

# The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization Among Youth in Thailand: Case Study of the 2020 Thai Protests

Arissara P. Srisai<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Correspondence: Arissara P. Srisai, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2025.01.06

## Abstract

The 2020 Thai protests marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape, driven largely by youth-led movements and the power of social media. This paper explores how social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Line, played a pivotal role in organizing protests, fostering political discourse, and shaping the political identity of Thai youth. With demands for constitutional reform, monarchy reform, and government accountability, the protests revealed the growing influence of digital activism in a country traditionally dominated by state-controlled media. Social media not only provided a space for youth to express their political opinions but also enabled them to bypass censorship, create global awareness, and maintain momentum throughout the protests. The paper examines how social media has empowered young people to become active political agents, transcending traditional methods of activism and creating a new era of youth-driven digital engagement.

**Keywords:** social media, political mobilization, youth activism, 2020 Thai protests, constitutional reform, monarchy reform, government accountability

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## 1. Introduction

Youth engagement in politics in Thailand has evolved significantly, with young people increasingly at the forefront of political movements. Historically, Thai youth have played key roles in major political uprisings, such as the 1973 Student Uprising and the 1992 pro-democracy protests, challenging oppressive regimes. In recent years, particularly after the 2014 military coup, youth activism has gained momentum, driven by dissatisfaction with government policies, economic struggles, and the lack of political reform. The stagnant

political environment, marked by military rule and authoritarian governance, fueled a growing sense of disillusionment, leading many young people to demand democratization and accountability.

Economic inequality has been a key driver of youth activism, with rising unemployment, underemployment, and living costs despite high education levels. Additionally, the military-backed government and the 2017 Constitution, which consolidated military power, further alienated young people, creating fertile ground for political participation and

activism.

The 2020 Thai protests highlighted the significant role youth have played in shaping the political landscape, with social media becoming a primary tool for organizing, spreading messages, and bypassing government-controlled media. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Line have allowed youth to create alternative spaces for political expression and to mobilize protests around key issues such as constitutional reform, government accountability, and monarchy reform. This shift to digitally-driven activism has reshaped the methods of political engagement, enabling young people to engage in real-time discourse and organize large-scale demonstrations, marking a new era in Thailand's political movements.

## **2. The Rise of Social Media as a Political Tool**

In the past decade, social media has become a transformative force in political engagement in Thailand, especially among youth. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Line have gained popularity, offering young people a space to express opinions, share experiences, and organize political movements. Social media has replaced traditional media, which is often controlled by the government, as the dominant space for political discourse.

These platforms allowed Thai youth to voice their concerns about issues such as government policies, economic inequality, and lack of political reform. Social media became an alternative to conventional political participation, enabling youth to bypass state-run media that often avoids or downplays sensitive issues. This shift has empowered young activists to challenge the political system and demand reform.

Social media's key role in political engagement is its ability to provide a platform for free expression, organization, and mobilization. In a politically repressive environment, social media enables anonymous or semi-anonymous expression, letting youth voice their dissatisfaction without fear of direct reprisal. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter were crucial for organizing protests, sharing real-time updates, and spreading political messages. These platforms became the primary source of information about the protests, allowing them to grow rapidly.

Instagram and TikTok also played significant

roles in spreading political messages through visual content. Instagram allowed protestors to share images and videos from the ground, while TikTok helped reach a younger audience by presenting political messages in an engaging, viral format. TikTok's algorithm allowed protest-related videos to spread widely, contributing to global awareness of the 2020 Thai protests.

Additionally, Line, a messaging app, became essential for organizing protests and creating secure, private groups for activists. This allowed them to communicate without fear of government surveillance.

One of the biggest advantages of social media in protest organization is its speed and reach, enabling activists to spread messages quickly and mobilize large crowds. Social media also fosters networks of support, where individuals can connect, share ideas, and offer emotional and logistical assistance. In the 2020 Thai protests, youth shared personal stories of political repression, further galvanizing support and humanizing the movement. This emotional connection helped the protests resonate with a broader audience, making social media an indispensable tool for mobilization.

## **3. The 2020 Thai Protests and the Mobilizing Power of Social Media**

The 2020 Thai protests marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape, as youth-led movements took center stage in demanding political reform, government accountability, and monarchy reform. The protests were fueled by a deep dissatisfaction with the political system, which many perceived as undemocratic, militarized, and unaccountable. The 2020 protests were driven by several core demands: a revised constitution, greater transparency in governance, and an overhaul of the monarchy's role in politics. The movement quickly gained momentum, attracting thousands of young people who were frustrated with the lack of political freedom, inequality, and systemic corruption that had persisted under the military-backed government since the 2014 coup.

The main triggers for the protests were multiple issues affecting Thailand's youth, such as economic instability, lack of political reform, and police brutality. However, the catalyst was the government's move to suppress

dissent—particularly following the conservative court's dissolution of political parties and the government's attempts to curb free speech. As a result, young people—who felt they had no political future under the existing system—mobilized in unprecedented numbers. The protests also coincided with the growth of digital platforms and a more interconnected, politically conscious youth generation.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the 2020 Thai protests was the role of social media in organizing, mobilizing, and spreading the movement's messages. Youth-led movements were able to use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Line to bypass traditional media censorship, organize protests, and raise awareness about their cause. These platforms allowed protestors to organize protests in real-time, share updates, and connect with others who shared their concerns about the political system. Social media also allowed young people to engage with the protests in creative and innovative ways, making the movements more dynamic and relatable to a younger audience.

One of the most visible and impactful features of the protests was the use of social media campaigns and hashtags. Hashtags like #WhatsHappeningInThailand went viral, allowing people inside and outside Thailand to share their experiences and raise awareness about the political situation. The hashtag became a rallying cry for the youth, not only in Thailand but across the world, amplifying their demand for democratic reforms and challenging the government's narrative. It also allowed Thai youth to bypass traditional media censorship and share images and video content that depicted the violence and repression they were facing.

Another prominent aspect of the protests was the use of live-streamed protests, where participants broadcasted the events in real-time on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, providing direct access to the protest action and allowing people both in Thailand and abroad to see what was happening on the ground. Live-streaming provided an unfiltered perspective of the events, showing how police responded to peaceful protests with violence and intimidation, which further fueled public outrage. It also offered the world an opportunity to witness the youth-driven political awakening happening in real-time, creating an international

solidarity movement.

The integration of online and offline activism became a defining characteristic of the 2020 Thai protests. Social media platforms not only played a critical role in organizing physical protests but also in maintaining momentum throughout the movement. While the physical protests provided a powerful outlet for expressing dissent, social media served as a tool to keep the protests alive by continuously spreading information, organizing new events, and engaging in political debates. Young people used hashtags, videos, and memes to disseminate their messages, while simultaneously organizing protest events in the streets. Social media also allowed for more localized and decentralized forms of protest, with small groups across the country organizing their own protests based on information shared online.

The ability of social media to sustain the momentum of protests was crucial. For example, after the initial protests in Bangkok, the movement spread to other regions of Thailand, with groups in cities like Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Pattaya using social media to organize their own demonstrations. Additionally, youth-led digital communities began to form across social media platforms, creating a space for ongoing discussions about political reform and providing support for those directly involved in the protests. The speed with which information could be disseminated and acted upon gave the movement a fluidity and adaptability that traditional forms of activism lacked.

Social media also helped coordinate international support for the protests, with activists sharing their messages with the world. Solidarity campaigns emerged globally, and Thai students and activists living abroad organized rallies to show support for the movements back home. The global visibility of the protests, aided by social media, ensured that the political demands of the youth were heard internationally, putting pressure on the Thai government and drawing attention to issues of democratic governance and human rights.

#### **4. Social Media's Impact on Political Engagement and Youth Identity**

Social media has played a crucial role in shaping the political identity of young Thai people, fostering a more politically engaged generation. With traditional political channels often failing

to represent youth perspectives, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become essential spaces for youth to express political opinions, share information, and organize movements. Social media democratizes information, enabling young people to participate in political discussions and raising awareness on issues like governance, social justice, and human rights.

In the 2020 Thai protests, social media helped youth connect their local struggles with global movements, such as those in Hong Kong and the United States. By using hashtags and viral content, Thai youth framed their demands for democracy and constitutional reform within a larger global context, asserting their voices and aligning with global democratic ideals. Social media allowed them to bypass state-controlled media, which often censored politically sensitive issues, giving youth access to uncensored news and alternative viewpoints. This shift enabled them to challenge official narratives and engage in more open political discourse.

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter became hubs for sharing personal experiences of political repression and economic hardship, humanizing the broader movement and raising awareness. Social media also allowed diverse voices to participate in political debates, providing a space for dialogue that was often limited in traditional settings like classrooms or political forums.

The emergence of youth-led digital communities has significantly influenced public opinion and political discourse. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook enabled young people to create decentralized spaces for organizing, strategizing, and advocating for human rights and accountability. Hashtags such as #WhatsHappeningInThailand served as focal points for both local and international solidarity, connecting Thai youth to global movements. These communities not only reshaped local politics but also helped challenge the status quo and push for systemic reform.

In conclusion, social media has empowered Thai youth to shape their political views, engage in debates, and organize for change, bypassing traditional media and fostering a more inclusive political landscape. Social media has become a powerful tool for youth to mobilize, influence public opinion, and advocate for reform, transforming political activism in Thailand.

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