Meaningful Youth Political Engagement in Pa-O's Politics

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Introduction

Myanmar is a country of ethnic diversity, and according to the 2014 Population and Housing Census, the State officially encompasses eight main ethnic groups, which the government has further divided into 135 different indigenous ethnic groups. [1]. The Pa-O people, also known as the Taungthu, are found throughout eastern Burma. They are the second largest ethnic group in Shan State and are scattered across Mon, Karen, and Karenni States with an estimated population of about two million. [2]Most Pa-O people believe in Theravada Buddhism, which is deeply integrated into their way of life, therefore monasteries hold a significant leading role in Pa-O society.

Under the 2008 constitution, Ho Pone, His Hseng, and Panglaung townships in Southern Shan State were designed as Pa-O self-administrative zones[3], (SAZ) and only 30% of the Pa-O population live in Pa-O SAZ. The actual population of Pa-O people around the world is governed by a Pa-O political organization named Pa-O National Organization (PNO). However, The PNO signed a ceasefire agreement in 1991 with the State under PNO leader Aung Kham Htee, who also won all three elections in 2010, 2015, and 2020 in the self-administration zones (SAZ)[4]. It clearly can be seen that the PNO has significantly influenced Pa-O people. There was only one political party representing Pa-O until the 2015 election. In the 2020 election, a political party called the Union of Pa-O National Organization party (UPNO), led by young people, ran in the election in Pa-O SAZ but did not win any seats.

Since Myanmar opened to the world after the 2010 election, the emergent CSOs came to be seen as political socialization agents trying to reinforce, or even impose, a certain political culture on the Pa-O youth community. These CSOs are cultivating a political culture that is not indigenous but is rather based on Western values, such as liberal democracy culture. These independent organizations are threatening to the PNO and are not recognized by the PNO.

Drawing from my personal experiences, it has been traditional for young people not to be involved in the decision-making process due to Myanmar's robust hierarchical culture. This cultural perspective holds that youth are not capable of assuming decision-making responsibilities.[5] These traditional norms impact the extent of youth participation in leadership roles. This grows from the broader Pa-O culture that makes Pa-O people very obedient to the elders and leaders (i.e., the ward administrators and the PNO leaders).

Why does youth matter? The international community has increasingly emphasized youth engagement as essential for ensuring sustainable and inclusive peace. The first formal recognition on a global scale is found in Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security. The Resolution highlights the inclusion of youth in peace and decision-making processes as a priority area for the United Nations.While the Pa-O region seems free from conflicts, young people face ('have faced' implies that they no longer have these problems) numerous problems, such as drug abuse, land grabbing, unemployment, and human rights violations. "Youth are the ones who can raise the community voice and educate the community," a young female leader from an ethnic minority told me last year. "Most senior people think there will be peace if the fighting stops, but they do not think about other problems, like drugs, trafficking, and natural resource exploitation, that perpetuate the conflict. There won't be genuine peace if the local community and youth voice are not included."[6] This is a powerful quotation!! Nice placement too, leads your reader directly to the research question.

[1] (2014, October 7). Overview of Ethnic Groups. Burma Link. https://www.burmalink.org/background/burma/ethnic-groups/overview/

[2] Pa-O people. (2023, July 14). In Wikipedia.

[3] (2022, January 5). Pa-O regions militia groups and Myanmar Military Junta. Burma New

International. https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/pa-o-regions-militia-groups-and-myanmar-military-junta

[4] (2022, July 14). Shan Women Lost Dignity and Safety. Visual Rebellion. https://visualrebellion.org/timeline/shan-women-lost-dignity-and-safety

[5] Irena Grizelj (2016). Policy Brief: Youth Participation in Myanmar's Peace Process.

[6] IRENA GRIZELJ (2017, March 3). Youth must have a space in Myanmar's peace process. Frontier Myanmar

Research Question

My research question is: Why is youth participation at the decision-making level essential, and what changes need to be made to increase youth engagement in the decision-making process?

Objectives

- To study the Pa-O youth participation in decision-making since 2011.

- To examine Pa-O youth's critical challenges in decision-making in social and political spheres.

- To provide suggestions for Pa-O society, including political parties, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations to support youth participation in decision-making.

Methods

This research utilized desk reviews, combined with qualitative and quantitative analytical approaches, to collect data for both numerical and in-depth insights into experiences, perceptions, and suggestions from Pa-O young people regarding their involvement in decision-making processes.

Survey Questions:

This survey aims to deeply understand the challenges of youth involvement in decision-making processes in the Pa-O society and get suggestions from them to enhance youth participation in leadership roles in the future.

Furthermore, I am committed to upholding the highest level of confidentiality and ensuring the anonymity of all respondents to protect sensitive information and the privacy of your participating in the interview. This commitment aligns with ethical considerations and best practices in research and data collection.

Demographic Information
- Age

- Region/City

- Gender

Youth Engagement in Decision-Making:
1. How familiar are you with the decision-making processes in Pa-O society?

2. Have you ever participated in any decision-making processes related to your community's affairs?

3. Have you engaged in initiatives concerning the social and political aspects of the Pa-O society?

4. Evaluate your confidence level when expressing your opinions during decision-making discussions.

5. Are you informed about opportunities for youth involvement in decision-making processes within your community?

Barriers for Youth Participation:
1. What significant challenges do you face when decision-making within social-political contexts?

2. Are there particular issues that prevent you from actively participating in discussions or activities related to community affairs?

3. Do cultural or societal norms impact the extent of youth involvement in social-political decision-making?

4. In your perspective, are there structural impediments restricting Pa-O youth from

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assuming more active roles in community decision-making?

5. Are there specific concerns preventing you from voicing your opinions?

6. How do you perceive the impact of traditional Pa-O cultural values on the involvement of youth in shaping social-political decisions?

7. Do aspects of Pa-O cultural norms potentially foster or discourage youth engagement in leadership roles?

Access to Information
1. How do you access information about social and political matters regarding Pa-O affairs?

2. Is the accessibility of information sufficient for youth to stay well-informed about community issues?

Future aspiration
1. What changes are essential to elevate meaningful youth participation in decision-making within social-political domains?

2. In your viewpoint, how can decision-makers better incorporate youth in determining the route of the community?

3. Might ask somewhere if they know about the UN resolution.

Sampling
This research employs (since the research is done, 'will', which implies the future is less than optimal a hybrid approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The research questions will be administered using Google Forms and conducted through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) via virtual meetings (Zoom) and in person to collect primary data, applying purposive sampling.

The specific criteria for participant selection include three key factors. First, the respondents must fall within the age range of 18-35 years, following the definition of "youth" stipulated by the Myanmar constitution. Secondly, respondents must be Pa-O

youth who reside within the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone (SAZ). Lastly, respondents must possess a vision of an enhanced role for youth in future societal decision-making roles. Failure to meet these criteria renders the research questions unsuitable, as the respondents only align with the intended target sample if they possess comprehensive knowledge of youth-related matters. Another way to address these criteria is a convenience sampling strategy, which is also employed due to limited resources such as budget limitations, time constraints, and difficulties accessing respondents amidst the ongoing political crisis in the country. As a result, the findings may not be guaranteed to represent the entire population, given that respondents are selected based on convenience sampling. Very good description of your process and its limitations.

However, the research methods are described in as much detail as possible and are presented transparently. Additionally, the findings have been meticulously documented and given significant attention to detail for the outcomes.

Key Challenges for youth
According to interviewees, ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, of which four males, four females, and three males over 40 years, the Pa-O young people encounter significant obstacles when participating in decision-making processes at various levels. These challenges include navigating a societal landscape predominantly governed by elders, family restrictions, experiencing limitations in technological and financial support, grappling with a shortage of platforms enabling them to shape policies, and poor quality of education systems that fail to equip critical and independent skills hinder youths' role of becoming active agents for change in society.

Societal and Cultural Barriers: In the Pa-O culture, the significance of decision-making is underscored by religious and political leaders, and parents. Despite the rising engagement of youth from various ethnic groups in social activism and political endeavors nowadays, the youth of the Pa-O community still face constraints hindering their participation due to the limitation primarily stems from familial restrictions, predominantly imposed

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by elders, coupled with conditions related to both financial resources and technical support.

Institution Barriers: Existing governance institutions within the Pa-O community, encompassing political parties and regional governance structures, exhibit bureaucratic complexities and rigid hierarchies that impede the effective representation of youth in pivotal decision-making bodies.

Capital and capacities Barriers: Financial constraints and limited capacities pose great challenges for young individuals aspiring to engage in the socio-political sphere. Due to these financial limitations, young people are compelled to migrate to other countries or engage in agricultural work to sustain themselves, thereby impeding their active participation in opportunities for civic engagement. Additionally, many youths believe that the existing Myanmar's education system does not equip them for leadership roles and civic engagement.

Recommendations:

- Encourage youth participation: Parents, alongside political and religious leaders, play pivotal roles in mitigating youth exclusion within Pa-O society. Consequently, there is a need to implement or create a targeted program to sensitize those stakeholders to the challenges faced by the youth and enhance the understanding of the benefits of young individuals' involvement in the socio-political decision-making process and the associated costs of their exclusion. Furthermore, it is imperative for the state and Pa-O leaders to actively pursue reforms in customary or conventional governance practices that systematically exclude young individuals under the guise of cultural, religious, or traditional norms.

- Independent Pa-O youth Committee: Building a solid network and connection among young people from different townships is vital to raising youth involvement. For example, create a platform for young people to be able to establish an Independent Pa-O youth Committee which represents the whole Pa-O youth. These platforms and channels serve as avenues to practice expressing their perspectives, addressing youth issues, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring

that the diverse voices of the younger generation are considered in the formulation and execution of socio-political policies. Moreover, this will assist young individuals to actively engage in and contribute to the broader political discourse and decision-making processes.

- Informal Education: To proactively engage in Pa-O development, there is a need for nationality-based schools or programs for Pa-O youth. These initiatives should empower the youth with essential tools, enabling them to navigate and influence the dynamic landscape of social change. This empowerment involves an in-depth study of Pa-O historical heritage, culture, national identities, politics, and alternative education methods that facilitate personal development. Additionally, Pa-O national educational institutions should extend their design beyond traditional academic frameworks, equipping Pa-O youth to emerge as proactive agents for societal change, preparing and offering opportunities like internships and volunteering for future careers.