


# YOUTHQUAKE: YOUTH-LED MOVEMENTS SHAKING UP EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

**REPORT**
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*Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, a leading young voice of Thailand's pro-democracy movement, gives a speech outside a prison in Bangkok on March 3, 2021.*

*Photo credit: SPhotograph via Shutterstock*

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*Burmese protesters express their disapproval of Burma's military coup in front of the United Nations in Bangkok.*

*Photo credit: teera.noisakran via Shutterstock*



# Major Takeaways

This report examines how certain youth-led movements in East and Southeast Asia were able to mobilize large-scale movements, connect with like-minded youth across borders, and navigate the legal and systematic challenges they faced, as summarized in the following five takeaways:

## Leaderless Mobilization

Youth-led movements are embracing leaderless decision-making models to encourage broader participation and collective action in mass gatherings across the country. A decentralized structure coupled with an anonymous yet verifiable communication strategy can amplify the voices of all participants and foster stronger solidarity while enhancing security and privacy features to provide better protection against state surveillance.

## Online Dissent

Youth activists, often digital natives, leverage pop culture references—such as memes, hashtags and emojis—to voice their opposition and resonate with larger audiences. These visual and textual shorthands enable rapid communication and are especially effective at evading state censorship, as they frequently use euphemisms or codes that authoritarian regimes struggle to detect and suppress.

## Repressive Laws

In response to the large-scale youth-led movements, regimes used laws with vague and broad definitions to widely punish people for their involvement in resistance efforts. These laws effectively expanded the powers of law enforcement to justify the arbitrary detention of scores of prisoners of conscience, many of whom may now stand trial without trial or due process.

## Cyberattacks

Authoritarian regimes use advanced spyware and cyber units to monitor and suppress dissent—often undetected. Their tactics include hacking protesters' phones, launching online attacks and doxxing dissenters, with women activists particularly vulnerable to these targeted assaults. Additionally, regimes deploy cyber armies and bots to spread disinformation while using extensive digital surveillance and censorship efforts to erase pro-democracy content from the online world.

## Diasporic Movements

Diaspora youth have created a transnational network motivated by a collective dedication to democratic values and a strong sense of ethnic and national identity. Despite enduring increasing transnational repression from authoritarian regimes, young activists from diasporic groups are building together international cross-movement solidarity to amplify their collective voices.

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*Hong Kongers put on helmets of politicized memes such as Pepe the Frog while protesting the government and police.*

*Photo credit: HUIYT via Shutterstock*



# Introduction

In recent years, youth[1] across East and Southeast Asia, and around the world, have spearheaded the demand for democracy, justice, and freedom. They have breathed new life into the struggle for democracy and employed innovative strategies that are unique to their generation.

This report examines youth-led movements across East and Southeast Asia, including those within diaspora communities. The study covers the period between the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019 to 2023, when a significant uptick in youth-led movements was documented throughout the region. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic and crackdowns by authoritarian regimes, these movements have continued to evolve and proliferate.

## HRF's report is divided into six chapters:

- **Chapter III** explores a series of protests in which young activists in the region used the power of pop culture, symbols, and creativity to strengthen their movements.
- **Chapter IV** studies how young people use digital tools to reach a wider audience, facilitate communications, and avoid censorship from authoritarian regimes.
- **Chapter V** details how the authoritarian regimes responded to online and offline resistance, examining the oppressive legislation and digital surveillance employed by the regimes.
- **Chapter VI** highlights conditions that facilitated the mobilization of diaspora movements of Hong Kong, Tibet, and Uyghur youth living abroad.
- **Conclusion and Recommendations** chapter summarizes key points discussed in the prior four chapters and issues recommendations on how civil society organizations and the Burmese, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Thai regimes can protect youth activism.

[1] The term "youth" lacks a universally accepted definition, varying across different entities and regions. In the countries covered by this report, definitions of youth also vary: according to Matkhao and Sooktawee, Thailand defines youth as individuals aged 14 to 25, Burma's National Youth Policy defines youth as those aged 16 to 35, and China's National Bureau of Statistics, defines youth as those aged 15 to 29. For the purposes of this report, the terms "youth," "young people," and "activists" are used interchangeably to encompass individuals aged 15 to 35, providing a broad framework to address the issues related to youth-led movements.

# On the Ground: Acts of Creative Defiance




*A Hong Kong protester holds a "Never Forget" placard featuring symbols of the pro-democracy movement during a solidarity gathering for those imprisoned at Lai Chi Kok Correctional Centre.*

*Photo credit: Sandra Sanders via Shutterstock*



*Hong Kong police use water cannons on protesters on September 15, 2019.*

*Photo credit: Isaac Yeung via Shutterstock*

# Be Water: Hong Kong's Leaderless Protests

**Youth across East and Southeast Asia have sparked a wave of movements characterized by leaderless organization and innovative creativity that harness the power of pop culture. Whether it be Pepe the Frog in Hong Kong, Harry Potter in Thailand, the three-finger salute in Burma, or the A4 protests in China, these movements have become powerful symbols of resistance and unity. Throughout this dynamic period, young activists have not only drawn inspiration from each other but have also exchanged ideas to strengthen their movements.**

As Beijing gradually tightened its grip over Hong Kong in the 21st century, starting with education reform that erased the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) historic crimes from textbooks to increasing control over Hong Kong elections, Hong Kongers have remained resilient in the face of CCP aggression.[2]

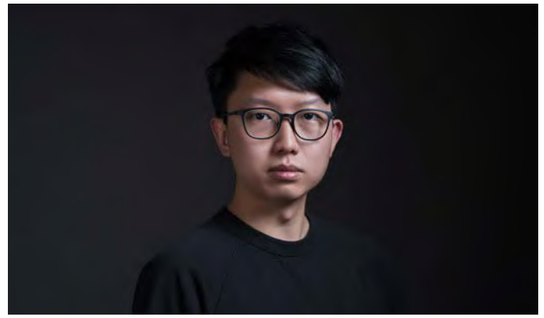
One such wave of repression came in 2019 when the pro-Beijing government of Carrie Lam proposed a law that would allow extraditions to mainland China, where political dissidents would be subject to China's opaque judicial process.[3] The movement grew into a citywide campaign of resistance against Hong Kong's deteriorating freedoms and Beijing's increasing authoritarian influence that would become the blueprint for youth-led movements.

The cornerstone of the youth-led protests in Hong Kong was anonymous but verifiable communication technologies that allowed protesters to organize safely and efficiently. End-to-end encrypted messaging services such as Telegram were widely used for their security and privacy features that better prevented third parties from monitoring conversations.[4] The other popular communication method was LIHKG, a Reddit-like forum where users could freely post messages to community boards. The forum required users to register with an email address linked to a Hong Kong internet service provider, school, or university.[5]

This strict verification process allowed users to trust each other as they were reassured that behind anonymous profiles was a verified Hong Konger. With additional functions such as upvoting, downvoting, and polling features, content easily gained popularity and users were able to establish a consensus around proposed ideas.[6]

*"We successfully pushed them to care about Hong Kong and fight for democracy and freedom, to voice their opposition against the Chinese Communist Party, even though the power is unmatched, even though Beijing has really overrun our power and authority. Then, we still resist."*

SUNNY CHEUNG
EXILED HONG KONG ACTIVIST, POLITICIAN, AND ASSOCIATE FELLOW FOR CHINA STUDIES AND DEPUTY EDITOR OF CHINA BRIEF AT THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION



[2] "Hong Kong students and residents reject national-education classes, 2012," *Global Nonviolent Action Database,* Accessed March 14, 2025, https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/hong-kong-students-and-residents-reject-national-education-classes-2012; Dan Glaun, "Chinese Legislature Tightens Control Over Hong Kong Elections," *PBS News*, March 11, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/chinese-legislature-tightens-control-over-hong-kong-elections/.

[3] Mike Ives, "What Is Hong Kong's Extradition Bill?," *The New York Times,* June 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/world/asia/hong-kong-extradition-bill.html.

[4] Alex Hurley, "Encryption vs. Surveillance: How the NSL Is Changing Hong Kong's Tech Landscape," *The China Guys,* August 2020, https://thechinaguys.com/encryption-vs-surveillance-how-the-nsl-is-changing-hong-kongs-tech-landscape/.

[5] Yong Ming Kow, Bonnie Nardi, and Wai Kuen Cheng, "Be Water: Technologies in the Leaderless Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong," *CHI '20: Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376634.

[6] *Ibid.*, 3-4.

The LIHKG forum and anonymous messaging groups became a hotbed for crowdsourced artistic material that served as an outlet to express sentiments of grief, discouragement, or hope, often with humor. Many artistic productions took on a macabre and satirical approach to illustrate the distress of the Hong Kong people. A notable example was the use of the cartoon Pepe the Frog to express their dissatisfaction with Beijing-backed rule.[7] To Hong Kong youth, the teary-eyed frog with an expression of resignation was emblematic of a long-suffering and sad resistance that many Hong Kongers felt over the course of the nearly two-year struggle against CCP aggression. Pepe was depicted in endless iterations, including as a typical protester outfitted with the iconic yellow construction helmet hat, an emergency responder, or a journalist.[8] Pepe memes offered much-needed moments of levity as violence and repression escalated, encapsulating the conflicting twinge of hopelessness but persistence many Hong Kongers felt.[9] Art was also a way for people to criticize the regime, as demonstrated by a street mural of former Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam and Chinese president Xi Jinping in an intimate embrace, a disturbing illustration of Beijing's influence in facilitating Hong Kong's decline into authoritarianism.[10]

Other art inspired optimism. Artists placed Hong Kongers in the midst of iconic scenes of liberation to envision what a possible victory might look like. For example, one user shared a reproduction of Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* that replaced protesters of the French revolution with Hong Kongers.[11] The reproduction suggests that liberty can prevail in Hong Kong's struggle for freedom and democracy. Other aspirational renditions employed more modern and popular references from Japanese anime series, such as *One Piece* or *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Drawings likened Hong Kong protesters to the series' protagonists, who also had to struggle to resist or defeat staggering villains.[12] These animes' central themes of integrity, unity, and resistance strongly resonated with protesters who also felt the imperative to remain united and resilient against assaults from police forces, the Hong Kong government, or the CCP.[13]




*Memes were also an important way for Hong Kongers to satirize leaders by superimposing their faces onto Pokemon characters or the Game of Thrones opening graphics.*

*Photo credit: Lewis Tse via Shutterstock*

[7] Daniel Victor, "Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog. No, They're Not Alt-Right.," *The New York Times,* August 19, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-pepe-frog.html.

[8] Emma Grey Ellis, "Pepe the Frog Means Something Different in Hong Kong—Right?," *WIRED,* August 23, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/pepe-the-frog-meme-hong-kong/.

[9] India Bourke, "Hong Kong protesters transform alt-right Pepe the Frog into pro-democracy symbol," *Hong Kong Free Press,* October 3, 2019, https://hongkongfp.com/2019/10/03/hong-kong-protesters-transform-alt-right-pepe-frog-pro-democracy-symbol/.

[10] Stephy Chung, "Future of political art in Hong Kong uncertain as Beijing tightens grip," *CNN,* May 27, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/hong-kong-protests-political-art-intl-hnk/index.html.

[11] "Dozens of Designers Work in Shifts to Create Hong Kong Protest Art. Here Are Some Examples of Their Work," *Time Magazine,* September 18, 2019, https://time.com/5679885/hong-kong-protest-art-agitprop-illustration/.

[12] Vivienne Chow, "The magical world of Japanese anime has become the reality of Hong Kong protesters," *Quartz,* November 14, 2019, https://qz.com/1729995/japanese-anime-is-coming-to-life-in-the-hong-kong-protests.

[13] *Ibid.*






*A demonstrator wears a costume of a Pepe the Frog with a bandage over his eye and carrying posters with protest slogans to sympathize with maltreated protesters.*

*Photo credit: HUIYT via Shutterstock*

*"People find amusing ways, creative ways to still express their sense of dissent through irony, through sarcasm, through memes even, that actually keep the spirits still somehow together. Because when you laugh at the dictator together, when you, make fun of these draconian laws together, you are actually still expressing a sort of dissent that cannot be expressed in other ways or forms."*

ANNA KWOK
EXILED HONG KONG ACTIVIST AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE HONG KONG DEMOCRACY COUNCIL (HKDC)



*Protesters wear gas masks, yellow helmets, sunglasses, and other protective gear on their way to a demonstration.*

*Photo credit: Rumbo a lo desconocido via Shutterstock*

Many users also created original content.[14] This includes the unofficial anthem of the protests, "Glory to Hong Kong," whose instrumental and lyrics were crowd-sourced on the LIHKG forum.[15] The anonymous composer then compiled recordings of people singing the song via Google Drive into a choir rendition.[16]

The success of crowdsourcing was also exemplified by the construction of the four-meter tall pro-democracy statue, "Lady Liberty Hong Kong." The design team held a vote on LIHKG to ask users which design they preferred and then launched a crowdfunding campaign, which raised HK$203,933 (~US$26,100) within six hours.[17]

The abundance of protest art was the product of a movement that was inclusive, anonymous, and collaborative. Facilitated by safe but anonymous technologies, young people felt particularly empowered to express themselves in creative formats and through popular references.

Technology also allowed protesters to share practical information widely, organize safely incognito, provide real-time updates, and generally create a community of care. Much of the city's protests were organized on the LIHKG forum or via Telegram where people would post dates, times, and locations of protests.[18] Organizers also cleverly took advantage of the Airdrop feature on iPhones to quickly share protest art or schedules with other iPhone users at rallies, subway stations, and other public locations.[19] To help keep each other safe, protesters would often make maps identifying the location of police, "thugs," or instigators of chaos, protesters, and icons to indicate the location of first aid and refueling stations.[20] As protesters endured the brutality of tear gas, police batons, and rubber bullets, protesters voluntarily set up supply points stocked with water, sanitary pads, goggles, and plastic wrap to protect against pepper spray, with locations shared on social media.[21]

Witnesses at protests would fact-check updates of protests circulating online and send photos as verification.[22] As police began to use live streaming and surveillance cameras to track individuals, protesters encouraged each other to wear masks, yellow helmets to hide their faces and protect themselves.[23] They would also largely wear all-black clothes to better conceal themselves among the crowd.[24]

Anna Kwok, exiled Hong Kong activist, describes how she helped others stay safe: *"One of the things I did was, to actually open up 9 or 12 broadcast streaming videos of Hong Kong at the time, because at the time Hong Kong had a lot of citizen journalists... I would just sit in front of the monitor, like a surveillance agent from the CCP as well, to see, where police were stationed, where they, what kinds of weapons they carried, what vehicles they were bringing with them and driving with them, things like that. Then disseminate this information on social media platforms."*

[14] "Dozens of Designers Work in Shifts to Create Hong Kong Protest Art. Here Are Some Examples of Their Work," *Time Magazine,* September 18, 2019, https://time.com/5679885/hong-kong-protest-art-agitprop-illustration/.

[15] Daniel Victor, "Hong Kong Protesters, Without an Anthem to Sing, Create One Online," *The New York Times,* September 12, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/12/world/asia/glory-to-hong-kong-anthem.html.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Kris Cheng, "Plan for 'Lady Liberty Hong Kong' pro-democracy statue surpasses HK$200k crowdfunding goal within hours," *Hong Kong Free Press,* August 31, 2019, https://hongkongfp.com/2019/08/31/plan-lady-liberty-hong-kong-pro-democracy-statue-surpasses-hk200k-crowdfunding-goal-within-hours/.

[18] Kow, Nardi, and Cheng, "Be Water: Technologies in the Leaderless Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong," *supra* note 5, 7.

[19] "Dozens of Designers Work in Shifts to Create Hong Kong Protest Art. Here Are Some Examples of Their Work," *Time Magazine,* September 18, 2019, https://time.com/5679885/hong-kong-protest-art-agitprop-illustration/.

[20] Benjamin Haas, "The new battle in Hong Kong isn't on the streets; it's in the apps," *MIT Technology Review,* September 10, 2019, https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/09/10/102646/the-new-battle-in-hong-kong-isnt-on-the-streets-its-in-the-apps/.

[21] Kow, Nardi, and Cheng, "Be Water: Technologies in the Leaderless Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong," *supra* note 5, 6.

[22] Kow, Nardi, and Cheng, "Be Water: Technologies in the Leaderless Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong," *supra* note 5, 8.

[23] "Hong Kong mood darkens as hard hats replace yellow umbrella," *Financial Times,* June 13, 2019, shttps://www.ft.com/content/b4eb3fb6-8d87-11e9-a1c1-51bf8f989972.

[24] Vanessa Friedman, "The Color of Protest," *The New York Times,* Published October 29, 2019; last modified October 30, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/style/29china-ban-black-clothing-hong-kong-protests.html.



*Hong Kongers write anonymous messages of encouragement on post-it notes to stick on a wall of Tsuen Wan.*

*Photo credit: Calvin Au via Shutterstock*



Other citizens found less involved ways to contribute to protests. Civil servants, for instance, uploaded their work IDs covered in a sticky note with messages condemning the regime.[25] Many citizens would tack on Post-it notes denouncing the regime and containing words of encouragement on walls across the city, much like the famous Lennon wall in Prague.[26] An anonymous 21-year old revealed she would protect the pieces of paper by protecting them with large sheets of plastic wrap.[27] And when the walls were forcibly taken down as the city cracked down on visible signs of dissent, restaurants and shops would put up blank Post-it notes in solidarity.[28]

Protesters also developed a unique lexicon of protest slogans and chants that encapsulated Hong Kongers' indomitable spirit and collaborative attitude. Many were straightforward calls for liberty and freedom such as "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times (光復香港時代革命)."[29] In addition to being graffitied all over the cityscape, the phrase was chanted at protests; and when police started cracking down on these protests, people would shout the slogan together from their own apartment in the evenings in a show of unity.[30]

Perhaps the most notable and ubiquitous slogan in Hong Kong was "Be Water."[31] Derived from martial arts star Bruce Lee, the phrase reminded youth to "be flexible," adaptable, and mobile with every challenge that arose.[32] The phrase encouraged people to be creative in their resistance as police escalated their crackdown on protesters. In one instance where an individual was arrested and charged with possessing an "offensive weapon" for wielding a laser at the protests, hundreds of protesters proceeded to wield lasers and direct the rays at the same planetarium.[33] The solidarity conveyed as hundreds of strangers coalesced to protest an individual's wrongful arrest exemplifies the cohesion of young protesters. In another instance, protesters formed a 30-mile-long human chain while waving lights from their mobile phones to express their yearning for freedom.[34] The move was a call-back to anti-Soviet protesters of the 1980s who also linked arms to demand liberty across former Soviet states.[35]

The unity and tenacity of protesters rippled throughout the city and around the globe, inspiring other youth to join in the calls for freedom and democracy in Hong Kong and their own homes. Hong Kong's leaderless movement, characterized by inventive strategies of resilience, created a blueprint for youth-led movements across the region to follow.

*"You never know what the legacy is, until perhaps someone, one day tells you, 'I am inspired by what you did... we actually also use some of your technique, thanks to you.' That is the moment you feel like, so the Hong Kong movement is not just about Hong Kong itself, right? It's also about how a normal human being in the world cares about democracy, and how all the civilized people should be geared up to fight for global authoritarianism this year."*

SUNNY CHEUNG
EXILED HONG KONG ACTIVIST

[25] Kris Cheng, "In Pictures: 100s of Hong Kong civil servants criticise gov't handling of protests and Yuen Long mob attacks," *Hong Kong Free Press,* March 31, 2020, https://hongkongfp.com/2019/07/25/pictures-100s-hong-kong-civil-servants-criticise-govt-handling-protests-yuen-long-mob-attacks/.

[26] Isabella Steger, "Post-it notes are the new weapon of choice for Hong Kong's protesters," *Quartz,* July 9, 2019, https://qz.com/1660649/post-it-notes-spread-protest-message-on-hong-kongs-lennon-walls.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] "Hongkongers use creativity against new security law," *Taiwan News,* July 6, 2020, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/3960846.

[29] Mary Hui, "A guide to the most important chants of Hong Kong's protests," *Quartz,* September 2, 2019, https://qz.com/1699119/chants-and-slogans-of-hong-kongs-protests-explained.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Kow, Nardi, and Cheng, "Be Water: Technologies in the Leaderless Anti-ELAB Movement in Hong Kong," *supra* note 5, 4.

[32] Ilaria Maria Sala, "Hong Kong's 'be water' protests leave China casting about for an enemy," *The Guardian,* August 30. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/30/hong-kongs-be-water-protests-leaves-china-casting-about-for-an-enemy.

[33] Christy Choi, "'No tears, no blood': Hongkongers stage huge laser show to protest against arrests," *The Guardian,* August 8, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/08/no-tears-no-blood-hongkongers-stage-huge-laser-show-to-protest-police-arrests.

[34] Erin Hale and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Hong Kong protesters join hands in 30-mile human chain," *The Guardian,* August 23, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/23/hong-kong-protesters-join-hands-in-30-mile-human-chain.

[35] *Ibid.*



*Thai students protest in front of the Ministry of Education in September 2020, calling for quality education and criticizing the authoritarian government.*

*Photo credit: Kan Sangtong via Shutterstock*

# "Free Youth" and Thai Student Resistance

A youth-led movement emerged in Thailand concurrently with the 2019 general election, the first since a military coup ousted the democratically elected government in 2014.[36] This was when the newly established Future Forward Party (FFP) came third in the election, receiving significant support from first-time voters who were seeking political change.[37] For many, this success was unexpected.[38]

In February 2020, the constitutional court disbanded the Future Forward Party and imposed a 10-year political ban on its executives.[39] Sombat Boonngamanong, a Thai veteran political activist, described how many young people were displeased with the move: *"The dissolution of the Future Forward Party also stoked anger and discontent among people. When the movement erupted, the new generation felt that this was their first mob. This was their mob. You can call it a mob of the new generation. The whole generation came out."*

Young people took to the street to protest the unjustified disbandment of the party. They not only demanded the reinstatement of the FFP but also called for broader political reforms, including a new constitution, the reduction of military influence in politics, and, unprecedentedly, the reform of the monarchy.[40] Angelo Sathayu Sathorn, Thai activist and member of the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD), notes how people's conception of the monarchy drastically changed: *"In the past, we saw ourselves as subjects, perhaps even commoners, under the king's authority. However, since we began organizing that year, there has been a shift. We began communicating with people, leading to a transformation in the perception of ourselves as citizens with rights. We are no longer merely subjects who are dictated to."*

Unlike previous protests in Thailand, young people infused creativity into their activism.[41] They set up smaller protest stages within rallies and utilized a range of innovative campaigns, including art exhibitions, public opinion polls, drag queen performances, and street fashion shows.[42]

*"It was pretty cool, very colorful, and the gatherings had a lot more variety in formats, such as Drag. There was an event venue at Silom, a fashion show, and things like that. The part I liked the most was probably when they used the Telegram application to schedule gatherings. The movement had no leaders. That was something that I never expected that there would be an event like this. It was an unusual and highly effective move."*

SOMBAT BOONNGAMANONG
THAI POLITICAL ACTIVSIT

[36] Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, "The rise and dynamics of the 2020 youth movement in Thailand," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, February 2022, https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/importedFiles/2023/11/14/Thailand-%25202020%2520youth%2520movement_FINAL.pdf; Amy Searight and Brian Harding, "Thailand's First Elections Since Its 2014 Coup," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 22, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/thailands-first-elections-its-2014-coup.

[37] *Ibid.*, 8.

[38] *Ibid.*, 8.

[39] Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Thai court dissolves opposition party Future Forward," *The Guardian,* February 21, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/21/thai-court-dissolves-opposition-party-future-forward.

[40] Lertchoosakul, "The rise and dynamics of the 2020 youth movement in Thailand," *supra* note 36, 9.

[41] Lertchoosakul, "The rise and dynamics of the 2020 youth movement in Thailand," *supra* note 36, 9-10.

[42] Lertchoosakul, "The rise and dynamics of the 2020 youth movement in Thailand," *supra* note 36, 10.



*Thai students wear inflatable dinosaur costumes at a 'Bad Student' rally in Bangkok in November 2020.*

*Photo credit: Narong Sangnak/ EPA-EFE via Shutterstock*

Thai youth took inspiration from Hong Kong protesters by adopting a leaderless strategy and leveraging digital tools to advance their calls.[43] The leaderless strategy facilitated decentralized decision-making that helped protesters to efficiently organize and mobilize large gatherings across the country.[44] As the protest progressed, young people utilized Telegram, an end-to-end encrypted messaging application, to circumvent official monitoring on platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook.[45] Telegram's features provided secure communication, including cloud-based messages and self-destruct timers.[46]

Creative expression became central to student resistance. Young people wore oversized T-rex inflatable suits to denounce the outdated way of thinking of older generation politicians, who were often called "dinosaurs." One 15 year old high school student leader, Benjamaporn Nivas, likened the students to the meteorites that will crush the antiquated class of "dinosaur" politicians into extinction.[47] Other dinosaur-costumed performers paraded to the theme song of the Royal News, a nightly news channel that covers the Thai royal family, to mock the Thai regime's long-standing practice of forcing people to consume one-sided news.[48] The Bad Student group, which opposed Thailand's outmoded education system, used the hashtag #ByeByeDinosaurs to express their displeasure with the older-generation of politicians.

Much like Hong Kong, a notable feature of recent youth-led movement protests in Thailand is their reference to global popular culture. Protesters have drawn comparisons between figures from popular movies and current political figures , such as cosplaying characters from the Harry Potter series, to draw comparisons between the antagonist Voldemort referred to as "He Who Shall Not be Named" whose name people refuse to utter out of fear and the Thai King who people can not insult at the risk of retribution of jail time for violating the lesé-majesté law that forbids any speech that "insults the King."[49]

Activists also took to X to crowd-source ideas, which led to the proliferation of Hamtaro, a Japanese manga Hamster, as a protest symbol. Youth protesters used the manga's theme song as an unofficial protest anthem, altering lyrics to criticize corruption in the government, singing *"the most delicious food is taxpayers' money. Dissolve the parliament! Dissolve the parliament! Dissolve the parliament!"*[50]

The use of pop culture in protests has defined a new generation of youth activists who incorporate the pop culture that they consume in their everyday lives into their politics. The easily recognizable icons allow participants to band together under images that resonate with memories from childhood or pop cultural interests. In an age where culture has become globalized, fictional references provide the shared context that allow young people to effectively communicate a message and garner solidarity with broader, international audiences. Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, a Thai activist, argues that youth-led movements fostered unprecedented levels of freedom of speech:

*"When we compare the social atmosphere in the past with today's, (in the past), people could not even talk (about the monarchy). People must whisper to each other. Even if they stayed in the car, they had to whisper to each other anyway. It was an atmosphere of fear. But if we look at the current situation after we "broke the ceiling," the social atmosphere was slowly opening."*

[43] Preeti Jha, "Thailand protest: Why young activists are embracing Hong Kong's tactics," *BBC,* October 22, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54626271; Marimi Kishimoto, "Tech-savvy Thai protesters take page out of Hong Kong's playbook," *Nikkei Asia,* October 30, 2020, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Turbulent-Thailand/Tech-savvy-Thai-protesters-take-page-out-of-Hong-Kong-s-playbook.

[44] *Ibid., BBC.*

[45] Marimi Kishimoto, "Tech-savvy Thai protesters take page out of Hong Kong's playbook," *Nikkei Asia,* October 30, 2020, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Turbulent-Thailand/Tech-savvy-Thai-protesters-take-page-out-of-Hong-Kong-s-playbook.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Matthew Tostevin and Petra Mahira, "Thai school students protest against 'dinosaurs'," *Reuters,* November 21, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-protests-idUSKBN2810AA/.

[48] *Ibid.*

[49] Erin Handley, "Why Thai students use rubber ducks, dinosaurs and three-finger salutes as protest symbols," *ABC News,* November 24, 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-24/thai-protests-rubber-duckies-dinosaurs-three-finger-salute/12911494.

[50] Anthony Gramuglia, "Hamtaro Is Now a Protest Symbol in Thailand," *CBR,* July 29, 2020, https://www.cbr.com/hamtaro-protest-symbol-thailand/.




*Healthcare workers participated in civil disobedience movements in support of the election results that saw the victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party and in opposition of the military coup.*

*Photo credit: Han Myo Htun via Shutterstock*

# The Civil Disobedience Movement in Burma

Since the Burmese military seized power in a coup in February 2021,[51] Burmese people from all walks of life came together to show their defiance against the authoritarian junta.[52] At the outset of the resistance, Burmese youth were instrumental in spearheading the movement.[53]

This generation, having lived through a period of democratic change in their childhood and adolescence, was particularly resistant to propaganda and social injustice.[54] Among the various resistance efforts, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) stood out as one of the most successful campaigns, largely due to the significant contributions of youth who used social media to mainstream the resistance and mobilize widespread participation.[55]

Healthcare professionals were among the first groups to launch a general strike mobilization against the coup, frequently referred to as the CDM.[56] From Nay Pyi Taw to Yangon, medical staff pledged to stop working in protest against the military coup.[57] Since then, the CDM has become a vital pillar of the resistance to military rule, involving hundreds of thousands of civil servants.[58] In Burma, the CDM is widely referred to as a strike in which civil servants refused to go to work to challenge the authoritarian regime.[59] The movement includes various forms of activities such as street protests, silent strikes, banging pots and pans at night, and boycotting military-linked businesses.[60]

Youth leadership ignited the collective effort to mainstream the movement, ultimately giving rise to what is arguably the longest-running CDM in the world.[61] Fueled by a deep-seated frustration over the country's stagnation and grim future under the military rule, Burmese youth led an anti-coup movement that entailed mobilizing financial support for striking civil servants on social media and leading street protests to challenge the military regime.[62]




*Burmese people from varied communities joined in the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).*

*Photo credit: R. Bociaga via Shutterstock*

[51] Thet Swe Win, "The coup united the people of Myanmar against oppression," *Al Jazeera,* October 1, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/10/1/the-coup-united-the-people-of-myanmar-against-oppression.

[52] "Myanmar coup: Tens of thousands join largest protests since 2007," *BBC,* February 7, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55967959.

[53] Niharika Mandhana and Feliz Solomon, "A New Generation Takes the Lead in Myanmar Protests," *The Wall Street Journal,* March 10, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-generation-takes-the-lead-in-myanmar-protests-11615395087.

[54] Su Mon Thant, "In the wake of the coup: how Myanmar youth arose to fight for the nation," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, December 2021, https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/importedFiles/2023/10/16/Myanmar%2520youth_FINAL.pdf.

[55] "The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era," *New Mandala,* October 19, 2021, https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/; "Myanmar's Youth After the Coup, A Primer," ASEAN Youth Forum, June 2023, https://aseanyouthforum.org/myanmars-youth-a-primer/.

[56] "After coup, medical workers spearhead civil disobedience campaign," *Frontier Myanmar,* February 2, 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/after-coup-medical-workers-spearhead-civil-disobedience-campaign/.

[57] *Ibid*.

[58] "The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era," *supra* note 55.

[59] Ye Htet, "It's time to re-think the CDM," *Frontier Myanmar,* August 28, 2023, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/its-time-to-re-think-the-cdm/.

[60] "The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era," *supra* note 55.

[61] "Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement Carries On in Face of Increasing Junta Repression," *The Irrawaddy,* January 24, 2022, https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-carries-on-in-face-of-increasing-junta-repression.html.

[62] Emily Fishbein and Nu Nu Lusan, "Young, rebellious and the Myanmar military's 'worst enemy'," *Al Jazeera,* October 5, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/5/young-rebellious-and-the-myanmar-militarys-worst-enemy.



*A Burmese protester bangs a pot during a demonstration in Mandalay against the military coup.*

*Photo credit: Sai Han One via Shutterstock*

Young artists also used their skills to challenge the regime and spread awareness of the CDM.[63] During the demonstration in Yangon, members of the Myanmar Cartoonists Association carried cutouts of cartoons denouncing the coup.[64] Tech-savvy youth also popularized and sustained the movement through online campaigns, including the "Social Punishment Campaign."[65] Internet users leveraged social media to identify and expose relatives of military generals, sharing information about their residences, occupation, and the foreign universities their children enrolled in.[66] The campaign called on the public to ostracize and shame these individuals, while also calling for a boycott of their businesses.[67] Win Ko Ko Aung, an exiled Burmese activist, social entrepreneur, and Global Bitcoin Adoption Fellow at the Human Rights Foundation, describes his role in galvanizing young people online: *"I personally also stood on the street. And also regularly, shared my videos with my community members, and then we saw many participate in the movement in some other parts of Yangon. At the same time, I regularly posted on social media to educate others about the situation because most of my followers, majority of my followers were Generation Z."*

Additionally, some university students refused to attend regime-run universities or military-linked institutions.[68]

As of April 2023, enrollment in regime-run universities has dropped by 70% since the coup.[69] Some CDM students who boycotted the regime's education system opted for online education.[70]

Protesters continued their peaceful demonstration everywhere, including at home. Burmese people voiced their solidarity in opposing the coup through the sound of banging pots and pans at night.[71] A widely-circulated poem titled "Battle Symphony" was composed with the line, "in this battle, the sound of justice comes from pots and pans."[72] Several pro-democracy groups, including The University Students' Union Alumni Force,[73] and The Milk Tea Alliance, urged people to join the movement to show resistance against the military.[74] The 'banging pots and pans' is a traditional ritual to ward off evil spirits or negativity.[75] This form of demonstration also facilitated the larger participation of different groups during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, including youth, older people, and persons with disabilities.[76]

As protests continued to brew after the February 1 coup, the people of Burma stacked and strategically placed commonplace household items to show their resistance while maintaining their anonymity, and thereby, safety.

[63] Syukron Subkhi, "The Youth Resistance Towards Myanmar's Military Coup: Efforts of Young Generation Protest Through Art," ASEAN Studies Center Universitas Gadjah Mada, September 24, 2021, https://asc.fisipol.ugm.ac.id/2021/09/24/the-youth-resistance-towards-myanmars-military-coup-efforts-of-young-generation-protest-through-art/.

[64] *Ibid*.

[65] The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era," *supra* note 55.

[66] Sithu Aung Myint, "'Social punishment' campaign turns the tables on military elite," *Frontier Myanmar,* March 18, 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/social-punishment-campaign-turns-the-tables-on-military-elite/.

[67] *Ibid*.

[68] Soe Htet and Tamas Wells, "Student Activism and Myanmar's Revolution," Australian Institute of International Affairs, August 4, 2023, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/student-activism-and-myanmars-revolution/.

[69] Padone, "Enrollment in state-run universities down '70%' since coup," *University World News,* April 26, 2023, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20230426140655766.

[70] Soe Htet and Wells, "Student Activism and Myanmar's Revolution," *supra* note

[71] "Myanmar junta threatens pot-banging protesters with treason," *France 24,* January 25, 2022, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220125-myanmar-junta-threatens-pot-banging-protesters-with-treason.

[72] Judith Beyer, "'You messed with the wrong generation': the young people resisting Myanmar's military," Open Democracy, February 11, 2021, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/you-messed-with-the-wrong-generation-the-young-people-resisting-myanmars-military/.

[73] Naw Say Phaw Waa, "Universities, professors and students still under attack," *University World News,* January 28, 2022, https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220128124326889.

[74] MilkTeaAllianceCalendar (@MTA_Calendar), "Mon Cont'd: Alliance for Free Burma Solidarity's event "Remembering 8.8.88 Heroic Struggle: Supporting ongoing movement for justice and #democracy in #Burma & In Myanmar the resistance is calling for a  memorial for historic '8888 movement' by banging Pots & Pans! /5," X, tweet, August 8, 2022, https://x.com/MTA_Calendar/status/1556377542461898759.

[75] Lorcan Lovett, "The nights of pots and pans are back, on Myanmar's fearful streets," *The Guardian,* February 2, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/02/the-nights-of-pots-and-pans-are-back-on-myanmar-fearful-streets.

[76] Phyu Phyu Oo, "The importance of Myanmar's pots and pans protests," Lowy Institute, February 11, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/importance-myanmar-s-pots-pans-protests.

The results were striking scenes of rows of stuffed toys carrying anti-junta signs, carefully arranged across a small street; a "flower strike" wherein rows of flowers were laid out to commemorate those slain by the brutal regime; protesters holding easter eggs with anti-junta slogans painted on them to reference the strike that took place on a Sunday. Some protesters held up pots and pans as protest signage, taping messages such as "pray for Myanmar's democracy" and "free our leaders."[77] The protest even garnered the attention of Pope Francis, who praised the Myanmar Youth for being "committed to supporting democracy and making their voices heard peacefully," in his Easter Sunday address at St. Peter's Basilica.[78] Young anti-coup demonstrators were exceptionally clever in selecting relevant themes for each rally or period of protest to unify protesters in demands for change, while resonating with broader audiences when images were shared online. Tapping into the imagery of easter eggs in a majority Buddhist country speaks to the ways in which protesters leveraged motifs with international recognition to catch the attention of a global audience.

Other protests paid homage to local themes and appealed to regional sensibilities. One protest consisted of placing thousands of dolls called *pyit-tine-htaung* in the streets.[79] The name loosely translates to "when it's thrown or falls, it comes back up."[80] Each doll, which was placed in front of a handwritten note, served as a symbol of the resilience of the Burmese people because the doll would right itself back up every time it was pushed over — similar to the Burmese people who continue to advocate for freedom even after numerous military coups and subsequent violence.[81] As the military junta increased their use of violence against demonstrators, protesters would rely on props to continue the rally. To replace human protesters, people would use toy cars, cardboard cutouts, and even helium-filled balloons with messages calling for international help to express themselves.[82]

Though the CDM did not lead to the immediate restoration of democracy, the movement significantly obstructed the administrative function of the regime.[83] Since the coup, approximately 410,000 people or nearly half of the workforce,[84] including healthcare workers, teachers, former security forces, and soldiers have joined the CDM.[85]

With its impact on political development in the country, the CDM was nominated for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its struggle for peace and democracy through non-violent means.[86]



*Protesters demonstrating against the military junta would draw protest slogans on eggs.*

*Photo credit: Myat Thu Kyaw via Alamy*

[77] "'Humanless protests' gain traction in Myanmar as crackdown casualties," *Reuters,* March 22, 2021 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-protest-idUSKBN2BE205/.

[78] Robin Gomes, "Pope to Celebrate Mass for Rome's Myanmar Catholics on May 16," *Vatican News,* May 4, 2021, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/pope-francis-myanmar-mass-may16-ascension.html#:~:text=More%20recently%2C%20in%20his%20Urbi,be%20dispelled%20only%20by%20love.%E2%80%9D.

[79] Emiline Smith, "In Myanmar, Protests Harness Creativity and Humor," *Hyperallergic,* April 12, 2021, https://hyperallergic.com/637088/myanmar-protests-harness-creativity-and-humor/.

[80] "Pyit Taing Htaung Ornament: ပစ်တိုင်းထောင်." Golden Land Solidarity Collective. Accessed April 9, 2025. https://shorturl.at/F7qs6.

[81] Mimi Aye, "Revolutions Are Built on Hope. That's Why I Believe Myanmar's Protesters Will Succeed," *TIME,* April 8, 2021, https://time.com/5953413/myanmar-protests-hope/.

[82] Joe Colquhoun, "Demonstrators in Myanmar 'troll' Police with Creative Forms of Protest ," *Famous Campaigns,* March 23, 2021, https://www.famouscampaigns.com/2021/03/demonstrators-in-myanmar-troll-police-with-creative-forms-of-protest/.

[83] "Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement 'losing steam' amid junta crackdowns," *Radio Free Asia,* April 26, 2022, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/cdm-04262022211343.html.

[84] "The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era," *supra* note 55.

[85] "Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement 'losing steam' amid junta crackdowns," *supra* note 82.

[86] Nadarajah Sethurupan, "Myanmar's CDM movement nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize," *Norway News,* March 29, 2021, https://www.norwaynews.com/myanmars-cdm-movement-nominated-for-the-nobel-peace-prize/.





*"We continue the fight because the movement in Burma is leaderless. It's truly decentralizing movements. The good thing about decentralized and leaderless movements is that [the Burmese military] cannot stop us. Because there are no leaders. Everybody participated in their own way within their own capacity. If they want to arrest, they would have to build the biggest prison to imprison 50 million."*

WIN KO KO AUNG
EXILED BURMESE ACTIVIST

*The Burmese people would lay flowers in public places as a part of a "flower strike" to commemorate the victims killed during the violent crackdown following the February 1, 2021, coup.*

*Photo credit: Photo by Theint Mon Soe/ SOPA Images/ Sipa USA via Alamy*



*Protesters in Bangkok hold up rubber ducks to protect themselves from riot police firing water cannons, a tactic learned from Hong Kong protesters.*

*Photo credit: Songpon Ruengsamut via Shutterstock*

# Cross-Movement Learning Across Asia

While certain symbols of protest originated from locally specific contexts, youth protesters also cited, shared, and adopted references used from movements across the continent to amplify their own messaging. These symbols were largely taken from global pop culture to create references that would easily resonate with a broader international community. These easily recognizable symbols came to characterize youth-led movements, as young people create a sense of solidarity across parallel demonstrations.

The rubber duck became an icon that demonstrated how a meme intended to troll the Chinese Community Party (CCP) transformed into a tangible tool of resistance across countries. The rubber first appeared when a mainland Chinese Sina Weibo user photoshopped a giant rubber duck onto the infamous 'tank man' photo to commemorate the Tiananmen Massacre, where the CCP rolled out military tanks to shoot down young pro-democracy protesters.[87] Even the term "big yellow duck" was censored was even censored, causing internet users of the Chinese-speaking world, including Hong Kongers, to use rubber ducks to poke fun at the CCP for its ridiculous censoring of harmless objects.[88]

Hong Kongers proceeded to incorporate the rubber duck, now a symbol of ridiculous government censorship, to their arsenal of protest pieces. In response to an incident in 2019 where Hong Kong police failed to prevent an alleged pro-CCP mob attack at a train station platform, protesters expressed their anger with police incompetence by washing the subway floors with detergent and setting rubber ducks afloat the station.[89]

Demonstrators in Thailand re-purposed the rubber duck both as a symbol of protest and protective gear. In a series of "coup prevention" drills, protesters practiced passing pool toy ducks over their heads.[90] The movement represented the military officials who passed over the will of the people and ignored demands for a new constitution and reform to the monarchy.[91] Protesters also keyed into the utility of the rubber duck, whose waterproof exterior protected front-line protesters against chemical-laced water cannons and tear gas.[92] Images of chemical-stained rubber ducks dripped with water resonated with the weary protesters who noted that the ducks mirrored their own state—weary and worn down, but still smiling.[93]

The symbol allowed individuals to easily visually indicate their support for the movement. Protesters would put duck clips in their hair or use duck bubble blowers to blow bubbles at police.[94] One duck bubble blower seller in Thailand even donated proceeds from her sales to volunteer medical teams at protests.[95]

Thai protesters also adopted symbols in pop culture, such as a three finger salute, in reference to the gesture frequently used in the dystopian fantasy movie, the "Hunger Games."[96] The gesture represented solidarity amongst oppressed people in rebellion of the tyrannical ruling class, "The Capitol." Similarly, Thai youth, who loosely coalesced under the "Free Youth" movement, saw the military junta as a tyrannical ruler who refused to hear out the voices of its citizens.

[87] Jasmine Chia, "How the Rubber Duck Became a Thai Protest Symbol," *Thai Enquirer,* November 19, 2020, https://www.thaienquirer.com/20903/how-the-rubber-duck-became-a-thai-protest-symbol/.

[88] Keith Wagstaff, "Why China is banning 'big yellow ducks' on the anniversary of Tiananmen Square," *The Week,* Last updated January 9, 2015, https://theweek.com/articles/463634/why-china-banning-big-yellow-ducks-anniversary-tiananmen-square.

[89] Chia, "How the Rubber Duck Became a Thai Protest Symbol," *supra* note 86.

[90] "Thai protesters practise 'coup prevention' in latest rally," *Al Jazeera,* November 27, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/27/thai-protesters-practise-coup-prevention-in-latest-rally.

[91] *Ibid.*

[92] Chia, "How the Rubber Duck Became a Thai Protest Symbol," *supra* note 86.

[93] *Ibid.*

[94] Rubber duck revolution' takes off in Thailand," *Philippine Daily Inquirer,* December 4, 2020, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1368112/rubber-duck-revolution-takes-off-in-thailand.

[95] *Ibid.*

[96] Caleb Quinley, "Three-finger salute: Hunger Games symbol adopted by Myanmar protesters," *The Guardian,* February 8, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/three-finger-salute-hunger-games-symbol-adopted-by-myanmars-protesters.

As ordinary peasants in certain districts had no choice but to use body gestures to express their dissent for fear of violent retaliation by the authorities, so too did Thai youth resort to raising three fingers to express their displeasure with a regime that has undertaken various efforts to silence any criticism. Thai social activist, Sombat Boonngamanong, who helped organize anti-coup protests called on people to raise "3 fingers, 3 times a day" in public to "escalate the anti-coup movement."[97]

Derived from fiction, the symbol allows protesters to infuse a number of meanings into the gesture based on their own interpretation. Some protesters said that the three fingers stood for values established by the French revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity.[98] Others said each digit stood for freedom, election, and democracy.[99] One photo graphic online depicted each phalange with the words "No Coup", "Liberty", and "Democracy."[100]

While the peak of the relevance of the Hunger Games has passed, the three finger salute has retained its utility for Thai students today. Even in 2020, students continued to hold up the three-fingered hand gesture, while adding their own flair of tying white ribbons to their apparel to express their political opinion.[101]

Inspired by the protests in Thailand, protesters across the region have taken to flashing the three fingers as a quick and identifiable way of expressing their support. In the 2019-2020 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, protesters were seen flashing the gesture in deviance of the police at rallies and at sit-ins outside government buildings.[102] While many protests in Asia have been inspired by the vigor and organization of youth in Hong Kong, Hong Kongers' adoption of the symbol speaks to how dialogues between protesters have become reciprocal, wherein protesters mutually share and inspire iconography or tactics employed.

In Burma, the gesture was widely used in protests following the 2021 military coup. It was first used by medical workers, then youth protesters, and eventually became a visual staple of opposition protests across the country.[103] Eventually, Burmese artists and creatives even created a campaign hub titled Raise Three Fingers and the website threefingers.org to highlight the humanitarian crises in their home nation to the global art community.[104]

The symbol was encouraged by exiled Cambodian politicians of the since dissolved Cambodia's National Rescue Party (CNRP) to express their support for protesters in Burma and Thailand.[105] Former VP of the CNRP, Mu Sochua, stated that the Cambodians want "freedom, justice, and true democracy" the way Burmese protesters do.[106] The call was then rebuked by the ruling Cambodian People's Party, who wrote off the call for solidarity as "ridiculous," denying the clear parallels drawn between Cambodia and Burma's authoritarian regimes.[107] These symbols have re-imagined the visual library of protest, incorporating the pleasure and interests of youth into what can feel like an all-encompassing struggle for freedom and democracy.

Second to visual paraphernalia, songs also served as backdrops to these youth-led movements. Notably, "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from Victor Hugo's Les Misérables, which had gained worldwide attention after the modern remake, became a staple soundtrack for protesters, who identified with the French revolutionaries, demanding the ruling class listen to the will of the people. Versions adapted to local languages have proudly been sung by Hong Kongers against the extradition bill, Chinese citizens memorializing Dr. Li Wenliang who exposed the coronavirus outbreak to the world,[108] Thai students demanding monarchy reform, and Burmese protesters against the military junta.[109]

[97] "Hunger Games salute banned by Thai military," *The Guardian,* June 3, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/03/hunger-games-salute-banned-thailand.

[98] Jocelyn Gecker and Thanyarat Doksone, "'Hunger Games' salute used as protest in Thailand," *AP,* June 4, 2014, https://apnews.com/general-news-movies-a787f542a3e24a559149965098fca370.

[99] Bill Dorman, "Asia Minute: Thailand's Hand of Defiance," *Hawaii Public Radio,* August 21, 2020, https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/asia-minute/2020-08-21/asia-minute-thailands-hand-of-defiance#stream/0.

[100] "Hunger Games salute banned by Thai military," *supra* note 96.

[101] Wassana Nanuam, Mongkol Bangprapa and Aekarach Sattaburuth, "Prawit: 3-finger gesture is Scouts' salute," *Bangkok Post,* August 18, 2020, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1970387/prawit-3-finger-gesture-is-scouts-salute.

[102] David Sim, "Hong Kong: Defiant protesters give Hunger Games' three-fingered salute as police clear camp," *International Business Times,* December 11, 2014, https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/hong-kong-defiant-protesters-give-hunger-games-three-fingered-salute-police-clear-camp-1479120.

[103] Quinley, "Three-finger salute: Hunger Games symbol adopted by Myanmar protesters," *supra* note 95.

[104] "About," *Raise Three Fingers,* Accessed March 30, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220330031408/https://www.threefingers.org/about.

[105] Ben Sokhean, "Gov't slams ex-opposition's call to adopt 'three-finger salute'," *Khmer Times,* February 18, 2021, https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50815235/govt-slams-ex-oppositions-call-to-adopt-three-finger-salute/.

[106] *Ibid.*

[107] *Ibid.*

[108] David Jays, "You still hear the people sing: Les Mis protest anthem blazes from France to China," *The Guardian,* February 13, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/feb/13/do-you-hear-the-people-sing-les-miserables-france-china.

[109] "Song From 'Les Misérables' Has A Long History In Pro-Democracy Movements," *NPR,* March 3, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/03/03/973198208/song-from-les-miserables-has-a-long-history-in-pro-democracy-movements.



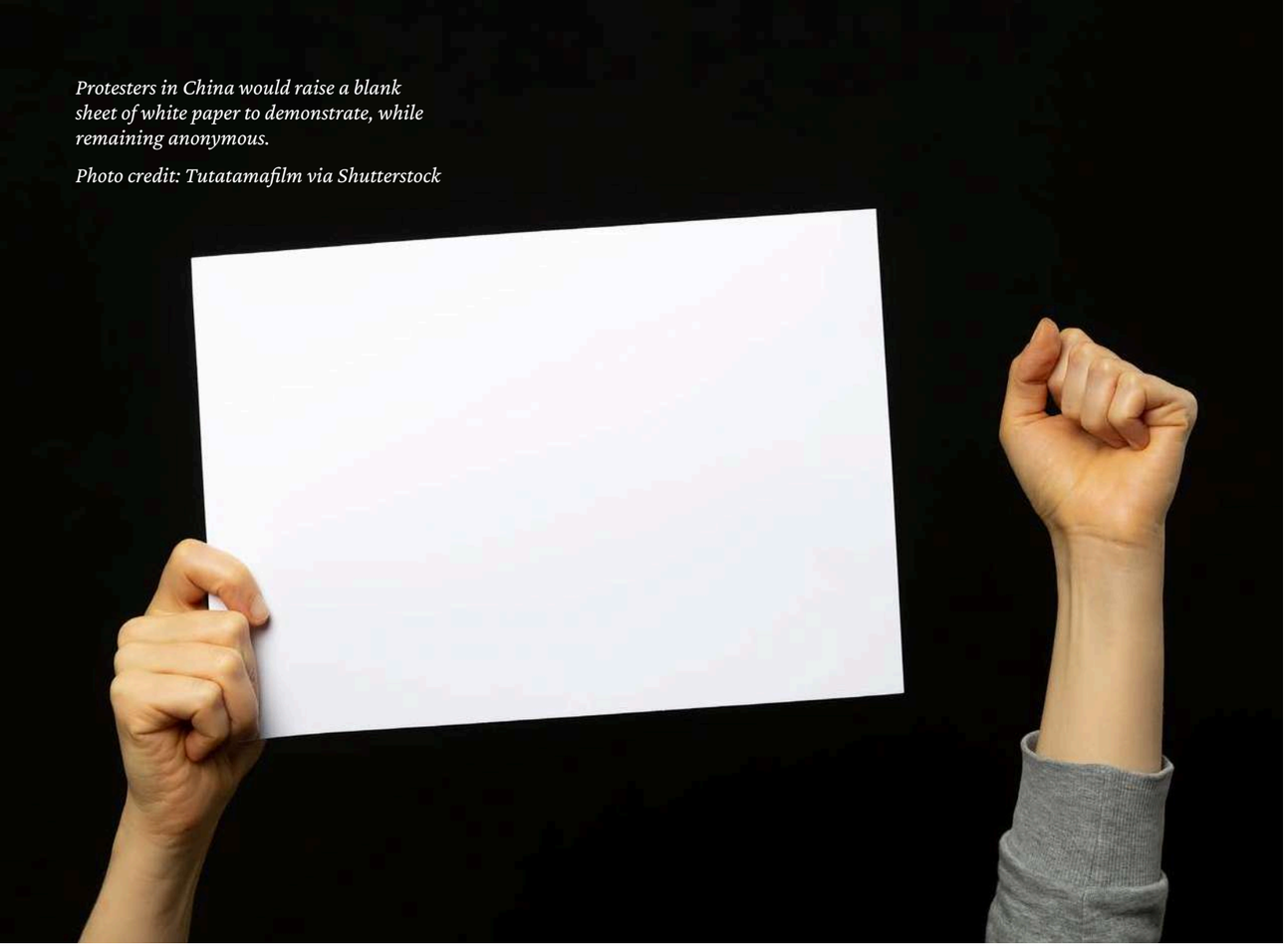



*"Firstly, it is important to understand that we are not alone. Secondly, resistance against authoritarianism can also be leveraged to form more effective containment strategies."*

CHANG YU-MENG
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TAIWAN YOUTH ASSOCIATION FOR DEMOCRACY (TYAD)

*A Burmese protester holds up a three-finger salute, a gesture protesters across Asia have used to signal demand for change, outside the Myanmar embassy on the 2nd anniversary of the military junta coup.*

*Photo credit: Kan Sangtong via Shutterstock*



*Protesters in China would raise a blank sheet of white paper to demonstrate, while remaining anonymous.*

*Photo credit: Tutatamafilm via Shutterstock*

# White Paper Protests or the A4 "Revolution"

Due to the repressive environment and suffocation of civic space in China, there is virtually no room for youth to exercise their freedom of assembly and expression. However, the "White paper" or "A4" protests of 2022 offered a short but exceptional glimmer into how an opportune political moment can ignite people to collectively demand greater freedoms in a country as restrictive as China.

In an attempt to control the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) implemented wide-sweeping measures to control the movements of its citizens, forcing many residents to be shuttered in their homes for months.[110] The "White Paper" or "A4" protests were triggered by a fire, which killed at least 10 and injured 9, in an apartment building in the city of Urumchi in China's northwestern Uyghur Region.[111] The tragedy prompted Chinese citizens across the nation to express their anger over the CCP's stringent preventative course of action, which included regular lockdowns, endless Covid testing, and vigilant health checks.[112]

Young Chinese protesters took to the streets to express their anger over the COVID-19 restrictions across major cities and top universities.[113] Protesters would hold blank sheets of paper, often sized A4, to avoid having their faces captured by surveillance cameras.[114]

The origins of using blank sheets of paper as protest gear is unclear, but it was also seen in the 2020 Hong Kong protests. A blank piece of paper, which has no specific meaning on its own, enables protesters to dissent without openly criticizing the regime.[115] It was also a challenge to the regime's heavy restrictions on free speech, as if to signal that the regime cannot arrest participants for holding a sign that says nothing.[116]

The protests also bore witness to bold political slogans typical of more flagrant political protests, including chants that demanded President Xi Jinping and the ruling CCP to step down.[117] On the eve of the 20th CCP National Congress, a congregation of China's highest governing body, two banners were hung on Sitong Bridge in Beijing, one of which boldly read "We don't need Covid tests, we need to eat; we don't need lockdowns, we need freedom."[118]

Under the brunt of restrictions placed on people's freedom of movement and extreme censorship, young people tapped into modern internet technologies from encrypted messaging services to livestream that allowed the protests to reach wider audiences. The young generation of Chinese internet users are digitally savvy and able to navigate government censors. Some users showcased their clever and sardonic sense of humor, leaving ironic comments of praise (i.e. "good good good" or "yes yes yes") on media of official Chinese regime accounts to express their frustration without being censored.[119] Many young people used VPNs to access forbidden apps and circulate videos and photos on non-Chinese platforms.[120] Others uploaded screenshots of text to avoid filters and automated detection systems.[121] One young protester recounts viewing sensitive content, such as the livestream of a vigil in Shanghai mourning the victims of the fire, by using banned apps such as Instagram and Telegram.[122]

Ultimately, the protests were short-lived, lasting a mere ten days before a slew of arrests, intimidations, and threats scared people back into silence.[123] But the world was already watching. Even when Chinese bots tried to flood X with obscene and pornographic content to skew search results and video footage of the protests, the rare sound of Chinese protest had been heard and memorialized on the internet.[124]

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[110] Nancy Qian, "The long tail of China's zero-Covid policy," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, November 21, 2023, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-long-tail-of-chinas-zero-covid-policy/.

[111] Dake Kang, "10 killed in apartment fire in northwest China's Xinjiang," *AP,* November 16, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/china-fires-6a1b6902e6c-cf87e064f1232045a2848.

[112] Verna Yu, "Depressed, powerless, angry: why frustration at China's zero-Covid is spilling over," *The Guardian,* November 27, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/27/anger-mounts-as-chinas-zero-covid-policy-fails-to-curb-record-rise-in-cases.

[113] Martin Quin Pollard and Brenda Goh, "Blank sheets of paper become symbol of defiance in China protests," *Reuters,* November 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/blank-sheets-paper-become-symbol-defiance-china-protests-2022-11-27/.

[114] *Ibid*.

[115] "Hong Kong protesters let sheets of blank paper do the talking," *Rappler,* July 8, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/266014-hong-kong-protesters-let-blank-signs-do-the-talking/

[116] *Ibid*.

[117] "China anti-lockdown protesters call for Xi to step down," *DW,* November 27, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/china-anti-lockdown-protesters-call-for-xi-to-step-down/a-63909531.

[118] Kin-man Chan, "Unwritten Endings: Revolutionary Potential of China's A4 Protest," *Sociologica* 17, no. 1 (2023): 57-66. doi:https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/16877.

[119] Liza Lin and Karen Hao, "New Symbol of Protest in China Roils Censors: Blank White Papers," *The Wall Street Journal,* November 28, 2022. https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-symbol-of-protest-in-china-roils-censors-blank-white-papers-11669642676.

[120] Jennifer Conrad, "How Chinese Netizens Swamped China's Internet Controls," *WIRED,* December 2, 2022. https://www.wired.com/story/how-chinese-protests-netizens-swamped-chinas-internet-controls/.

[121] *Ibid*.

[122] Chan, "Unwritten Endings," 60.

[123] Cate Cadell and Christian Shepherd, "Tracked, detained, vilified: How China throttled anti-covid protests," *The Washington Post,* January 4, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/04/china-surveillance-protests-security/.

[124] Joseph Menn, "Twitter grapples with Chinese spam obscuring news of protests," *The Washington Post,* November 27, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/11/27/twitter-china-spam-protests/.

04



*Pro-democracy protesters shine their phone flashlights while rallying in solidarity with protesters detained at a correctional center in New Kowloon, Hong Kong, on December 20, 2019.*

*Photo credit: via Shutterstock*

# Digital Resistance: The Online Battle against Censorship




*Protesters carrying "Milk Tea Alliance" placards gather in Bangkok, Thailand to show solidarity with Burma's anti-coup movement on February 28, 2021.*

*Photo credit: Anusak Laowilas/ NurPhoto SRL via Alamy*

# Memes, Hashtags, Emojis

In addition to the street protests, digital activism became a powerful form of resistance through which youth can rally support, share information, and exchange ideas. This digital strategy helped youth activists reach out to a wider audience while circumventing forms of censorship and oppression. Visual and textual shorthands such as memes, emojis, and hashtags have become popular means of political expression for youth in the digital age. In the face of authoritarianism, political content carrying either or all of these elements serves as a compelling and relatively safe form of resistance.

Memes, emojis, and hashtags are easy to proliferate and digest, allowing activists to break down nuanced subjects in layman terms, and circulate their perspectives with relative speed and in a culturally relevant manner. A lucid example is the anti-authoritarianism hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance that took social media by storm when it surfaced amid the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. Young pro-democracy activists across Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan fashioned the hashtag as a response to backlash from pro-CCP accounts against a Thai actor's repost of an image that referred to Hong Kong as a "country" as opposed to a constituent of China on his X then known as Twitter.[125]

The hashtag grew into a movement intended to address the intractable debate about the CCP's overarching influence in Hong Kong, which formally enjoys a degree of autonomy within China's "one country, two systems" framework. Catalyzers of the movement successfully broke down the debate by introducing the milk tea, a popular beverage in many Asian countries, as a symbol of kinship with Hong Kong's struggle for freedom and the broader efforts to resist authoritarianism in its regional neighbors. It proved effective. In April 2021, Twitter revealed that the hashtag had been used in as many as 11 million tweets on its platform.[126] It subsequently released a milk tea emoji that would automatically appear in tweet mentions of the Milk Tea Alliance in English, Thai, Burmese, and Chinese (both simplified and traditional).[127]

*"People find amusing ways, creative ways to still express their sense of dissent through irony, through sarcasm, through memes even, that actually keep the spirits still somehow together. Because when you laugh at the dictator together, when you, make fun of these draconian laws together, you are actually still expressing a sort of dissent that cannot be expressed in other ways or forms."*

ANNA KWOK
EXILED HONG KONG ACTIVIST

[125] Jazilah Salam, "Milk Tea Alliance: From Meme War to Transnational Activism," last modified May 25, 2022, https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/milk-tea-alliance-meme-war-transnational-activism/.

[126] *Ibid*.

[127] *Ibid*. Prior to its rebrand to X, Twitter also unveiled an emoji in support of the youth-led #EndSARS movement against police brutality in Nigeria. *See* Magdalene Teiko Larnyoh, "Twitter unveils emoji in support of #EndSARS protests," *Business Insider Africa*, October 16, 2020. https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/lifestyle/twitter-unveils-emoji-in-support-of-endsars-protests/7emvggn.



*Students for a Free Tibet India Director Tenzin Passang speaks before a crowd waving the Tibetan flag on the 65th anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising 1959 in Dharamsala, India.*

*Photo credit: Tenzin Passang via Instagram*

Soon, the movement started seeping into the offline space, inspiring calls of support for pro-democracy protests across the continent. An example of the outpouring of solidarity that occurred under this hashtag was during the 2021 military coup in Burma. Protest art included drawings of Burma's popular milk tea *laphet yay cho* next to Hong Kong's version of milk tea to indicate solidarity between the two groups.[128] After a call from Burmese pro-democracy groups, hundreds of people in Taipei and dozens in Bangkok, Jakarta, Hong Kong took to the streets holding #MilkTeaAlliance signs in support of those struggling in Burma, before being joined by supporters in other continents.[129]

The Milk Tea Alliance also helped young activists learn from each other's activism playbook.[130] It taught Burmese and Thai protesters to adopt Hong Kong's flash mob-style protest.[131] In Malaysia and Indonesia, thousands of internet users posted photos with #MilkTeaAlliance signs to show solidarity with those struggling for democracy in neighboring Burma.[132] Additionally, the movement later even extended beyond East and Southeast Asia to countries such as India, Belarus, and Iran.[133]

The Alliance revolutionized the fight against authoritarianism in the region. It linked disparate pro-democracy groups in various countries with the help of shared symbolisms and slogans. It was loud, infectious, and difficult to contain. As users on Hong Kong's prominent pro-democracy forum LIHKG aptly described: "Hongkongers can support Thai protesters' without being subject to harsh lèse majesté laws that criminalize defamation of the king, and Thai protesters can promote Hong Kong's struggle without facing potential repercussions under a draconian new national security law."[134]

Today, the hashtag remains a potent memetic force in the activism realm, inspiring a deluge of pro-democracy rallies in and outside Asia, and being used in the advocacy of a wider range of causes beyond Hong Kong.[135]

Emojis also became an important, and, more importantly, quick way to express grievances against repressive regime policies. In 2016, youth activist Joshua Wong called on his followers to leave angry face emojis on the Facebook page of former chief executive Leung Chun-Ying, who had been installed by a predominantly CCP-backed election committee. In the end, hundreds of thousands left angry faces on Leung's profile picture and posts in a matter of weeks.[136] Likewise, the recognition of emojis as vessels of dissent prompted Tibetan activists to start #InsertTibetanFlag in 2018, a campaign pushing for the creation of a Tibetan flag emoji by the Unicode Consortium, of which big tech companies such as Google and Apple are part.[137] The Tibetan flag is often used as a token of the Tibet independence movement. The usefulness of technologies such as this set youth activism apart from its precursors.

*"Young people are quick to adapt to new ideas and technological developments, allowing them to experiment with new forms of activism compared to older generations."*

TENZIN PASSANG
DIRECTOR OF STUDENTS FOR A FREE TIBET INDIA

[128] Wanpen Pajai, "Junta to junta: As Milk Tea Alliance brews in Myanmar, how far can it go?," *Southeast Asia Globe,* February 11, 2021. https://southeastasiaglobe.com/milk-tea-alliance-myanmar/.

[129] Fanny Potkin and Patpicha Tanakasempipat, "'Milk Tea Alliance' activists across Asia hold rallies against Myanmar coup," *Reuters,* February 28, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN2AS0HP/.

[130] Jessie Lau, "Myanmar's Protest Movement Finds Friends in the Milk Tea Alliance," *The Diplomat,* February 13, 2021. https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/myanmars-protest-movement-finds-friends-in-the-milk-tea-alliance/.

[131] *Ibid.*

[132] Leela Jacinto, "'Milk Tea Alliance' blends Asian discontents - but how strong is the brew?," *France 24,* March 1, 2021. https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210301-milk-tea-alliance-blends-asian-discontents-but-how-strong-is-the-brew.

[133] "'Milk Tea Alliance' pushes for democracy vs China's authoritarianism," *ABS-CBN,* April 14, 2021, https://www.abs-cbn.com/overseas/04/14/21/milk-tea-alliance-pushes-for-democracy-vs-chinas-authoritarianism.

[134] Laignee Barron, "'We Share the Ideals of Democracy.' How the Milk Tea Alliance is Brewing Solidarity Among Activists in Asia and Beyond," *TIME,* October 28, 2020. https://time.com/5904114/milk-tea-alliance/.

[135] Jasmine Chia and Scott Singer, "How the Milk Tea Alliance Is Remaking Myanmar," *The Diplomat,* July 23, 2021. https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-the-milk-tea-alliance-is-remaking-myanmar/; "'Milk Tea Alliance' activists demonstrate across Asia against Myanmar coup," *France 24,* February 28, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210228-milk-tea-alliance-activists-demonstrate-across-asia-against-myanmar-coup; Jasmine Chia and Scott Singer, "How the Milk Tea Alliance Has Succeeded, and Why It May Fail," *Fulcrum,* December 23, 2020. https://fulcrum.sg/how-the-milk-tea-alliance-has-succeeded-and-why-it-may-fail/; Jill Li and Adrianna Zhang, "#MilkTeaAlliance Brews Pan-Asian Solidarity for Democratic Activists," *Voice of America,* August 28, 2020. https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_milkteaalliance-brews-pan-asian-solidarity-democratic-activists/6195144.html.

[136] Hermina Wong, "Student activist Joshua Wong criticised for urging fans to flood CY Leung's page with angry emojis," *Hong Kong Free Press,* March 1, 2016. https://hongkongfp.com/2016/03/01/student-activist-joshua-wong-criticised-for-urging-fans-to-flood-cy-leungs-page-with-angry-emojis/.

[137] "About," Tibet Flag Emoji, accessed August 15, 2024. https://www.tibetflagemoji.com/about; Tibetan Flag Emoji (@tibetflagemoji), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/tibetflagemoji/?hl=en.



*A protester wears a mask with a split image of Xi Jinping and Winnie the Pooh, a satiricization of the Chinese ruler.*

*Photo credit: SOPA Images via Alamy*

# Evading Regime Censors: The Chinese Case

Memes, hashtags, and emojis are difficult to censor. Not only do they diversify the authorship of a political message, they can also double as codes for the specific terms or phrases that would otherwise be picked up by regime censorship radars. When regime censors are sophisticated enough, however, such censorship may nevertheless be possible. China illustrates this best.

In 2017, news circulated of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) decision to ban Winnie the Pooh.[138] The seemingly peculiar move was not without reason: For years, the beloved anthropomorphic bear had been compared to Xi Jinping by online users in ways that the CCP regime considered insulting, and was therefore an important symbol of youth resistance in China.[139] Posts on the Chinese messaging app WeChat and social media platform Sina Weibo, as well as on X that contained likening Winnie to the president, as well as pictures and animated GIFs, were taken down by the regime's online censors.[140] A photo depicting Xi during a parade side-by-side with Winnie inside a toy car became one of the most censored photos in the country.[141] Upon discovering that the censorship did little to stop people from making similar content, the regime stepped up its clampdown by banning the film "Christopher Robin" from screening in both China and Hong Kong,[142] editing Winnie out of a popular video game,[143] and jailing youth who posted the meme on their social media and used it to protest.[144]

Censorship is one of the oldest tactics in the CCP's digital repression playbook. It has been effective in stunting any attempt by the youth to mobilize for a cause. This was exactly the outcome of the regime's extensive censorship of references to the Tiananmen Massacre. Its censors are wired to detect keywords or phrases that point to the violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters and the day it took place, June 4th, 1989. These include various number combinations and their Pinyin counterparts, such as "64," "65-1," or "35" which is shorthand for May 35th, another way that netizens have referred to the forbidden date.[145] Memes recreating the iconic "Tank Man" picture at the Tiananmen Square with rubber ducks and Lego pieces, as discussed in a previous section, were also automatically removed on Sina Weibo.[146] Censorship done in this manner is a concerted effort to commit historical erasure. According to Danwei, a Beijing-based media watchdog, those young after the events of 1989 "only have a faint notion of what happened" due to the minimum historical information available to them.[147] This is still the case today, with many young Chinese believing in the illusion that the regime is not capable of inflicting harm on them and choosing to focus more on the economic trappings of the modern world.[148]

To circumvent the CCP's censors, Chinese youth have experimented with homophonic memes. Take, for example, the "Grass Mud Horse" (cǎo ní mǎ, 草泥马) meme coined by Chinese netizens that became viral towards the end of the 2010s. The phrase is a wordplay of the Mandarin profanity "cào nǐ mā" (肏你妈), which literally translates to "f**k your mother." The phrase is a backhanded censure of the CCP, who is often described as the "mother" of the people.[149] The meme included pictures of the mythical "horse" and lore about its habitat. Netizens claimed that the horses' were endangered by invasive "river crabs" (héxiè, 河蟹), a reference to the CCP's growing internet censorship as the word sounds similar to the Mandarin word for "harmony," and the CCP has maintained that its internet censorship measures are aimed at creating a "harmonious society."[150]

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[138] Emily Rauhala, "The curious case of China's 'ban' on Winnie the Pooh," *The Washington Post,* July 22, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/22/the-curious-case-of-chinas-ban-on-winnie-the-pooh/; Louisa Lim, "China's Top 5 Censored Posts in 2015," *Foreign Policy,* December 31, 2015. https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/31/china-top-5-censored-posts-2015-censorship-communist-party-xi-jinping-explosion-pooh/; Stephen McDonell, "Why China censors banned Winnie the Pooh," *BBC,* July 17, 2017. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-china-blog-40627855; Javier C. Hernández, "China Censors Winnie-the-Pooh on Social Media," *The New York Times,* July 17, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/world/asia/china-winnie-the-pooh-censored.html.

[139] Lily Kuo, "China's Twitter erases John Oliver after scathing Xi Jinping skit," *The Guardian,* June 21, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jun/21/chinas-twitter-erases-john-oliver-after-scathing-xi-jinping-skit.

[140] *Supra* note 138.

[141] McDonell, "Why China censors banned Winnie the Pooh," *supra* note 138.

[142] Benjamin Haas, "China bans Winnie the Pooh film after comparisons to President Xi," *The Guardian,* August 7, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/07/china-bans-winnie-the-pooh-film-to-stop-comparisons-to-president-xi.

[143] Brian VanHooker, "How banned is Winnie the Pooh in China, really?," *Mel,* September 22, 2020. https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/winnie-the-pooh-china-ban.

[144] "Ng Yik-tung and Sing Man, "China Jails Student For Tweets Sent in US Showing President as Winnie The Pooh," trans. Luisetta Mudie, *Radio Free Asia,* January 23, 2020. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/tweets-01232020164342.html; Gu Ting, "Shanghai police detain young people over Halloween cosplay photos," trans. Luisetta Mudie, *Radio Free Asia,* November 20, 2023. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/halloween-shanghai-11202023134614.html.

[145] Anne Henochowicz, "Sensitive words: 24th anniversary of Tiananmen," last modified June 3, 2013, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/sensitive-words-24th-anniversary-of-tiananmen/.

[146] Matthew Green, "How A Rubber Duck Meme Sidestepped Censorship on Tiananmen Square Anniversary," *KQED,* June 3, 2016. https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/13161/on-tiananmen-square-anniversary-using-creative-memes-to-circumvent-censorship.

[147] *Ibid*.

[148] Jamil Anderlini, "China's rebellious youth has forgotten Tiananmen," *Politico,* November 28, 2022. https://www.politico.eu/article/chinas-rebellious-youth-has-forgotten-tiananmen/; Qiao Long, "China's Young People 'Know Little of 1989 Tiananmen Massacre," trans. Luisetta Mudie, *Radio Free Asia,* June 3, 2021. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/people-06032021105724.html. *See also* Ye Liu, "Why youth activism has passed China by," *King's College London* (blog), June 25, 2020, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/why-youth-activism-has-passed-china-by ("[t]he Chinese government's focus on meritocracy has led millions of youth to become preoccupied with academic degrees, competitiveness and employability [preventing them] from engaging in activities devoted to the public good.")

[149] "Grass-Mud Horse," China Digital Times, accessed August 18, 2024, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Grass-mud_horse.

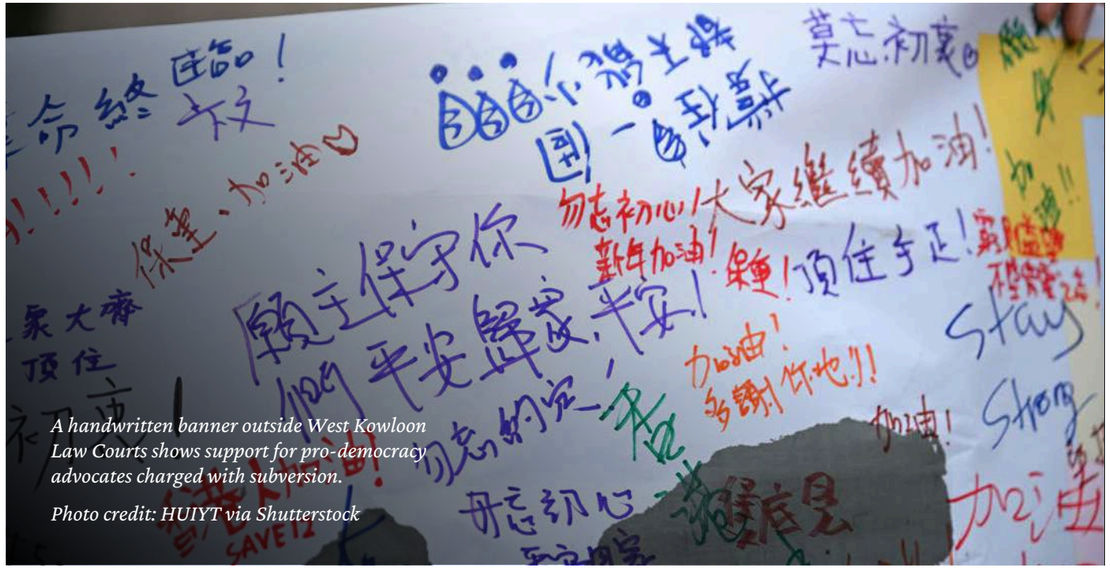
[150] "River Crab," China Digital Times, accessed August 18, 2024, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/River_crab.




*Youth protesters occupy Hong Kong International Airport in August 2019, waving black flags emblazoned with the 'Liberate Hong Kong' slogan banned by the National Security Law. This demonstration follows a violent incident where a woman protester was shot in the eye with a projectile during clashes with police.*

*Photo credit: Studio Incendo via Wikimedia Commons*





*A handwritten banner outside West Kowloon Law Courts shows support for pro-democracy advocates charged with subversion.*

*Photo credit: HUIYT via Shutterstock*

The reliance on homophonic hashtags and euphemisms has since remained a recurring form of political dissent among young Chinese netizens to avoid censorship in their activism. They were used in 2018, when the #MeToo movement to raise awareness of sexual harassment against women gained traction in China, prompting the regime to periodically block the hashtag, and take down pages and posts discussing key women's rights issues.[151]

Supporters of the movement then invented #RiceBunny (米兔), pronounced "mi tu" in Mandarin and similar sounding to the English pronunciation of "Me Too."[152] They also used the bunny and rice bowl emojis to mobilize people behind the cause with minimum risk of detection.[153] Likewise, when the CCP regime's sophisticated censors sought to stifle online discussions regarding the COVID-19 outbreak by restricting content containing trigger words such as "Wuhan," "crisis," and "Hubei," or a combination thereof, netizens countered by devising memetic codes to replace them. These include shorthand of the words, Mandarin characters that signify certain terms (such as the use of "red 十" or shí, meaning ten, to replace mentions of the Red Cross"), and euphemisms such as "F4" to refer to the groups of politicians seen as those responsible for the outbreak.[154] These went on to become a collection of viral lexicon that sustained online criticisms surrounding the pandemic.

Hong Kongers have also long used word play to criticize the regime. In the wake of widespread protests against the Beijing-backed national security law in 2020, the local government declared illegal the popular protest slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times." The slogan represented the demands of Hong Kongers for greater autonomy from mainland China and the restoration of democratic norms. In response, netizens began using coded language to indirectly refer to the slogan and evade China's censors. Those codes include the letters "GFHG, SDGM"—which abbreviates the Cantonese version of the slogan, *"gwong fuk heung gong, si doi gak ming"*—and the numbers "3219 0246," whose Cantonese pronunciation mimics the tone and rhythm of the slogan.[155] Another version uses the phrase "seize back banana," a play on the similar Pinyin characters for Hong Kong (xiānggǎng, 香港) and banana (xiāngjiāo, 香蕉).[156] With these workarounds, Hong Kongers were able to keep the slogan alive throughout one of the most critical fights for democracy in their history.

[151] WeChatscope, "Banned From WeChat: #MeToo Considered a Threat by Chinese Authorities," *The News Lens.* March 27, 2019. https://international.thenewslens.com/article/116248; Leta Hong Fincher and Pin Lu, "Feminist Voices in China: From #MeToo to Censorship," interview by Rachel B. Vogelstein, Council on Foreign Relations, July 26, 2018. https://www.cfr.org/event/feminist-voices-china-metoo-censorship.

[152] Jing Zeng, "From #MeToo to #RiceBunny: how social media users are campaigning in China," *The Conversation.* February 6, 2018. https://theconversation.com/from-metoo-to-ricebunny-how-social-media-users-are-campaigning-in-china-90860.

[153] Margaret Andersen, "How Feminists in China Are Using Emoji to Avoid Censorship," *WIRED.* March 30, 2018. https://www.wired.com/story/china-feminism-emoji-censorship/.

[154] "Pho noodles and pandas: How China's social media users created a new language to beat government censorship on COVID-19," Amnesty International, March 6, 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/china-social-media-language-government-censorship-covid/.

[155] "Hongkongers use creativity against new security law," *Taiwan News,* July 6, 2020, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/3960846.

[156] "'Hidden language': Hongkongers get creative against security law," *The Guardian,* July 4, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/04/hidden-language-hong-kong-security-law-residents-wordplay.

05

# Facing the Storm: The Challenges of Youth Activism

*A young woman protester is arrested on Nathan Road, Hong Kong.*

*Photo credit: Rumbo a lo desconocido via Shutterstock*




*The Hong Kong government hangs a banner promoting the National Security Law.*

*Photo credit: Yu Chun Christopher Wong via Shutterstock*

# Repressive Legislation

While youth-led movements in East and Southeast Asia have proliferated across movements and the terrains of multiple web spaces, regimes have relentlessly and ruthlessly cracked down on acts of dissent.

As fearless youth across East and Southeast Asia have challenged authoritarian regimes, authoritarian regimes responded by employing vague and overly broad provisions that impose severe penalties on dissent. Hong Kong, Thailand, and Burma, in particular, have adopted a troubling approach of enforcing vague laws that grant officials extraordinary powers to conduct arrests without warrants, engage in extensive surveillance, and arbitrarily detain activists, among others. They provide regimes with undue justification to imprison and ultimately criminalize an entire generation of young people whose only crime is exercising their right to peaceful protest.

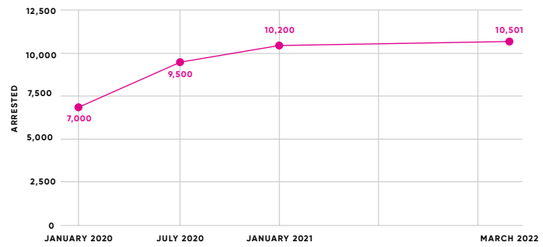
## HONG KONG'S DRACONIAN NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

After more than a million Hong Kongers took to the streets to protest China's encroaching influence on the city, police ramped up arrests. More than 7,000 people were arrested from June 2019 to January 2020.[157] Young people were disproportionately targeted: over 75% of Hong Kong's political prisoners are under the age of 30, 50% under the age of 25, and more than 15% are minors.[158]

The unexpected resistance from Hong Kongers forced the Chinese regime to consider more powerful ways to control the situation. As a result, in June 2020, the Hong Kong government imposed the National Security Law (NSL), a draconian law that broadly targets four crimes: secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security. The NSL was covertly drafted in Beijing and passed swiftly – just 40 days after the introduction of the bill in late May 2020. It was only made public after its enactment.[159] The law's sweeping provisions shocked the world and raised serious concerns about the erosion of Hong Kongers' ability to dissent and the city's overall autonomy.[160] Within three years of its implementation, approximately 265 people have been arrested for national security-related crimes under the NSL.[161]

The NSL removed many of the procedural safeguards defendants would usually enjoy during their trial to ensure a higher rate of conviction.[162] Before a trial even begins, the NSL broaden's police investigatory powers to search a suspect's homes, surveil them, freeze their assets, and censor their speech online deemed a threat to national security with limited judicial oversight.[163]

**NUMBER OF PROTEST-RELATED ARRESTS FROM THE 2019-2020 HONG KONG PROTESTS**




*Source: Hong Kong Democracy Council*

[157] "Hong Kong Reaches a Grim Milestone: 1,000 Political Prisoners," Hong Kong Democracy Council, May 2022, 3, https://www.hkdc.us/_files/ugd/b76ce4_250b285a553e494483038075ef0b0777.pdf.

[158] "New HKDC report documents the rapid rise of political prisoners in Hong Kong and calls for international response," Hong Kong Democracy Council, May 2022, https://www.hkdc.us/political-prisoner-report.

[159] Lily Kuo, "Controversial Hong Kong national security law comes into effect," *The Guardian,* June 30, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/30/controversial-hong-kong-national-security-law-comes-into-effect.

[160] *Ibid.*

[161] Natalie Wong, "Hong Kong's national security law: 3 years on, more than 160 prosecutions, 8 bounties later, what else can the city expect?," *South China Morning Post,* July 13, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3227486/hong-kongs-national-security-law-3-years-more-160-prosecutions-8-bounties-later-what-else-can-city.

[162] Lydia Wong, Thomas E. Kellogg, and Eric Yanho Lai. "Hong Kong's National Security Law and the Right to a Fair Trial," Georgetown Center for Asian Law (2021): 2, https://www.law.georgetown.edu/law-asia/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2021/06/HongKongNSLRightToFairTrial.pdf.

[163] *Ibid.*, 3.




*A protester in Taiwan dresses up as Winnie the Pooh behind a fake jail cell, to express solidarity with Hong Kongers protesting the passage of another national security law, Article 23.*

*Photo credit: jamesonwu1972 via Shutterstock*

The NSL also allows the chief executive to appoint a select group of judges to preside over national security trials without disclosure;[164] The law creates a presumption against bail, as opposed to the presumption in favor of bail commonly applied in criminal cases, meaning that it places the burden on the defendants to convince judges that they will not continue to commit acts that endanger national security.[165] Judges may conduct trials without a jury at the discretion of the Secretary for Justice.[166] The law seriously undermines judicial independence in Hong Kong and further entrenches Beijing's intervention with the city's legal system. As of April 2023, Hong Kong's security minister reported nearly a 100 percent conviction rate in national security cases.[167]

The law has also enabled the police to pursue dissidents overseas. In December of 2023, Hong Kong police accused 13 overseas-based activists of violating the NSL and offered over HK$1 million in rewards for information leading to their arrest.[168] National security police also visited family members of these activists and reportedly took them away for questioning and interrogation, before releasing them.[169]

Capitalizing on the momentum of the NSL, the Hong Kong government introduced another national security-related law titled the Safeguarding National Security Bill, also known as Article 23.[170] The bill expands the definitions of sedition and state secrets, increases punishment for national security offenses, including life sentences, and allows defendants to be held without charge for up to 16 days, during which time they may not be granted access to a lawyer.[171] Prosecutors have paired charges under the NSL with Article 23 and other punitive laws, including colonial-era sedition laws, to lob multiple trumped-up charges against dissidents.[172] As of December 2024, a total of 19 overseas activists in exile have been issued arrest warrants.[173]

Both the NSL and Article 23 have effectively created a "parallel" legal system wherein national security cases are allowed to bypass due process and abandon fair trial standards.[174] They have helped the CCP accelerate its efforts to suppress dissent in Hong Kong, putting the city's once-vibrant civil liberties landscape under the shadow of Beijing's overarching influence.

*"I still hold the hope that one day we'll see another social movement in Hong Kong that will forever change Hong Kong's history. I think it's unavoidable when Hong Kongers have this collective sense of political awakening, and Hong Kongers have this strong sense of Hong Konger identity that is being erased by the Chinese Communist Party every single day."*

ANNA KWOK
EXILED HONG KONG ACTIVIST

[164] *Ibid.*, 10.

[165] "China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet): Hong Kong," U.S. Department of State, 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/hong-kong/#:~:text=In%20bail%20hearings%2C%20the%20NSL,case%20in%20most%20criminal%20matters; Selina Cheng and Elliot Bently, "How China's National Security Law Silences Hong Kong," *The Wall Street Journal,* July 1, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-chinas-national-security-law-silences-hong-kong-11656673119.

[166] Wong, Kellogg, and Lai, "Hong Kong's National Security Law and the Right to a Fair Trial," *supra* note 161, 19.

[167] Kelly Ho, "Hong Kong security chief hails 100% conviction rate in national security cases," *Hong Kong Free Press,* April 14, 2023, https://hongkongfp.com/2023/04/14/hong-kong-security-chief-hails-100-conviction-rate-in-national-security-cases/.

[168] Jessie Pang, "Hong Kong police expand dragnet on overseas pro-democracy activists," *Reuters,* December 15, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hong-kong-police-issue-arrest-warrants-5-more-overseas-activists-2023-12-14/.

[169] Jessie Pang and James Pomfret, "Wanted Hong Kong activist's relatives taken for questioning by police," *Reuters,* July 12, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/wanted-hong-kong-activists-relatives-taken-questioning-by-police-2023-07-11/.

[170] Lily Kuo, "Hong Kong fast-tracks law that once drew protests, cementing Beijing's hold," *The Washington Post,* March 20, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/19/hong-kong-article-23-security-law/.

[171] Helen Davidson, "Hong Kong's article 23: what is the new national security law and what will it mean for human rights?," *The Guardian,* January 30, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/30/hong-kong-article-23-new-national-security-laws-explained-what-do-they-mean.

[172] "Jimmy Lai pleads not guilty to national security, sedition charges," *Al Jazeera,* January 2, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/2/jimmy-lai-pleads-not-guilty-to-national-security-sedition-charges.

[173] Frances Mao, "The A-level student who became an enemy of the Chinese state," *BBC,* February 15, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93lp2wd0qzo.

[174] "One City, Two Legal Systems: Hong Kong Judges' Role in Rights Violations under the National Security," Congressional-Executive Commission on China, May 10, 2023, Lawhttps://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/one-city-two-legal-systems-hong-kong-judges%E2%80%99-role-in-rights#:~:text=The%20NSL%20has%20created%20a,presumption%20of%20innocence%20are%20disregarded.

## BURMESE JUNTA'S BROADENING OF PUNITIVE LAWS POST-2021 COUP

After the Burmese military junta seized power in a 2021 February coup, it made significant changes to the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code, including expanding existing offenses to target activists, journalists, student leaders, and those supporting or being members of the Civil Disobedience Movement.[175] The Burma military responded to the movement with intimidation and legal persecution.[176] Hundreds of CDM members were sentenced on bogus charges,[177] while dozens of their family members were taken hostage by security forces.[178] In August 2021, some CDM members who were in custody reported being sexually harassed or tortured to death.[179]

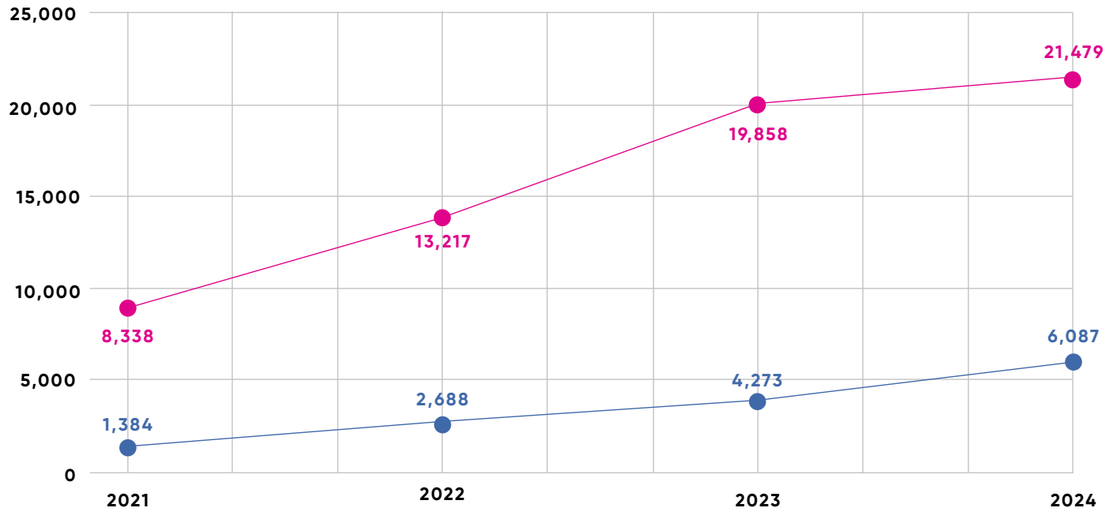
The junta also adopted a new legal provision, Section 505A, that may be used to silence those exercising their rights to freedom of expression or publicly criticize the military regime.[180] The new section criminalizes "causing fear, spreading false news, or agitating directly or indirectly criminal offenses against government employees."[181] Not only does the new provision define punishable acts such as "causing fear" or "false news" in a vague and overbroad manner,[182] but it also grants the power to law enforcement officers to arrest anyone without a warrant.[183]

Anyone who violates the law could face up to three years in prison, or a fine, or both.[184] Many detainees facing trials associated with protests or anti-coup activities have been charged under the amended 505A of the Penal Code.[185] According to Free Expression Myanmar (FEM), thousands have been criminalized under Articles 505 and 505A.[186] In September 2023, Sai Zaw Thaike, a photojournalist of local news outlet Myanmar Now, was sentenced to 20 years in prison by a military tribunal in Yangon following his report on the impact of Cyclone Mocha.[187] His initial indictment included allegations of incitement and misinformation under the Natural Disaster Management Law, and Section 505A of the Penal Code.[188]

Apart from the newly enacted 505A of the Penal Code, the Burmese military junta increasingly used the overbroad 2014 Counter-Terrorism Act, which grants the regime unchecked power to suppress, and target dissent.[189] The law has been used to target and silence all forms of resistance throughout the country and has enabled the junta to block digital resistance efforts.[190] After the coup, the Burmese junta amended the Act to crack down on activists.[191] Addendum to the law enables junta officials to surveil members of pro-democracy groups, confiscate their assets of the suspects, and cooperate with other regimes to arrest or deport them.[192] Thousands of human rights defenders have been detained on the basis of these laws and others relating to sedition and incitement.[193] Many have been sentenced by military courts in closed-door trials and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, or even death.[194]

According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), at least 28,000 have been arrested, and more than 10,000 have been sentenced as of March 2025.[195] Political prisoners suffered from various forms of torture and ill-treatment, including denial of access to adequate medical treatment, sexual and gender-based violence, and other physical abuses.[196] Between February 2021 and January 2023, there were 1,009 deaths in custody, as reported by AAPP. Among the deceased were 67 children, ranging in age from 0 to 18 years old, and 265 individuals aged 19 to 30.[197] The Burmese military regime has shown no signs of ceasing its oppressive tactics against dissenters. Those who resisted the military continued to face severe persecution, including arbitrary detention, harsh interrogations, and inhumane treatment.[198] This relentless suppression serves as a reminder of the human cost of resistance under a brutal military regime, where even the young are not spared.

### NUMBER OF PEOPLE KILLED AND DETAINED SINCE THE 2021 BURMA COUP




*Source: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)*

[175] "Myanmar: Analysis of the Military's Changes to the Penal Code," Centre for Law and Democracy, May 10, 2021, https://www.law-democracy.org/live/myanmar-analysis-of-the-militarys-changes-to-the-penal-code/; "Myanmar: Post-Coup Legal Changes Erode Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, March 2, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/02/myanmar-post-coup-legal-changes-erode-human-rights.

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[179] *Ibid.*

[180] "Myanmar: Post-Coup Legal Changes Erode Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, March 2, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/02/myanmar-post-coup-legal-changes-erode-human-rights.

[181] "Freed Prisoners in Myanmar Express Fear of Being Rearrested," *Voice of America,* May 25, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/7108599.html.

[182] "Two years after Myanmar's military coup, human rights violations continue to escalate," ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, February 2, 2023, https://aseanmp.org/2023/02/02/two-years-after-myanmars-military-coup-human-rights-violations-continue-to-escalate/; "Analysis: Amendments to the Penal Code by the State Administration Council," Centre for Law and Democracy, May 2021: 6, https://www.law-democracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Myanmar.Penal-Code-Analysis.FINAL_.pdf.

[183] *Ibid.*, Centre for Law and Democracy, 6.

[184] *Ibid.*, Centre for Law and Democracy, 6.

[185] "Our Numbers Are Dwindling:" Myanmar's Post-Coup Crackdown on Lawyers," Human Rights Watch, June 8, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/08/our-numbers-are-dwindling/myanmars-post-coup-crackdown-lawyers.

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[187] "Myanmar court jails photojournalist for 20 years," *Reuters,* September 6, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-court-jails-photojournalist-20-years-2023-09-06/; "Myanmar: Photojournalist sentenced to twenty years imprisonment," Interntional Federation of Journalists, September 7, 2023, https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/myanmar-photojournalist-sentenced-to-twenty-years-imprisonment.

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[189] ""Our Numbers Are Dwindling:" Myanmar's Post-Coup Crackdown on Lawyers," *supra* note 184; Dhevy Sivaprakasam, Wai Phyo Myint, and Méabh Maguire, "Myanmar's "counter-terrorism" by-laws must be denounced for what they are – illegal," Access Now, April, 19, 2023, https://www.accessnow.org/myanmar-counter-terrorism-law/.

[190] Sivaprakasam, Wai Phyo Myint, and Maguire, "Myanmar's "counter-terrorism" by-laws must be denounced for what they are – illegal," *supra* note 188; "Myanmar Regime Extends Counterterrorism Law to Block Resistance Funding," *The Irrawaddy,* March 17, 2023, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-extends-counterterrorism-law-to-block-resistance-funding.html.

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[193] "Myanmar: As assault on human rights persist civil society calls for review of failed ASEAN strategy," CIVICUS, May 19, 2023, https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/myanmar-as-assault-on-human-rights-persist-civil-society-calls-for-review-of-failed-asean-strategy/.

[194] *Ibid.*; ""Our Numbers Are Dwindling:" Myanmar's Post-Coup Crackdown on Lawyers," *supra* note 184.

[195] "Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup," Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), March 13, 2025, https://aappb.org/?p=31697.

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[197] "Assistance Association for Political Prisoner's Submission to Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Call for input – Deaths in custody," OHCHR, March 6, 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/executions/sr-sumex/cfi-deathincustody/submissions/subm-deaths-custody-cso-assistance-association-political-pri-burma.pdf.

[198] "The Flow of Injustice," *supra* note 195.




*A protester bangs a pot in protest after the court denied bail to activists detained under Article 112.*

*Photo credit: Adirach Toumlamoon via Shutterstock*

## THAILAND'S MISUSE OF ROYAL DEFAMATION

Following the series of youth-led protests that erupted in 2020, Thailand has used several provisions to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including the Computer Crime Act, the Emergency Decree, and the lèse-majesté law for royal defamation.[199] According to the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, more than 1,900 people have been persecuted since the "Free Youth" protest sparked in July 2020, 286 of whom are children and youth under 18.[200]

As activists shifted to online advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, Thai officials enforced the lèse-majesté law more strictly.[201] Lèse-majesté, defined by Article 112 of Thailand's Criminal Code, states that "Whoever defames, insults, or threatens the King, the Queen, the Heir-apparent, or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years."[202] The law has been criticized as a political tool to clamp down on freedom of expression.[203]

In 2024, Mongkol "Busbas" Thirakot, an online clothing vendor, was sentenced to 50 years in prison under the lèse-majesté law for his social media comments perceived to criticize the monarchy.[204] His sentence is the longest on record of the lèse-majesté cases.[205] However, Mongkol's case is only one of many individuals who have been detained for royal defamation and meted out disproportionate sentences. The Thai Lawyers for Human Rights reported that at least 262 people have been charged under the lèse-majesté law as of January 2024.[206] Many of these cases do not adhere to proper judicial procedures, with many people being denied bail or subject to pre-trial detention.[207]

*"Similar to Hong Kong, Thailand also responded to waves of change or waves of hope with violence. This violence manifests in both physical and legal forms. It not only weakened the capacity of activist groups but also fostered an atmosphere of fear, causing individuals—particularly newcomers or prospective participants in movements—to rethink security. Simply put, the state escalated consequences for exercising such rights."*

ANGELO SATHAYU SATHORN
THAI ACTIVIST




*Pro-democracy protesters in Thailand occupy a road around the Victory Monument in Bangkok to demand the release of arrested protest leaders.*

*Photo credit: kan Sangtong via Shutterstock*

[199] "New report highlights impact of the Computer Crime Act on online expression in Thailand," Engage Media, June 10, 2022, https://engagemedia.org/2022/thailand-computer-crime-act/; "Thai authorities use excessive force, lese-majeste laws to clamp down on pro-democracy protests," CIVICUS, December 2, 2020, https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/thai-authorities-use-excessive-force-lese-majeste-laws-clamp-down-pro-democracy-protests/; "Thailand: Emergency Decree Pretext for Crackdown," Human Rights Watch, October 15, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/15/thailand-emergency-decree-pretext-crackdown.

[200] "December 2023: a total of 1,938 people have been politically prosecuted in 1,264 cases," Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, January 17, 2024, https://tlhr2014.com/en/archives/63246.

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[206] "December 2023: a total of 1,938 people have been politically prosecuted in 1,264 cases," *supra* note 200.

[207] "Thai courts hand jail terms to lawmaker and musician for royal insults," *The Straits Times*, May 27, 2024, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-opposition-lawmaker-sentenced-to-2-years-in-jail-for-insulting-monarchy; "Thailand: Arbitrary detention of eight pro-democracy activists," International Federation for Human Rights, August 12, 2021, https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/thailand-arbitrary-detention-of-eight-pro-democracy-activists; "Thailand: Sixth conviction of pro-democracy activist Anon Nampa under "lèse-majesté" charges," International Federation for Human Rights, December 20, 2024, https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/thailand-sixth-conviction-of-pro-democracy-activist-anon-nampa-under.

# Tactics of Digital Repression

With increased reliance on digital means of activism, youth are vulnerable to regime surveillance in this space. Authoritarian regimes across Asia are exploiting advanced spyware and building cyber armies to monitor and suppress dissenting voices, and often without being detected.

In Thailand, the regime of coup leader-turned-PM Prayut Chan-o-cha acquired Pegasus Spyware from Israeli firm NSO Group that it ultimately used to spy on at least four members of a prominent youth movement, United Front Thammasat and Demonstration.[208] Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, a Thai woman activist, recounts her firsthand experience of having her phone hacked, stating "[My phone] was hacked four times, and if you look at each round that was hacked, it was before the event (protest) took place." In addition to hacking, she also notes being attacked online: "There were hateful comments in the various comment and message channels. Some told me to "go die." Some called me horrible names." In Cambodia, regime officials are increasingly monitoring the activities of young environmentalists, obstructing their activism.[209] In 2020, for instance, 14 youth and environmental activists were arrested and hit with spurious incitement charges for organizing, via Facebook, a peaceful protest for the protection of land rights along the border with Vietnam.[210]

In Burma, surveillance has led to widespread doxing targeting women and men alike. In February 2023, a Telegram channel run by junta supporters leaked an adult video bearing the flag of the State Administration Council (SAC) that features a 25-year-old woman accused of harboring pro-democracy views.[211] A CNN analysis found hundreds of similar pro-junta Telegram channels conducting such doxing activities—with their victims being predominantly women who opposed the coup, including activists—and flagged the possibility that some of those channels are coordinated alongside the military itself.[212] Thai woman activist Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul notes the gender-based nature of cyber attacks: "*Women activists faced heightened levels of violence. Some even edited photos of women activists into nude images. In my case, a photo (of me giving a speech) was edited by replacing the microphone with a male genitalia. Other women activists also faced the same, including rape threats. These (attacks) make people feel burned out.*" Many of those doxed and outed on social media were subsequently arrested.[213]

Authoritarian regimes have also discovered the benefit of delegating repression to cyber armies or trolls. In China, the CCP is known to have outsourced a sizable group of anonymous internet commenters dubbed the "50 Cent Party"—a name attributed to rumors that members are paid 50 cents for each comment they post—to debate regime critics and influence public opinion in its favor. A 2017 study found that members of the group are responsible for "astroturfing," or the practice of posing as genuine social media users and leaving false social media comments that fiercely defend the regime. While the identities of the vast majority of members, as well as their precise number, remain unknown, the study revealed that some were civil servants working for various local bureaus.[214] Another study found that the term "50-cent gang" is often used to refer to young, radical patriots called the "angry youth" as well as their more subdued counterparts, the "little pinks," who commonly engage internet users whose views they deem disrespectful of the motherland.[215]

The little pinks, specifically, played a key role in derailing the celebration of the Democratic Progressive Party as the victor of the 2016 Taiwanese elections. Rather than scornful statements, however, they flooded online spaces with "funny and provocative internet memes" advocating mainland nationalism. These birthed a meme war with pro-Taiwan independence users that led to dozens of photos, slogans, and romantic metaphors portraying China and Taiwan as a broken family that needs to be reunited being distributed by different accounts.[216] While some have concluded that the little pinks are mostly self-mobilizing volunteers distinct from the CCP,[217] the latter has commended their actions.[218]

Cyber armies are not an exclusively Chinese phenomenon. Since 2016, Vietnam's Force 47, a 10,000-strong military unit, has been waging an information war online and rebutting critics of the Communist Party.[219] In Thailand, the state security apparatus has dedicated massive financial and human resources to Information Operations (IOs). Pannika Wanich, a former lawmaker of the now-dissolved Future Forward Party, exposed more than 54,000 IO Twitter accounts operated in Thailand, over 17,000 of which were controlled by an infantry division of the Thai Royal Army. These accounts, in fact, were controlled by a cluster of cyber units comprising over 1,000 army personnel who receive basic training and monthly pay to steer public opinions online through comments, hashtags, and retweets, and to attack dissidents.[220] Although the operations have been described as "low impact,"[221] they result in real-life repercussions for youth activists. A 2021 joint civil society report identified 124 individuals charged with Article 112, which enshrines Thailand's royal defamation, or lèse-majesté, law between November 2020 and August 2021, and many of the charges were brought against them following IOs conducted by the military.[222]



*Authoritarian regimes such as Vietnam employ cyber troops to create accounts and social media pages to promote content favorable to the regime and attack dissent online.*

*Photo credit: beast01 via Shutterstock*

[208] Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Dozens of Thai democracy activists targeted with Pegasus phone spyware," *The Guardian,* July 18, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/17/dozens-of-thai-democracy-activists-targeted-with-pegasus-phone-spyware.

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[210] "Cambodia: Free Detained Youth, Environmental Activists," Human Rights Watch, September 11, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/11/cambodia-free-detained-youth-environmental-activists.

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[213] Htin Aung Kyaw (trans.), "Myanmar junta arrested more than 1,300 people for online criticism," *Radio Free Asia,* October 13, 2023. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/arrests-101320231710 12.html.

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[215] Ho Wing-Chung, "The Surge of Nationalist Sentiment among Chinese Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *China: An International Journal* 20, no. 4 (2022): 1-22. doi:https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2022.0032. See also Anthony Tao, "China's 'Little Pink' are not who you think," *The China Project,* November 15, 2017. https://thechinaproject.com/2017/11/15/chinas-little-pink-are-not-who-you-think/.

[216] Kecheng Fang and M. Repnikova, "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The creation and evolution of a gendered label for nationalistic activists in China," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2018): 2162-2185. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731923.

[217] Ho Wing-Chung, "The Surge of Nationalist Sentiment among Chinese Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *China: An International Journal* 20, no. 4 (2022): 1-22. doi:https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2022.0032 ("more [scholars] deem the nationalism featured by this group as 'spontaneous' and 'non-state' in the sense that their patriotic actions are less anticipated by and, sometimes, not entirely in line with the state.")

[218] Zhuang Pinghui, "The rise of the Little Pink: China's angry young digital warriors," *South China Morning Post,* May 26, 2017. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2095458/rise-little-pink-chinas-young-angry-digital-warriors.

[219] Michael Caster, "Vietnam: Confronting digital dictatorship," ARTICLE 19. September 12, 2023. https://www.article19.org/resources/vietnam-confronting-digital-dictatorship/; Raksha Kumar, "As more Vietnamese get online, a new battlefront for the regime - social media," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at University of Oxford. August 10, 2021. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/more-vietnamese-get-online-new-battlefront-regime-social-media.

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06

# Diasporic Dissent: Youth Activism Away from the Homeland

*Members of the Coalition of Students Resisting the CCP and Students for a Free Tibet Boston chapter protest Chinese Ambassador to the United States Xie Feng's address at the Harvard Kennedy School.*

*Photo credit: The Coalition of Students Resisting the CCP*

China's escalating authoritarianism has systematically obliterated space for political dissent, especially in Hong Kong, Tibet, the Uyghur Region, and increasingly so in Taiwan. The restrictive environment has precipitated the mobilization of diaspora movements outside of China, inadvertently fostering a collaborative network of youth activists united by the common objective of protecting their respective homelands against Chinese aggression.

There is a rich history of collaboration and solidarity between Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Tibetan and Uyghur communities as they amplify their collective voice against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). After more than 144,400 Hong Kongers born after 1997 fled their homeland to continue their activism abroad,[223] they were supported by Taiwanese, Tibetans, and Uyghurs who also joined protests,[224] organized solidarity campaigns,[225] jointly condemned various rights violations,[226] and reinforced their united stand against the CCP. Tenzin Passang, Director of Students for a Free Tibet India speaks to the importance of working together: *"The transnational collaboration serves as a reminder for everyone who cares about these issues that they are not competing against each other for coverage, but it is them against a giant enemy that is authoritarianism."*

While China's growing aggression in the region may be the starting point for cross-movement diasporic collaboration, youth groups also share a mutual understanding of how life in exile has shaped their identities and changed their relationship to their homelands. Diverging from older generations, the Hong Kong and Taiwanese diaspora largely define themselves as uniquely Hong Kongers and Taiwanese, rather than Chinese.[227] While older generations struggle to reconcile colonial histories and conflicts over national identity, younger generations share a common objective of restoring democracy, self-determination, and human rights that compel them to embrace their own national identities.

The Tibetan and the Uyghur youth, on the other hand, have inherited a legacy of collective identity, ethnic autonomy, and diaspora mobilization from their elders, who have actively been advocating for the establishment of democracy, self-determination, and human rights for their homelands for decades. Therefore, even though many in the younger generations have never been to their homelands, this shared sense of exiled identity has allowed them to relate to each other in a way that older generations did not. As Kawsar Yasin, Uyghur co-founder of The Coalition of Students Resisting the CCP and 2025 HRF Freedom Fellow, discusses: *"I think the older generation didn't really engage in transnational collaboration with other groups like Hong Kongers and Tibetans. I really value this collaboration.... I am so much connected to the Tibetans that they were my only friends who can understand my feelings in terms of identity recognition and our homeland, because we have never been to homeland, we lived in exile for our whole lives. I resonate with their movement deeply in a sense that it's based on the struggle for the rights of the country they've never been to."* [228]

Uyghur youth have previously been slower to engage in diasporic advocacy possibly due to their perceived disconnection with older generations.[229] Different generations have assimilated to the society of their host country in exile to varying degrees.[230] There were also limited opportunities for youth to engage in existing mobilization efforts, which has led some to feel marginalized among the broader diaspora.[231] However, as domestic and transnational repression has intensified over the past decade, young people have become more motivated to work with other diasporic groups to bring global attention to the plight of those in their homelands.

They have found new ways to participate in the movement by harnessing their unique strengths, such as language skills to communicate with local networks, digital expertise to campaign online, and citizenship that afford them stronger protections to exercise their rights.[232] As a result, there is an unprecedented increase of Uyghur youth engagement, marked by the establishment of dozens of new youth groups that are cultivating a more inclusive environment for younger generations to support the cause. A Uyghur activist, who wished to remain anonymous, notes how cross-movement collaboration is helpful: *"Receiving help from other movements... gives more credibility to all of our members when such diverse groups can come together and send the same messages. And of course we have greater numbers when moving together."*

[223] Heather Rolfe, "General Election 2024: What are Hong Kong BNO voters looking for?," *UK in a Changing Europe,* March 18, 2024. https://ukandeu.ac.uk/general-election-2024-what-are-hong-kong-bno-voters-looking-for/.

[224] Jodi Xu Klein, "Taiwan, Tibet and Uygur expats join Hongkongers in New York to show support for protests," *South China Morning Post,* 11 August, 2019. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3022319/taiwan-tibet-and-uygur-expats-join-hongkongers-new-york-show.

[225] "Taiwanese, Tibetan students protest Chinese envoy's speech at Harvard," *Focus Taiwan,* April 22, 2024. https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202404220007.

[226] "Solidarity Statement For Joey Siu and Frances Hui," Students for a Free Tibet". December 15, 2023. https://studentsforafreetibet.org/joey-siu-and-frances-hui-solidarity/.

[227] Syaru Shirley Lin, "Analyzing the Relationship between Identity and Democratization in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Shadow of China," *The Asian Forum,* December 20, 2018. https://theasanforum.org/analyzing-the-relationship-between-identity-and-democratization-in-taiwan-and-hong-kong-in-the-shadow-of-china/.

[228] Coalition of Students Resisting the CCP, https://www.coalition-studentsresistchina.org/."

[229] From a conversation with a youth Uyghur community member who wishes to remain anonymous

[230] From a conversation with a youth Uyghur community member who wishes to remain anonymous

[231] From a conversation with a youth Uyghur community member who wishes to remain anonymous

[232] From a conversation with a youth Uyghur community member who wishes to remain anonymous






*Uyghur Youth Initiative launches the "What If It Happened To You" Campaign.*

*Photo credit: Uyghur Youth Initiative*

*"I am seeing a lot more youth mobilizing as the years go by, which makes sense as they have new ideas, resources, or technology they can utilize to effect change. Perhaps it's because more youth who were born here or moved as young children – who have been struggling with identity, community, even local opportunities – are now coming into that age. In any case, youth mobilization should be supported and guided (but not hindered or usurped) by elders. A fuller activist effort can only happen if all generations are working on the issue."*

ANONYMOUS UYGHUR ACTIVIST




*Uyghur youth protest in Frankfurt to raise awareness about human rights violations and genocide in the Uyghur Region.*

*Photo credit: Uyghur Youth Initiative*





*The 3rd Students For a Free Tibet Cross-Movement Roundtable in Taipei unites youth activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Uyghur movements to strategize against Chinese colonialism*

*Photo Credit: Students for a Free Tibet via Instagram*

One such group that is playing a pivotal role in mobilizing youth is the Germany-based Uyghur Youth Initiative (UYI), which has organized impactful, creative campaigns, workshops, and cultural initiatives both online and offline.[233] Particularly on social media, they regularly recreate popular TikTok trends to highlight gross human rights abuses in the Uyghur Region.[234]

They also co-produce creative digital content with their peers in the United States[235] and across Europe.[236] These partnerships not only enhance the visibility and impact of their work, but also help advance the momentum of the broader youth advocacy effort.

Moreover, these collaborative efforts are also increasingly unfolding in partnership with Hong Kong and Tibetan youth groups in offline environments and developing into high-level capacity-building programs. Initiatives such as the United Nations Advocacy Training, provide a formal space for youth leaders from the Hong Kong, Tibetan and Uyghur movements to engage meaningfully with international stakeholders.[237]

Youth groups such as Student for a Free Tibet (SFT), have also been a significant contributor in the global solidarity building effort with its annual Action Camps and Cross-Movement Roundtables that bring together like-minded allies to counter CCP repression. These ventures have enriched strategic alliances and enhanced global awareness, as evidenced by the joint protests led by all three groups during Xi Jinping's visit to San Francisco during the 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and Premier Li Qiang's trip to Canberra, Australia in mid-2024.[238] These joint protests and collaborative initiatives have empowered marginalized youth to connect with their peers and facilitated the proliferation of youth alliance groups and increasing collaboration.[239]

[233] Uyghur Youth Initiative (uyghuryouth_initiative), https://www.instagram.com/uyghuryouth_initiative?igsh=MXdpaHh6czAyY3Jtaw%3D%3D.

[234] Nuriman Abdureshid, "Tiktok video by 3 Uyghur women goes viral," *Radio Free Asia*, January 29, 2024. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/tiktok-video-01292024151123.html.

[235] Uyghur Youth Initiative Free Uyghur Now, "Outfit Check in Washington D.C.," Instagram, May 26, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7amjVXuZ-8V/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

[236] Uyghur Youth Initiative SFT Netherlands, "The next generation of Uyghurs, Tibetans and Hongkongers continue to be resilient and resist against China's repression...," September 19, 2023. https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxX0gln-MaV7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

[237] Salomé Boucif, "Young Uyghur, Tibetan and Hong Konger defenders share their priorities with the UN's human rights bodies in Geneva,"October 4, 2023. International Service for Human Rights, https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/young-uyghur-tibetan-and-hong-konger-defenders-share-their-priorities-with-the-uns-human-rights-bodies-in-geneva/.

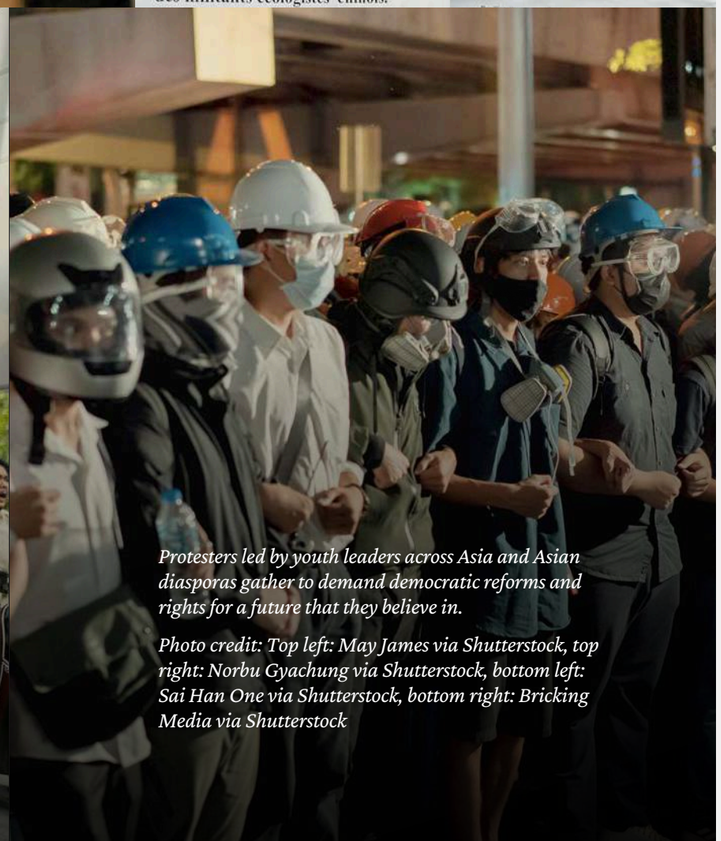
[238] Hundreds of Tibetans Protest Chinese Premier Li Qiang's Visit to Australia," June 18, 2024. Central Tibetan Administration, https://tibet.net/hundreds-of-tibetans-protest-chinese-premier-li-qiangs-visit-to-australia/.

[239] Coalition of Students Resisting the CCP (@coalition.src). "After their April protest of Chinese Ambassador Xie Feng, Harvard student activists felt terrified, unsupported, and unsafe...," Instagram, July 24, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9zr_v0h2dQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; "Rise Up Against Xi: A Cross-movement Protest During the Biden-Xi Talk," *Student for a Free Tibet*, November 10, 2023. https://studentsforafreetibet.org/rise-up-against-xi-press-release/.







*Protesters led by youth leaders across Asia and Asian diasporas gather to demand democratic reforms and rights for a future that they believe in.*

*Photo credit: Top left: May James via Shutterstock, top right: Norbu Gyachung via Shutterstock, bottom left: Sai Han One via Shutterstock, bottom right: Bricking Media via Shutterstock*

# Conclusion

Recent years have seen a growing discourse on the reality that many young people around the world are becoming disenchanted with democratic governance, viewing it as inefficient, corrupt, and unequal. These sentiments especially ring true for youth in emerging and established democracies who lack collective memories of authoritarian rule.

Against this backdrop, the youth-led movements that flourished in parts of Asia between 2019 and 2023 serve as a potent reminder of why democratic ideals are worth defending. East and Southeast Asia, in particular, are pivotal areas for these movements: although countries in the sub-regions have made strides in development, only three – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – are stable democracies.[240] The remaining nations, which account for 83% of the sub-regions,[241] have failed to escape despotic rule, struggled to consolidate their democratic institutions, or exhibited signs of authoritarian relapse following transitional periods.

Contemporary youth-led movements are also inseparable from technology. Social media, for example, served as a powerful tool to leverage support for the pro-democracy cause across the events we observed, while also evolving as a battleground for information warfare. However, the digital landscape presents vulnerabilities, with authoritarian regimes increasingly deploying sophisticated surveillance and censorship technologies to quash criticism.

The experiences of activists facing cyber harassment and doxing highlight the precarious nature of digital activism.

A striking feature of contemporary youth-led movements is the spirit of solidarity among activists from diverse backgrounds. The collaboration between Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, Uyghurs, and Tibetans illustrates a collective rejection of authoritarianism that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. The same can be seen in the emergence of pro-democracy protests under the mutual banner of the Milk Tea Alliance, which spread even to places like Burma, where protesting could be a choice between life and death.

Looking ahead, the challenges facing youth-led movements remain formidable. Young people are passionate changemakers. In their activism, they must navigate not only the complexities of regime repression but also skepticism, and sometimes resistance, from older generations.

In addition, the youth activists with whom we sat down pointed out cases where their colleagues withdrew from their cause, embattled by regime attacks and apprehensive about whether their efforts would bear fruit at all.

Nevertheless, democratic governments are best positioned to show that democracy still pays dividends. Free societies have the potential to significantly shape expectations for change in repressive contexts. Ultimately, those expectations determine whether democracy thrives or stagnates at the hands of younger generations, both in Asia and beyond.

[240] HRF considers stable democracies as those that demonstrate a capacity to consistently hold free and fair elections, uphold fundamental liberties, and guarantee the independence of the judiciary in a predictable and secure political environment. A relative absence of extreme political turmoil, violence, or systemic corruption over a significant period of time is required under this definition.

[241] There is a total of 17 countries in the sub-regions, including Taiwan.

# Recommendations

To date, young activists living under the Burmese, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Thai regimes continue to face intimidation, oppressive laws, cyberattacks, and other state-sponsored campaigns of repression. The following are a series of recommendations for international civil society organizations and democratic governments on how they can bolster youth-led activism and policymakers to protect and promote freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in the region. There are also a set of domestic policy recommendations applicable to Burma, China, Hong Kong, and Thailand.

## For International Civil Society Organizations

**Enhance Capacity Building for Youth Activists.** International civil society organizations should provide training workshops for young activists to equip them with the essential skills, such as leadership, advocacy, digital security, media literacy, and peer learning networks, in order to further their advocacy for freedom and democracy.

**Strengthen transnational networks.** International civil society organizations should act as a bridge to connect young activists across borders. These networks are crucial for activists to share experiences, learn about challenges, and collaborate on future activism.

**Provide financial support to youth groups.** Several young activists interviewed for this report highlighted a lack of funding and resources as a significant barrier to their campaigns. International civil society organizations should establish grant programs to sustain ongoing and future youth-led activism.

**Offer legal support.** International civil society organizations should monitor activists at risk of arbitrary detention and provide legal support to expedite their release.

## For Democratic Governments

**Prioritize youth activism programs in foreign assistance.** Democratic governments should provide sustainable funding, mentorship, and context-specific support for youth-led initiatives in countries with authoritarian regimes. Support includes comprehensive skill training on leadership, advocacy, digital security, media literacy, and peer learning networks.

**Enhance security mehcanisms for activists seeking refuge.** Democratic governments should implement protection policies and offer legal protection, asylum, and emergency support to youth activists facing threats or reprisals in their home countries according to the principle of non-refoulement.

**Supports independent and grassroots media.** On-the-ground reporting is vital to create a safer environment for youth activists. Democratic governments should offer legal aid, capacity-building programs, grants, and publicly recognize the contribution of independent media outlets in amplifying the aspirations of youth activists. This support should also involve fostering partnerships between media outlets and international organizations, journalist associations, and advocacy groups.

**Provide opportunities for youth activists to engage with democratic institutions abroad.** Democratic governments should facilitate practical opportunities for youth activists – especially those from marginalized, at risk, and underrepresented groups – to engage with democratic actors abroad. Programs should enhance the understanding of social movements among youth activists, promote cross-cultural knowledge sharing, and encourage collaboration among activists from diverse backgrounds.

## Domestic Policy Recommendations

**Repeal or reform laws that unduly restrict the freedom of dissent.** HRF calls on the following regimes to repeal or amend laws that violate the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and ensure that they are aligned with international human rights laws and principles.

**Burma**

- Repeal Section 505A and other provisions that unduly criminalize the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in the country.

**Hong Kong**

- Amend the National Security Law 2020 to prevent the widespread misuse of the law. Clearly define broad and vague terms such as "secession," "subversion," "terrorism," "and "collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security."
- Reinstate procedural safeguards for defendants and restore fair trial standards and due process, especially in National Security Law cases.
- Reform the Safeguarding National Security Bill, or Article 23: Clarify the scope and meaning of the broadly worded "treason," "sedition," "espionage," "state secrets," and "external interference."
- Abolish closed-door trials that permit police to detain suspects for up to 16 days without formal charges.

**Thailand**

- Repeal the lèse-majesté law, or the royal defamation law known as Article 112, and unconditionally and immediately release all prisoners of conscience arbitrarily detained under Article 112.

**Abide by international standards on protecting human rights.** HRF calls on the Burmese, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Thai regimes to ratify and adhere to treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, incorporating the principles of the conventions into national legislation; particularly freedom of expression (ICCPR Article 19), the right to peaceful assembly (ICCPR Article 21), freedom of association (ICCPR Article 22), the right to freedom of expression for children and young people (CRC Article 13), the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly for children and young people (CRC Article 15), and the right to access information (CRC Article 17).

**Support local civil society groups.** The Burmese, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Thai governments should support local civil society groups focusing on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and empowering youth. This means creating policies that facilitate their registration and protect their activities, providing financial assistance and resources to sustain their operations, and collaborating with international organizations to raise awareness of human rights violations.

**Establish appropriate and accessible judicial and non-judicial redress mechanisms.** The Burmese, Chinese, Hong Kong, and Thai regimes should ensure that there are sufficient safeguards against potential abuses of policies, laws, and regulations, and that individuals or groups who are adversely affected by them may access avenues to appeal or amend harmful legal provisions, as well as obtain fair and equitable remedies. These may include oversight authorities, independent human rights commissions, and mediation and conciliation procedures. Regular evaluations of such mechanisms should also be undertaken to ensure their consistency with prevailing human rights standards.

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