

WORKING FOR CHANGE: IUSY in the Asia-Pacific Region

Jonas Bagas

THE INTERNATIONAL UNION OF SOCIALIST YOUTH (IUSY) is an international movement of socialist, social democratic and labor youth organizations all over the world. It was founded in Europe in 1907, but its political work was suspended due to World Wars I and II, and was resumed in 1946. Now, with a membership of 143 organizations in 100 countries worldwide, IUSY is the biggest political youth network in the entire world.

As a socialist/social democratic organization, IUSY believes in the following principles:

Freedom and Human Rights—IUSY affirms the universality of fundamental freedoms and human rights, where every individual, woman and man, have full political rights without being discriminated on the basis of class, caste, gender, religion and race;

Equality—IUSY is part of the struggle in ensuring equality among people and nations. It is fighting for equality between the genders, for equal opportunities and access to knowledge, and for social justice and the equal redistribution of economic wealth;

Democracy—IUSY believes that only through democracy can there be equal, full and free exercise of one's freedoms and human rights. It is part of the fight against authoritarianism, populism, and dictatorship;

Universal Solidarity—IUSY rejects the idea that the relationship among nations and states should be governed by capitalism and affirms that solidarity should instead be the foundation of international relations. IUSY likewise believes that the problems

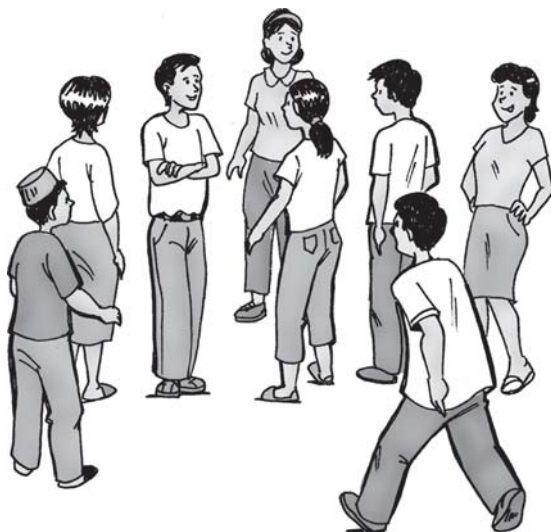
that the world is confronting today should be addressed through political solutions;

IUSY's engagement in the Asia-Pacific region is more recent, with India, Nepal, and the Philippines among the first countries to be represented in the region. Now, the International has 16 member organizations in the region. These include All Burma Students League, Australian Young Labor, Youth Organization of Bhutan, Fiji Labor Party, Rashtra Seva Dal (India), Yuva Janata Dal (India), Social Democratic Party of Japan – Youth Bureau, Minsha Youth – Japan, Democratic Action Party Socialist Youth Malaysia, Mongolian Democratic Socialist Youth Union, Nepal Students Union, Nepal Tarun Dal, New Zealand Young Labor, Akbayan Youth – Philippines, Demokratiko-Sosyalistang Kabataan ng Pilipinas, and the Tibetan Youth Congress. There are four Southeast Asian youth organizations in IUSY, but one of them, the All Burma Students League, is a refugee organization currently based in India.

Regional Youth Organizing in Asia-Pacific

Regional platforms for the youth in Asia-Pacific are numerous but are largely uncoordinated and unsustainable. Sectarian organizations, particularly religious ones, are the majority of regional organizations, mostly because of access to resources and stable organizing structures at the national level. Parallel groups for the youth of formal inter-state organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, also exist, albeit with no strategic or clear mandates.

In ASEAN's founding declaration in 1967, youth cooperation and development are included in the organization's socio-economic and developmental framework. The Southeast Asian organization



first created the ASEAN Youth Forum to map out common concerns and strategies on the youth and it was later elevated into the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Youth, a regular gathering of the youth ministers of its member states. Its task is to establish an ASEAN identity and awareness among the youth in the region and prepare them as active players in “an era of trade liberalization and globalization.”

APEC, on the other hand, has a looser youth forum, which was established for networking to deepen youth appreciation of APEC’s neoliberal economic framework. The Youth Forum meets once every two years and involve trainings for young entrepreneurs, economists, and scholars of neoliberal thought.

The above organizations’ youth programs reflect the marginalization with which the youth is treated in these inter-state groups and at the level of national politics. At best, these organizations serve as mere platform with no strategic vision or agenda for the youth, except to mimic the political or economic orientation of the regional organizations. Access to decision

making processes and influence in determining APEC or ASEAN's agenda is very limited. The unevenness and lack of democratic processes and meaningful youth participation in many Southeast Asian countries is replicated in ASEAN, and it is no surprise, therefore, that under its policy of constructive engagement, a clear euphemism to avoid the thorny issue of democratization in the region, ASEAN has tolerated the active presence of Myanmar's military regime in the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting for the Youth, despite the junta's anti-youth and civil liberties policies.

The rise of protest movements and the waves of democratization in the region have also changed the characteristics of international networking among the youth in the region. In 1969, a political international organization called the Asian Students Association was founded "to promote students solidarity for democracy, self-determination, peace, justice and liberation." In a geographically gargantuan region such as Asia and the Pacific, representing diversity is always a challenge.

The other political youth network is the Young Liberals and Democrats of Asia (YLDA), the youth-wing of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD), which is the alliance of "liberal" parties in the region. Established during the 2003 CALD Young Leaders workshop in Cambodia, YLDA aims "to realize liberal ideals and democratic principles in Asia through cooperation and dialogue among youth."

IUSY and the Challenges of Progressive Youth Organizing in the Asia-Pacific Region

As mentioned above, youth networking in the Asia-Pacific region faces layers of daunting challenges. With varying degrees of democratization, economic conditions, and socio-cultural make-up, the diversity itself of the region poses immense and practical

tasks to efforts to establish platforms for progressive youth and student organizations. Furthermore, the practical and economic cost of “south-to-south” dialogue makes solidarity work between and among Asia-Pacific countries all the more complicated.

Realities on the ground attest to this difficulty. Countries that need urgent international solidarity the most oftentimes face harsh political conditions that make youth organizing or networking difficult. The IUSY Asia Pacific Committee, for instance, has two member organizations in the region that operate in refugee camps. The All Burma Students League, an alliance of Burmese student organizations fighting for democracy in Burma, has its base in India, where thousands of Burmese refugees have flocked due to the repressive policies of the Burmese military junta. Similarly, the Youth Organization of Bhutan operates in Nepal, where hundreds of thousands of Bhutanese live in small refugee camps to escape from the dictatorial monarchy of the small South Asian country. Exiled from their countries, these youth organizations need to contend with the scarcity of resources for organizing and political work in their locations, obstructions to their freedom of movement, and the political instabilities in their host countries.

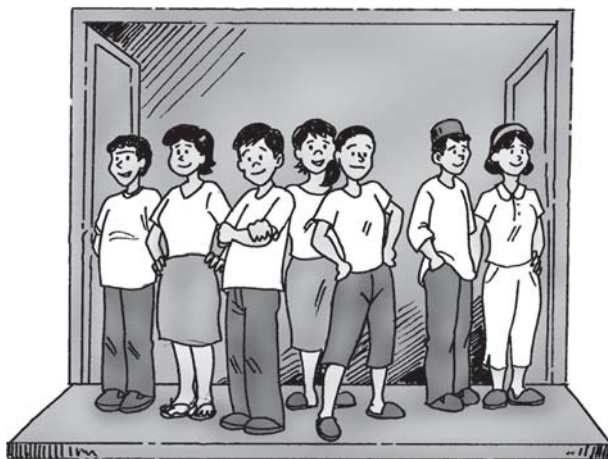
Furthermore, the presence of institutional democracy in some Asia-Pacific countries does not consequentially result in greater youth organizing, and thus aid in building strong regional youth platforms. In such countries, existing traditional barriers to meaningful youth participation, like repressive military or police force or the control of political families, significantly reduce possibilities and opportunities for youth organizations to grow stronger. Many Southeast Asian countries demonstrate that remnants of authoritarianism and tyrannical tendencies can survive along with elements of institutionalized democracy, such as elections and multi-party systems, through repressive laws that advantage traditional wielders of powers. In the Philippines, for instance, the post-Martial Law “democratic” political system favors

heavily the economic and political elites, which assures them of continuing hold to power. In Malaysia, electoral laws that favor one racial community from the others and legal tools of repression (for example, the Internal Security Act) that limit political protests severely restrict youth participation and organizing at the national level.

The economic situation of many young people in the region is also an important consideration. While it is true that economic marginalization provides an impetus for collective social action, it is also valid to argue that harsh economic realities can and do force young people to devote their time to raise resources for their families and themselves. It is even more difficult when economic opportunities are only available abroad, since leaving the country for job opportunities becomes a sad reality that youth organizations have to contend with.

Hindrances on progressive youth organizing at the national level impose limitations to the sustainability of progressive youth platforms at the regional level. Deficits in democracy, economic marginalization, and similar barriers at the national level mean that international solidarity work and sustaining an international platform for socialist and social democratic youth groups cannot be limited to common campaigns or collective undertakings, but should also delve into expanding opportunities that can strengthen youth organizations in their own political and economic milieu. Ideological deepening and collectivizing political 'biases' are necessary, but they should be done in context of creating more and robust progressive youth organizations in the region in order to strengthen international youth platforms.

Defying the Difficulties: IUSY's Initiatives in the Asia-Pacific Region



The major challenge for IUSY, then, is how to deepen its ideological and political roots in the region, while at the same time provide space for organizational development for progressive and socialist youth organizations in Asia Pacific. This is no easy feat, especially if one considers the democratic deficit and the degree of economic marginalization in the region. Existing technology on information and communication like the internet can be maximized, but it, too, has certain limitations such as access to ICT tools relies on availability of computers, access to education, etc.

These challenges shape IUSY's initiatives in the region. As a progressive platform, IUSY actively campaigns on issues of democratization, youth participation, and globalization. It has launched regional campaigns on issues of the first time voters in the region and the repressive laws that target youth participation such as Malaysia's Internal Security Act. It has also actively campaigned against terrorism and US' War on Terrorism. It also

pushed for peace in South Asia, particularly in Nepal and Kashmir. IUSY believes that the problem of violence in Nepal and Kashmir necessitates political and not military solutions; only by strengthening democracy in these areas can peace be lasting.

As the largest international and political youth organization, IUSY has also called for the immediate restoration of democracy in Burma. It has been campaigning for the recognition of the 1991 national elections, where the National League for Democracy won. It has also called for the release of political prisoners in the country, particularly the student activists who were detained by the military junta and NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi. As part of its campaign on education, IUSY has been pushing for the re-opening of schools in Burma.

During the World Social Forum in Mumbai 2004, IUSY launched its campaign on refugees. This is an issue close to the heart of IUSY: it has several refugee organizations, three of them come from Asia alone. Aside from the All Burma Student's League and the Youth Organization of Bhutan, there's the Tibetan Youth Congress, a youth movement of Tibetan refugees fighting for self-determination and human rights. These three Asia-Pacific organizations experience political and economic marginality that is amplified by the harsh realities in their host countries. In an IUSY Presidium visit to the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, it was discovered that the UN High Commissioner for the Refugees, who provides for basic services in the camp, has decided to leave the area. With the political instability in Nepal and the foot dragging of the Bhutanese monarchy in the negotiations on the refugee crisis, the future of the Bhutanese refugees, which is around 120,000, remains unclear. It is only through the efforts of private civic organizations that the refugees get minimal access to their basic needs, including education. But these NGOs are also losing their resources and might eventually be forced to phase out their refugee program.

Indeed, in such conditions, it is difficult to ensure that the youth organizations can be strong or remain strong in order to survive, let alone contribute to the building of strong regional youth organizations. It is common, for example, for the above-mentioned groups to be unable to take part in some of IUSY's activities due to visa restrictions and lack of resources.

It is due to these realizations that IUSY decided to launch the Asia-Pacific Progressive Youth Forum. Prior to this, IUSY had only one regional meeting in the Asia-Pacific Committee, which limits the interaction between its own members and other youth organizations. The regular meeting is usually focused on the issues that IUSY needs to tackle and some of the organizational decisions the Asia-Pacific Committee has to make. Limited support has been given to help strengthen the youth organizations.

With the Asia-Pacific Progressive Youth Forum, IUSY aims to provide a platform for socialist and progressive youth organizations to share strategies for organizational growth and at the same time promote awareness of regional and global issues. It is also envisioned to be a broader platform, comprised of IUSY members and non-members alike, to encourage greater youth cooperation among young progressives and socialists in the region. The next Asia Pacific Progressive Youth Forum will be held in Bangkok in June 2005.