

ELECTED, NOT EMPOWERED: ASIA'S YOUTH, THE POWER GAP, AND WHY ITS POLITICAL SYSTEMS LOSE THEIR FUTURE LEADERS

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A Global Youth Participation Index Spotlight in partnership
with the Centre for Youth Policy

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Recent developments in the Asian¹ continent demonstrate a shift towards organised political action in the streets: young activists have taken to action in what has come to be known as ‘Gen-Z’ protests that have toppled regimes in Nepal and Bangladesh. The young, Asian generation are amongst those that have made a name for themselves in recent months, showcasing that they are no longer willing to be tolerant of a gap between government policy and lived reality.

Despite these changes, however, it would still appear that real political power in the region does not rest in the hands of the youth, who have the ability to participate in public life and protest, but not to hold formal power in the political institutions they oppose. This gap can be understood by the findings of the Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI), an index that systematically scores 142 countries on how well they enable young people to participate in political, civic and economic life. Read alongside the Centre for Youth Policy’s After They Win report, it becomes easy to see that there are two barriers to overcome, not one. The first are the candidacy laws and party structures measured by the GYPI, which keep most young people out of office altogether. The second gap between participation and power, mapped by After They Win, exists after young people enter office, sometimes being placed in offices without the staff capacity to function, or even those without the standing or authority to govern.

A protest can force the first gate open; it guarantees nothing about the second.

Drawing on the GYPI data and the Centre for Youth Policy’s After They Win report, this Spotlight demonstrates that Asia’s youth are held back not by apathy but by design: winning office only to be stripped of real authority. Closing the gap between mobilisation and power will take deliberate reform, from staffing to youth quotas, if the continent’s protest energy is to harden into durable leadership rather than recurring instability.

1. For the purposes of this article, Asia refers to countries between Indonesia & Japan to Afghanistan & Kazakhstan, or, alternatively does not include the Middle East.



WHAT THE GLOBAL YOUTH PARTICIPATION INDEX (GYPI) MEASURES

The Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI) is, simply put, a measure of how integrated a country’s youth is in their respective political and civic lives and creates an important distinction between the four dimensions it measures, as they do not often work in lockstep with one another. That is to say, most nations have a different quality of one dimension compared to another, and nations with relatively low scores overall on the GYPI may still score very highly in one category. For example, Japan, which has an overall score of 74, has a Socio-Economic subscore of 98 but a Political Affairs subscore of only 51, implying that although the Japanese youth are well educated and employed, they are shut out of formal political decision-making. Myanmar lies on the other side of the spectrum. An overall score of 41 masks a much healthier Socio-Economic subscore of 74. This is not to say, however, that these factors are independent of each other. Improvement in one dimension can lead to improvement in others. In nations where young people find themselves with protected civic freedoms, political participation also increases.

One of the GYPI’s clearest findings is that these four dimensions vary dramatically in their worldwide averages. The ‘Socio-Economic’ dimension scores highest, at 76 out of 100, followed by ‘Civic Space’ at 62 out of 100. The ‘Elections’ metric peaks at a score of 54, and Political Affairs ranks lowest of all, at roughly 51. Bearing in mind that the global average GYPI score is 61, these scores paint a clear picture. Youth participation worldwide is a question of whether young people hold tangible power within political institutions.

This is not a story of apathy. The foundations that theoretically enable youth to enter office are real; the reality is that there exist other circumstances that inhibit them from being able to do so. Young people are not opting out of formal politics. They are being kept out of it. This is where the findings from After They Win come in.

WHERE THE GYPI AND FINDINGS FROM AFTER THEY WIN CONVERGE

The After They Win report was undertaken by the Centre for Youth Policy, an independent, non-partisan research organisation focused on young people's role in politics and democracy, set out to understand the experience of young politicians after they are elected to office. 100 young, elected individuals from across 6 different world regions were surveyed, spanning positions across various levels of government, such as local councilors, regional legislators, ministers and parliamentarians. All of those surveyed were under 33 years of age, with an average of 27. Asia was the most represented region within the sample, with 30 respondents originating from South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia.

The results of the survey were eye-opening. Across the sample, 71% agreed that it was easier for young people to win office than to remain in politics long-term, and 56% were unsure or unlikely as to whether they would remain in politics five years from the time of the study. In other words, the pipeline does not leak only before the election; it could also leak after the matter.

The pattern described by the study is a familiar one: young officials are elected to maintain an image of progressive, youth-driven change, then quietly stripped of the power that office is supposed to carry. Much of this happens through assignment. Rather than landing on the committees where real authority rests, like finance, diplomacy, and energy, young legislators are routed toward gender, sport, and culture.

What drives this is less conspiracy than structure. The committees that carry real authority are allocated by seniority and controlled by party leadership, and a young member arrives with neither the tenure nor the internal standing to claim one; [comparative research](#) on candidate selection establishes this, finding that even where party youth wings sit inside the body that picks candidates, their success still hinges on informal negotiation with senior party figures rather than on their own merits. Parties, for their part, recruit youth given what a fresh face signals on the ballot, not for the power it might someday wield. Once the seat is won the incentive to invest further fades.

Many of those surveyed also cited a lack of support from staff and frequent harassment as factors that prompted their exit from office. The study thus concludes that the systems that bring young people into politics are not meant to keep them there. Passively or actively, they inhibit young politicians from having lasting, meaningful political careers. As one South Asian parliamentarian stated, "Winning was supposed to be the hard part. But getting in was only the first gate. Staying in was much harder than the campaign itself".

The young officials who are able to escape this pattern are usually those who never relied on the party to begin with — those who inherited their seat. India shows the pattern at its clearest: when Patrick French surveyed the 2009 Lok Sabha for India: A Portrait, he found that every MP under the age of thirty had inherited their seat, as had roughly two-thirds of those aged forty and under, with dynastic MPs on average nearly five times wealthier than their self-made peers. Inheritance supplies precisely what a young outsider lacks — a name, a ready-made constituency organisation, factional cover, and money — and without it a young legislator has neither the leverage to demand a serious portfolio nor an independent base to fall back on when the party's use for them runs out.

APPLICATION TO THE ASIAN CONTINENT

The Asian continent has the largest distinction on the GYPI of any other region in the world. Scores run from South Korea, being the highest, at 76, all the way down to Afghanistan, the lowest-scoring nation (globally), at 14. With the rise of the Taliban and the subsequent dismantling of youth-led political institutions and involvement in the political sphere, Afghanistan has a bleak rating of 2 in the Political Affairs dimension. The Taliban formally banned all political parties in 2023, ruling that they have no basis under Sharia law, leaving no legal space for multiparty politics or the many other youth wings that would ordinarily grow out of it. They have no young leaders represented in the legislature, no youth party association, on top of an extremely low quality of freedom of expression and other political rights. Afghanistan's elections dimension on the GYPI scored a dismal 18/100, due to there being no free and fair elections, limited voting accessibility, and low youth voter turnout.

Vietnam offers a more moderate version of the same problem. It is nowhere near Afghanistan's extreme, but it still scored a mere 27 out of 100 in the Elections dimension. That weakness has a direct cost: when the ballot is constrained to this extent, young people have little ability to elect officials who represent their interests. The dimension that should channel youth demand into actual representation instead narrows it.

Seen together, Afghanistan and Vietnam point to a unifying experience in this otherwise diverse continent: an energetic, vocal youth presence colliding with political power structures that remain stubbornly closed. This mismatch is not stable, and it does not bode well for the future of young people in Asian politics. To understand why, it helps to examine Asian youth through each of the four dimensions measured by the GYPI.

Civic Space

The GYPI's findings make clear that Asian youth dominate in the Civic Space dimension, which is where the recent wave of 'Gen Z protests' come into focus. Over the past few years, youth-led movements across the continent have forced real change, often at real personal risk. In Nepal, young protesters seized on the 'nepo kids' label, circulating images of politicians' children flaunting wealth funded by public money while ordinary citizens struggled. That anger turned into one of the most widespread uprisings in the country's modern history. Young Nepalis showed exactly the kind of civic-space strength measured by the GYPI; mobilising digitally, leading campaigns, and building student coalitions, even after the government banned dozens of social-media platforms. In Indonesia, young protesters took to the streets against MPs who had granted themselves housing allowances dwarfing the minimum wage: another revolt against an elite seen as indifferent to a younger generation.

In perhaps the region's most distinctive development, we see that these grievances have begun to cross borders: young people in different countries, recognising their shared injustice, forming coalitions aimed at governments that do not serve them. For understanding regional trends in youth participation, these cross-border alliances may be the single, most telling sign of a common trend.

Unfortunately, the story the GYPI tells is one of informal power. However loud and effective youth voices have become in the civic space, the formal structures of governance remain closed to them, which blunts the possibility of durable political change. [Bangladesh](#) is the sharpest illustration of this principle: the 2024 student uprising forced out Sheikh Hasina, yet power passed first to the eighty-four-year-old Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus and then, in the February 2026 election, to the dynastic Bangladesh Nationalist Party under Tarique Rahman.

The generation that forced the change never inherited the power it created.

Socio-economic:

By the GYPI's own measures, much of Asia scores relatively well on the socio-economic dimension: its young people are broadly educated, increasingly drawn into modern sectors of the economy, and technologically fluent, aware of the world beyond their borders. Japan makes the point in a single figure, with a near-perfect Socio-Economic subscore of 98, but the pattern holds well across borders; even a country as troubled overall as Myanmar still posts a respectable 74 on this dimension. This is the front on which the continent looks most modern.

That strength is precisely what sharpens the grievance. The very capacities the GYPI rewards here, such as literacy, connectivity, and digital fluency, are the same tools that powered the protests described above: the Nepali campaigns coordinated over Discord and VPNs, the hashtag movements, the student coalitions. The civic energy of Asian youth, in other words, is not separate from their socio-economic standing but a direct product of it. A generation equipped to organise, argue, and mobilise is a generation that expects to be heard.

However, because the four dimensions do not reinforce one another, a commanding Socio-Economic score guarantees nothing about formal political access: Japan's 98 sits beside a Political Affairs subscore of just 51. A young person can be well-educated, digitally competent, and politically mobilised, win office, and still find that the institution offers no scaffolding for them to exercise real power. This is precisely the trap documented by After They Win. The mismatch is not merely frustrating; it is a textbook precondition for instability. When a society produces capable, expectant citizens faster than its institutions are willing to absorb them, that surplus capacity does not quietly dissipate. It searches for another outlet, which is exactly the volatile civic energy outlined in the previous section.

Political Affairs:

If Asia's young people have proven they can topple governments, they have found it far harder to govern within them. The same energy that fills a public square rarely converts into a seat at the table where decisions are actually made, and when it does, it is often hollowed out from the inside. This is the gap measured by the Political Affairs dimension, and this is where the continent scores worst. Crucially, weak Political Affairs scores are not confined to authoritarian states. Japan, one of Asia's strongest overall performers, carries a near-perfect Socio-Economic subscore of 98 but only a 51 in Political Affairs, thus flagging it as a place where young people remain badly under-represented in the bodies that govern. A high headline score, in other words, can coexist with the near-total absence of youth from meaningful decision-making, which is exactly the decoupling between dimensions the GYPI warns against.

One Political Affairs indicator connects the protest story to the lived experience of young officials more directly than any other: the political party youth wing. On paper, a youth wing is precisely the bridge that ought to carry civic energy into formal power, a built-in channel for bringing young people into the life of a party. And at first sight, the data suggests it works. Among the officials surveyed in After They Win, 52% named the party youth wing as their route into politics, ahead of civil society, student politics, or social movements combined. The channel exists, and young people are walking through it.

The significance of the channel is easiest to see in India. The BJP's youth wing, the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, is one of the largest youth political organisations in the world, comparable in size only to the Indian Youth Congress: between them, the two dwarf the youth wings of most Western parties combined. But size has not translated into authority: real decision-making sits with the BJP's National Executive, staffed by party seniors, while the Yuva Morcha's own role runs to volunteers, rally turnout, and campaign messaging. Political scientists who study youth wings across democracies describe this as a structural default rather than an Indian peculiarity. Parties typically lean on their youth wings for recruitment, legitimacy, socialisation, campaigning, and elite training, and the first four tend to crowd out the fifth. Bangladesh shows what happens when that imbalance goes furthest. The Bangladesh Chhatra League, the Awami League's student wing, was for decades the country's largest entry point into politics for young people; under Sheikh Hasina it became one of the most frequently named perpetrators in the country's political violence, repeatedly documented attacking student protesters, before the interim government banned it outright in October 2024 for its role in the crackdown on the July uprising. In both cases the wing did exactly what it was built to do: pull young people in, mobilise them, carry the party's message, and stop well short of what recruitment alone can never deliver, a claim on power once the campaign ends.

What waits on the other side is the problem. The same respondents who credited the youth wing with their entry went on to dismantle the illusion that it empowered them: 81% agreed that parties deploy young candidates for visibility rather than cultivating them as durable leaders, and 95%, one of the highest levels of agreement anywhere in the survey, said their youth was prized during the campaign and discounted once they were in office.

Elections:

The GYPI flags a candidacy-age barrier in its Political Affairs dimension, but the Elections dimension is where the mechanism becomes legible. A low voting age pulls young people into the electorate and makes them available to be mobilised, courted, and counted, while a higher candidacy age quietly disqualifies those same young people from being taken seriously as leaders.

The result is a structural paradox. Across much of Asia, young people are among the largest segments of the electorate, which on paper would make them the most powerful voting bloc on the continent, yet they remain the least represented inside the chambers where law is actually made.

India illustrates the gap precisely. A citizen can vote at 18, but cannot contest a state assembly seat until 25, nor the upper house until 30, creating a span of more than a decade in which a young Indian is trusted to choose representatives but not to be one. In 2023, a parliamentary standing committee identified this as a brake on youth empowerment and recommended lowering the candidacy age to 18 to match the vote, pointing to the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, where eighteen-year-olds may stand for national office and young legislators have proven reliable.

The Election Commission rejected the proposal, reasoning that eighteen-year-olds lack the experience and maturity to govern, notably the same maturity that goes unquestioned when their votes are being solicited. The cost of that refusal is visible in who actually wins. The 2024 general election returned the oldest Lok Sabha in India's history, its members averaging nearly fifty-six years; fewer than one MP in ten falls in the 25-to-40 band (a cohort that makes up approximately a quarter of the population) and barely one in twenty is under thirty-five.

The pattern also holds for the level below: across the eight state assemblies elected that same year, the share of legislators aged forty or younger hovered around ten percent or lower, and in Arunachal Pradesh not a single member was forty or under. A young voter can decide who governs, yet almost none of the people they elect look anything like them.

This is the paradox exposed by the Elections dimension — not that young people are missing from politics, but that the rules welcome them into the electorate and turn them away at the chamber door.

WHERE AND HOW THIS CHANGE MUST OCCUR

These protests must be leveraged to turn into real, tangible change inside governments to meet the needs of younger generations. The reason this matters beyond fairness is written across Asia's recent history. When energetic, capable, mobilised young people find that every formal route into political power is either closed or baseless, their energy does not disappear. It moves to the street. Asia's protest wave is, in part, a manifestation of a blocked political pipeline forcing its way out from the outside. A region that cannot turn its youngest, most engaged citizens into durable political leaders condemns itself to recurring inefficiency, and potentially to long-term instability.

One caveat should be mentioned here. It is tempting to look at the numbers: youth as a plurality, and in some countries a majority, of the electorate and picture a bloc held back by institutions alone. But the youth are not a unified bloc. It is a demographic fact, not a political identity: across Asia, young people are split by ethnicity, gender, religion, language, sect, region, sexuality, and class as sharply as their elders are, and at the ballot box voters divide along those same lines rather than as a generation. That largely accounts for why a demographic majority seldom becomes an electoral one.

Where age might otherwise harden into a common demand, entrenched elites have well-worn tools for preventing it: identity appeals that fold young voters into ethnic or sectarian camps, and patronage for public jobs, welfare, a party ticket that buys their loyalty a segment at a time.

Dynastic politics is the clearest example of this. When a party gives a politician's son or daughter an easy path to a seat, it puts a young face on an old establishment, which pulls other young voters back toward the very parties they might otherwise have opposed. Indonesia's PSI, a party built explicitly around youth representation, made this literal in 2023, installing Joko Widodo's 28-year-old son as its chairman within two days of him joining — a move described as extending the outgoing president's political network under a youth-branded banner rather than renewing it. This is why the current protests stand out: they are the rare moments when a single grievance is strong enough to unite young people across the lines that usually divide them. But that unity does not last. It tends to break apart on the way from the street to the ballot box, where those old divisions reopen.



To that extent, the most effective remedies are the concrete ones: the kind that leave little room for these power gaps to quietly persist. Nearly all of them come down to a single principle: supporting young politicians, both those trying to reach office and those already in it. That support runs in two directions, internal and external, and a serious strategy needs both.

Internally, the most immediate fix is also the most unglamorous: staff. After They Win identifies a lack of staff as the primary factor pushing young politicians out of office, the corollary is just as stark, with 90% of those surveyed saying that adequate staffing would make them more likely to seek a second term. The logic is plain. Without the support that makes the work survivable, young officials burn out under a workload they were never resourced to carry and drift toward the exit, not because they failed to win, but because no one built the conditions for them to govern.

Externally, the lever is representation by design. Youth quotas in government are one factor included in both the GYPI and the Centre for Youth Policy's findings on what creates healthy participation for youths in politics. The tools already exist inside the region: Kazakhstan requires at least 30% of a party's candidates, and of the seats it wins, to come from a combined pool of women, youth under 29, and people with disabilities. The Philippines runs a nationwide, legally reserved youth council in each of its roughly 42,000 barangays, complete with its own budget and an anti-dynasty clause built into the law that created it.

Worth noting is that neither guarantees influence on its own. Electoral-design research on youth quotas consistently finds that a quota only converts into real representation when young candidates are placed in electable positions, not near the bottom of a list where the letter of the law is satisfied while nothing in practice changes. The solution therefore becomes quotas paired with electable placement, which would both defuse civic unrest before it escalates and steer countries towards durable progress that a frozen-out generation cannot otherwise help build. Paired with the other measures that both studies identify, quotas and staffing begin to form a real foundation under young Asian politicians, bridging the gap between winning power and wielding it.

What the GYPI ultimately measures is not youth apathy but its opposite: a generation ready to govern, held at the threshold by design. The countries that move first to dismantle that threshold will not just be the fairer ones. They will be the stable ones.

Explore the **GYPI** - gypi.epd.eu/

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