

Will Green Parties Rise in Southeast Asia?

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Greens often prosper in federal systems, in richer countries with service-based economies, in situations where environmental issues are part of mainstream political debates, and in electorates with large numbers of young, highly-educated members drawn from the middle class. If this is the case, then Southeast Asia may eventually see the rise of its own green movement.

2022 will see several interesting contests taking place in Southeast Asia's democracies. A general ballot – for the Presidency and congress – will be held in The Philippines in early May, while Malaysia and Thailand face the prospect of early polls as political instability and uncertainty roil both nations.

Yet one thing is likely to be absent in the region: a major green political party.

It's a curious anomaly, because organised environmental parties have become increasingly important in political systems around the rest of the globe. Since the first overtly green candidates began standing for office in the early 1970s in Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland and Germany, they have now spread into most democracies. Today, they can also be found in local, state/provincial and national legislatures in countries — and electoral systems — as diverse as France, Finland, Rwanda, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, the UK, Canada, Vanuatu, the European Parliament, and the USA. Many Greens MPs have held ministerial offices and some have even served as prime minister. As the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) noted just last year, green politics is now reshaping much of the global political system.

In other parts of Asia, greens have played significant political roles over several decades. In 1990, Green MPs in Mongolia formed part of that country's first post-communist governing coalition. Taiwan's greens currently hold several local government seats, and have previously served in the Legislative Yuan.

But within Southeast Asia, the environmental movement has made limited political headway. Sustainability issues have in recent years featured in the policy manifestos, such as Singapore's opposition [Workers' Party](#) and the 2018 Malaysian general election campaigns of [both Pakatan Harapan and Barisan Nasional](#). However, no formal green parties have been founded in Singapore, Malaysia, or Indonesia. The Philippines Green Republican Party won a miserly 701 votes out of 40.5 million votes cast in the 2019 general congressional elections, failing also to win any seats.

Only Thailand shows any signs of an emerging green political movement, albeit on a minimal scale. In the March 2019 House of Representatives election, the [Thai Forest Conservation Party](#) won 136,000 votes (0.38 per cent of total votes out of a total of 36.1 million votes cast), allowing it to take two seats through proportional representation in the 500-member House. A separate Green Party also garnered a further 22,600 votes, but no seats. These are still well shy of the 5-25 per cent of votes that green parties in other parts of the world regularly collect.

Why is there such a limited political voice in the region for environmental issues?

One reason may be that most voters in Southeast Asia continue to hold fast to their traditional patterns of political identity and voting, largely framed around racial, class and cultural divisions. These electorates, it might be argued, still vote along ethnic, religious and/or economic lines, and place less importance on environmental issues. Voters may also be more willing to support established parties that subsume environmental concerns into their political platform, instead of newly constituted green parties.

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Another factor may be the inherent advantage of incumbency. Parties already in parliament are more likely to stay in parliament, for a variety of reasons. Politicians who currently hold elected positions naturally generate more public interest and media coverage than those on the fringe. Political parties in power enjoy greater access to both public and private funding for their operations and election campaigns. Parliaments and political parties in parts of Southeast Asia also regularly change electoral systems and laws, often in ways that assist themselves and preempt opponents trying to break through.

Yet there is still some prospect of change in the future.

In 2018, a [London School of Economics](#) analysis of global voting patterns suggested that formalised green parties tend to do better under certain situations than others. Greens often prosper in federal systems, in richer countries with service-based economies, in situations where environmental issues are part of mainstream political debates, and in electorates with large numbers of young, highly-educated members drawn from the middle class.

If this is the case, then Southeast Asia may eventually see the rise of its own green movement. Federal-type governance systems are embedded in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. There are other factors in play: rising educational attainment; a large and expanding middle class; political parties raising the profile of sustainability, and a young population. While much of the regional economy remains focused on agriculture, primary production and manufacturing, the services sector is vibrant and momentously expanding. Finally, as the impact of climate change becomes increasingly apparent, environmental matters should gain more and more traction in the public consciousness.

Thailand now has a small, formalized environment-focused party in its national parliament. Filipinos are increasingly becoming focused on climate change as the impact of extreme weather events continue to bite. [Recent surveys](#) in both Malaysia and Thailand have indicated high levels of public dissatisfaction with climate change policies of their respective governments. Malaysia has [just implemented](#) the new voting age of 18 — reduced from 21 previously — and automatic voter registration, which in tandem herald a much bigger say by its youth in future national polls.

Don't be surprised if future elections start to produce surprises across the region.

Michael Schaper

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