how laws such as the Sedition Act, "essentially criminalises all acts of dissent in Malaysia,". This she says has been applied disproportionately to women:

> 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.
> – Qyira, Malaysia

Even online harassment in Malaysia targets women activists:

> Comparing between male and female activists, female activists are harassed more, and their bodies are targeted. Online they attack their appearance, for example comments about being fat or ugly.
> – Chaiya, Malaysia

Yet if states set out to repress student activists, this has not prevented a reawakening of student activism. In this process, young activists who are 'digital natives' have relied on the double-edged sword that is digital media. In the next section, we look at the roles digital media has played in shaping youth student movements and how, at the same time, it has been used by the state against them.

Digital media and Surveillance: Dissent as cybercrime

Waves of protests in Southeast Asia in recent years have highlighted the important role that digital media plays in youth and student movements. In Thailand, a K-pop fan who manages a K-pop Twitter account was able to raise $US25,000 to help protesters who were attacked by the police (Tanakasempipat, 2020). In Malaysia, Leong et al. (2020) claim that social media has helped the Bersih Movement, which fought for electoral reforms between 2007-2015, to sustain its membership and momentum for years – establishing a stable network of activist groups. In the middle of the COVID pandemic, Filipino's took to social media to highlight the failure of the Duterte government to address the crisis, making hashtags #OustDuterte and #DuterteResign trend on Twitter (Auethavornpipat and Tanyag, 2021). In Singapore, student activists, despite being framed as 'apathetic' (see above), were able to mobilise a public demonstration against media censorship using social media (Skoric and Poor, 2013).

Social media platforms like Facebook are seen by student activists as an important tool in organising and mobilising:

> Social media is where people express their anger and a powerful tool to communicate. All you have to do is post on Facebook and people come, they show up. In the past, people thought that social media and digital platforms were just for keyboard warriors. Now, pressure can be built online that can lead to something to happen or change in the real world.
> – Isra, Thailand

In Malaysia and Singapore, social media is helping in reawakening student activism that has been quiescent for decades:

> Before this year, I would say I did not consider myself as an activist. 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. 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.
> – Qyira, 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. Our group 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, Malaysia

In Singapore, which has strict laws on public protest, social media has been used as a platform to politically engage young people experiencing job insecurity and other economic problems. Singapore uses laws such as the Public Order Act, the Sedition Act, and various penal code provisions, as well as laws on criminal contempt to stifle freedom of speech and assembly (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

> Given how much Singapore has restrictions on public gatherings and protests, anything on the physical realm, 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.
> – Hannah, Singapore

For Ethan, a student activist whose organisation started as a Facebook page in Singapore sharing political memes and satire, social media provides the anonymity needed by activists to protect themselves from being identified by the government. It also gives them some flexibility about how they can be involved in the movement.

> It allows you to cut your losses and allows you to decide how much of yourself you want to put on the line. In the old days, if you were an activist, you would go out and become part of an NGO or go out and make a very public speech. Whereas now in social media, you can choose how public you want to be. 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.
> – Ethan, Singapore

However, while digital media gives activists new opportunities for action, it is also used by governments to surveil, intimidate and harass them. In Singapore, any person can report anyone who posts criticisms of the government on social media. According to Hannah, a friend of hers who posted an Instagram video criticising the government, was threatened directly from the Prime Minister's office through her employer, who said they would fire her if she did not issue an apology.

In Malaysia, Qyira explains that section 233A of the Communications and Multimedia Act allows police to arrest and charge anyone for social media posts that can be "offensive, annoying, or irritating" She adds that, "This is so vague. This law is often abused to harass

activists who post things online," she adds. Sarah's experience with another law, the Sedition Act, landed her in jail.

> I for one was arrested and spent the night in lockup under the Sedition Act for a tweet from our organisation's account, calling for the resignation of the then Prime Minister Mahiaddin and to raise a Black Flag in protest.
> – Sarah, Malaysia

Laws criminalising online dissent are widespread across Southeast Asia, a problem exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Thailand, the government has reportedly abused the Computer Crimes Act, which was amended in 2016 to give authorities permission to monitor and suppress online content (Amnesty International, 2020). Amnesty International also reports that the Thai government has used the Thai Criminal Code to criminalise defamation, arresting and imprisoning people who criticise the government and especially the monarchy.

In Singapore, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act was passed in 2019 (CIVICUS, n.d.). This legislation was designed to 'protect Singaporeans from fake news and educate them about potential damage it can cause – in particular inciting racial and religious disharmony' (CIVICUS, n.d.). However, CIVICUS (n.d.) and Article 19 (2020) agree that the law is being used to suppress dissent and freedom of speech. In the Philippines, a new law, the *Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act, was passed in the middle of the COVID pandemic, which criminalised certain forms of online speech (CIVICUS, n.d.). Additionally, the Anti-Terrorism Act was passed in 2020, permitting the government to prosecute online speech (Freedom House, 2021). The Armed Forces of the Philippines proposed using the law to regulate social media (Freedom House, 2021). In all the four countries we looked at, the criminalisation of online dissent has become the state's reaction to the widespread use of social media by activists as a tool to criticise and mobilise.

But student activists are fighting back and reclaiming digital space. Isra knows the risks of using social media but believes that allowing the government to instil fear in them and to ultimately silence them is unacceptable.

> I understand the risk and how using online platforms can be sensitive and how you can be harassed but, I think, because of that fear, it's important to use it more.
> – Isra, Thailand

Young people like Isra have also started thinking one step ahead to protect themselves from state surveillance online:

> In the beginning, organisers used Facebook messenger, but once they learned about the risk of privacy, they started using Telegram or Signal and other apps that can be safer or that make it more difficult for the government to hack or get any information.
> -Isra, Thailand

The young activists we interviewed have demonstrated how digital media has changed young people's movements in ways that help them to build their bases, to mobilize, and engage. At the same time, social media has also been used to harass them or even to criminalise their activism.

Labelling and delegitimization: young people working against, with and despite governments

Framing young people as troubled or a problem by using a mixture of state policy, media representations and negative public discourses – is a common tactic designed to de-legitimate young people's dissent. Mico, a national leader of a students' union in the Philippines, describes below the common reaction he receives from government officials and other stakeholders when student leaders participate in decision-making processes.

> They say, *estudyante sa umaga, rebelde sa gabi* (students in the morning and rebels in the evening). That form of attack... we are rebranded as enemies of the people and enemies of the state... our demands are immediately being discredited because we are being branded as enemies, but we try to propose solutions. Of course, we want government programmes to work!
> – Mico, Philippines

Mico's experience is emblematic of the kind of labelling and age-based prejudice that young people experience in an adult-dominated world. Around the world young people like Mico are framed as 'dangers to the public order' or a threat to peace and security (Pickard, 2019; Power, 2012). They are represented as 'public enemies' who need to be policed, managed and controlled: they are not active citizens who are participating in democratic spaces. These powerful labels make it relatively easy for governments and other stakeholders to question the legitimacy of young people's right to organise politically and question their commitment to being partners in development processes.

We also found that young people themselves have differing ideas about who counts as a youth activist and what 'qualifies' as activist work. For Ethan in Singapore, activism means working against of the state:

> 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.
> – Ethan, Singapore

Ethan identifies himself as an activist because his start-up company directly opposes the state's activities and initiatives. Hannah, another Singaporean young activist, says that the term activist is politically charged, and in a way, combative or conflictive – which is the reason why she thinks several young Singaporeans are reluctant to call themselves as an activist. For her, activism is more than making the government accountable, it is also about young people working together to create solutions.

> 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.
> – Hannah, Singapore

Sean's account (young activist in Singapore) of the relationship between the state and young activists (working *against the state*) seems to be at odds with Mico's account of Filipino activists working in collaboration with the government to come up with solutions together (working *with* the state). Both these activist-state relationships differ from Hannah's account of activism as working with other young people to resolve social problems (working *despite the state*). The differences in how these young activists perceive their relationship with the government and other elites can be attributed to particularities of the political landscape that characterise their countries.

It has been argued, for instance, that Singapore's civil society, has a long history of acting in an adversarial way against the state (John, 2022). Conversely in the Philippines, civil society's participation in state processes is promoted, protected and enshrined in the country's constitution. The different forms of civil society participation in the Philippines and in Singapore highlight the complex roles activists play in society. However policy makers, and to a certain extent public opinion, seems to be more inclined to describe all young activists as 'troubled' and 'problematic teens', which then legitimises government efforts to stifle their voices and actions.

During the COVID pandemic these age-based biases were exacerbated. Young people were quickly accused of being reluctant to comply with COVID-19 rules or to get vaccinated (Simpson and Altiok, 2020). These representations of young people as irresponsible 'rule breakers' have subsequently been 'used' by police to justify arrests. In the Philippines, for example, two young indigenous *Lumad* students who left their school to participate in a state-sponsored programme were detained on the basis that they were breaking quarantine rules (Dressler, 2021). Community pantries that had been built as mutual aid projects, many of which were set-up and maintained by young people, were 'red-tagged' as exercises run by the armed New People's Army (Talabong, 2021). These reports suggest that rather than being treated as service providers whose work should be values, supported and protected during the pandemic, young people and student organisers were represented as 'lawbreakers' who were not following quarantine and isolation rules.

Young people occupy a paradoxical space in discourses about political participation. On the one hand, they can be represented as apathetic, and disengaged. On the other hand, when they do participate, they can be criticised either for having too little experience or are labelled as dangerous subjects and as threats to the state. These representations can be used to justify state actions intended to silence or muffle young people's voices and restrict their political agency.

Conclusion

Countries in Southeast Asia have long histories of youth and social movements, some of which go back to the years of anti-colonial struggles. They continue to be central to the political landscapes of many Southeast Asian nations. As young people's activism continues to play an important role in the politics of the region, we need to pay a lot more attention given to the 'pluralisation of protest control' or the diversification of ways protests are repressed by Southeast Asian states (Ellefsen & Jämte, 2022, p. 2).

In this chapter, we explored various tactics and strategies to repress young people's movements in the context of increasingly authoritarian-style governance. Many state actors and other elites weaponise state laws – including those introduced as a 'response' to the COVID-19 pandemic – to control and manage youth movements. Popular biases and assumptions about young people are also being used as part of covert and overt exercises in repression. Repression also relies on the vulnerabilities found in unequal gender relations or in situations such as unemployment. We also find that narratives of nation-building and collaboration promulgated by the state are used to 'justify' why protesting is a 'distraction' and therefore counterproductive to 'development'.

We also argued that while the rise of social media provided young people with new ways to organise; it also affords government security forces new ways to stifle protests such as through surveillance, limiting speech on social media and online policing.

The chapter provided examples of more subtle techniques of repression, such as stigmatisation through labelling, surveillance, and threatening future employment prospects. We argued for a need for deeper and more extensive inquiry into the kinds of soft repression used by Southeast Asian states, which give us a better understanding of the multiple layers of repressive actions and help to understand better as Linden and Klandermans (2006) put it,

how soft repression "prepares the ground for hard repression" (p. 226). There is a clear need to further explore modes and impacts of what Ferree (2004) calls soft repression, especially in Southeast Asia, where most research has so far focused on hard repression tactics of the state.

The often-hostile environment that young people navigate had implications for how we conduct research about their work. This hostility reinforced the need to pay extra attention to ensuring their anonymity in any document or publication that reaches public domain.

One question brought to light while doing this research is what do we do when youth activists want to be identified for their work? Although a few of our interviewees said they wanted to use their real names for this report, ethics guidelines recommend anonymity especially in such cases where participants might be harmed. In this case, we chose to anonymise all participants because of the possibility of them facing serious repercussions but are we, perhaps, taking away power from those who wished to be identified for their work as an activist? With this in mind, we need further discussion about relying on anonymisation, its implications, and what identification means for research participants who might value and find empowerment in being named despite potential harms.

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