



Source: © Adriana Loureiro, Reuters.

[No Longer on the Sidelines? Youth and Politics](#)

# Between Hope and Resignation

Young People and Politics in  
West Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America

Elisabeth Hoffmann / Florian Karner / Katharina Hopp / Alina Reiß / Sebastian  
Grundberger / Thomas Schaumberg / Laura Rubio

All around the globe – in countries with and without democratically elected governments – young people are taking to the streets to protest about issues concerning them and demanding change. Depending on the region, different experiences shape their view of politics and society. But what are the specific concerns of young people? We turn our focus towards West Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

---

“Once again, the youth of today are forcefully stating their demands with regard to shaping the future of our society and demands the settings for the course needed for this be initiated today. Environmental protection and climate change, in particular, have grown considerably in importance as issues of relevance to the future.” These comments come from a summary of the 2019 Shell Youth Study and therefore refer to Germany. According to the study, for young people in Germany, environmental protection and climate change “are at the centre of the demand for greater participation and a call to action on the part of the political classes and society.” Overall, today’s young generation is characterised by a “pragmatic outlook”. They are performance-oriented and generally satisfied with democracy.<sup>1</sup> However, this fundamental satisfaction with democracy lies in stark contrast to their disenchantment with the political parties that play such a key role within it. According to a survey conducted by the Generationen Stiftung in 2021, 54 per cent of young respondents do not feel represented by any of the parties running for office at the Bundestag elections. And more than 83 per cent said the government ignores their concerns despite various protests over recent years.<sup>2</sup>

But what is the situation in other parts of the world? What are young people’s concerns, what are their goals? How do they rate their future prospects? And in what ways do political and socio-economic circumstances, which can differ greatly from region to region and country to country, shape young people’s attitudes and ambitions?

This article focuses on three regions where the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) runs regional

programmes that focus on political dialogue and, not least, promoting the next generation of politicians: West Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. It is based, inter alia, on non-representative surveys conducted by these programmes among young people in the regions concerned. The picture that emerges is a complex one. While many young people have a clear desire for political engagement, the political realities often lead to resignation – or protest. Their trust in parties and political institutions has been shaken in many cases. In Southeast Asia, for example, a majority of survey participants said they were unhappy with their system of government. In West Africa, where even proximity to traditional politicians is viewed as detrimental to one’s reputation, many young people migrate within the region or abroad, with the well-educated being the least likely to vote. This is in stark contrast to countries like Germany, where 87 per cent of highly educated young people voted in the 2017 federal elections compared to just 64 per cent of those with lower levels of education.<sup>3</sup>

And yet young people in the regions concerned are also drivers of change, despite their circumstances often being much more difficult than in Germany. They may not be particularly interested in political parties, but they are interested in politics. Young people are taking to the streets in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Depending on the particular country, they protest against corruption, one-party systems, military coups, negligent COVID-19 policies, poverty, hunger, and drug trafficking. The protests are certainly having an impact and at times instigating far-reaching changes. In Chile, for example,

they have led to the drafting of a new constitutional process. However, climate change is of minor importance for young people in the three regions of comparison – at least in the national context. Here, political and economic stability are the dominant issues. They believe climate change has been caused by the Western industrialised nations.

COVID-19 is a very important issue for young people, and is causing them great concern. Many young people in the three regions are worried about poverty and hunger, the death of family members, and rising unemployment. We will now look in more detail at the findings for the three selected regions.

### “Young African” – a Pleonasm

While in Germany, a young person is defined as being between the ages of 14 and 17 inclusive or, depending on the definition, under the age of 27,<sup>4</sup> the definition is broader in Africa. The African Charter on Youth<sup>5</sup> defines youth as those persons aged between 15 and 35, and the age group under 35 years now accounts for around 77 per cent of Africa’s total population. By 2050, the latter is expected to almost double to 2.4 billion.<sup>6</sup> Yet, definitions of youth in (West) Africa vary greatly depending on social contexts and actual circumstances. For example, it is not uncommon for members of party youth organisations to be 40 to 50, with unmarried 40-year-olds often still living with their parents. In a study carried out by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (detailed below), 60 per cent of participants associate the transition to adulthood with financial independence or regular, paid work. High rates of youth unemployment have led people to be reliant on their families for longer, and 49 per cent still live in the family home.

For this study<sup>7</sup> conducted by the KAS Regional Programme Political Dialogue West Africa, 2,000 young people aged between 18 and 35 from Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Benin, and Togo were interviewed by the market research company LOOKA. It afforded a variety of insights into their ambitions and perspectives. Here, the

results of the survey are rounded out and supplemented by qualitative interviews with African scholarship holders in both West Africa and Germany.

## 72 per cent of the young people interviewed are currently looking for a job.

### *Personal Priorities: Education, Jobs, and Material Security*

Despite dissatisfaction with the education sector, perceived as being too inflexible and dominated by curricula that are often inadequately oriented towards skills actually needed in the labour market, the level of education in the region has gradually improved over the years. For example, the proportion of young Ivorians in upper secondary education has increased from 25 per cent in 2014 to 34 per cent in 2019, and the proportion of those in tertiary education has risen from 8.2 per cent in 2013 to 10 per cent in 2019.<sup>8</sup> These increasingly educated young people are becoming more ambitious and improving their personal economic situation has become a priority. However, national and regional economic policy still lacks suitable approaches to promote private investment and effectively back it up with the necessary conditions for increasing the level of industrialisation and absorbing the large number of school-leavers into the labour market. According to the KAS survey, 72 per cent of the young people interviewed are currently looking for a job, and just under one-third can imagine leaving Africa behind. The higher their level of education, the greater their willingness to leave their own country for economic reasons. This trend is somewhat more pronounced in West and Central Africa than in the eastern and southern parts of the continent.<sup>9</sup> This potential talent drain could have a major economic impact over the medium- and long-term. The trend is intensified by the fact that young people feel a responsibility towards their families, with





And what comes after graduation? The educational level of young people in West Africa has recently increased noticeably. Nevertheless, the prospects on the labour market remain uncertain for many. *Source: © Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters.*

six out of ten respondents stating that they support their (extended) family financially.

The attractiveness of international organisations as employers, especially for well-educated specialists and university graduates, is correspondingly high. The trend is still towards public sector jobs rather than the private sector, which is associated with lower levels of job security. Those who do choose the path of entrepreneurship are predominantly young men setting up a business in the agricultural and tourism sectors. However, the proportion of registered small and medium-sized enterprises is low across all economic sectors, and the middle class remains largely undeveloped. A clear majority of respondents feel that governments and political classes tend to ignore their needs and concerns. Having said that, most of them are optimistic about the future, and 85 per cent believe life in

their country will improve in the next ten years. A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center produced a similar result, determining that half of Africans surveyed were optimistic about the future and believed the next generation would be in a better position.<sup>10</sup> This may come as a surprise, but the continent has become an increasingly important market and African economies have been booming for years. For example, real GDP growth for West Africa before the COVID-19 pandemic stood at 3.3 per cent (2018), with countries like Côte d'Ivoire and Benin in the lead recording real GDP growth of 7.4 per cent and six per cent respectively.<sup>11</sup> Even though we cannot fully anticipate the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic growth seems to be stabilising. For 2021 and 2022, the World Bank is forecasting 2.1 per cent for West Africa and 3 per cent for Central Africa.<sup>12</sup> Although high population growth is

resulting in an increased number of people living in extreme poverty, Africa's poverty rate has fallen steadily over the last few decades.<sup>13</sup>

### *Elections Significant, but Little Trust in Politicians*

A clear majority of young people obtain their information about domestic politics from television (34 per cent), followed by Facebook (20 per cent), and radio (19 per cent). There are relatively high levels of trust in political information that comes from family members – on average, 31 per cent of young people trust information conveyed in this way. This figure is as high as 37 per cent among the lower educated, while only 18 per cent of university graduates primarily rely on family members for political information. Social media channels take second place as trusted sources of information at 21 per cent, with Facebook (20 per cent) well ahead of WhatsApp (8 per cent) as the top platform in West Africa. Only 4 per cent regularly obtain information from online or analogue newspapers.

The importance of elections continues to be high for the younger generation. 77 per cent say they have already voted in national elections, 67 per cent intend to do so, and 26 per cent are undecided. 5 per cent say they will not vote. The survey corroborates the findings of a recent Afrobarometer study on youth in Côte d'Ivoire: the higher their level of education, the less likely they are to vote. 60 per cent of less educated respondents voted in the last election, whereas the figure for the more highly educated was merely 41 per cent.<sup>14</sup> The reasons for this are certainly complex and cannot be discussed in detail here. It would, however, be reasonable to assume that better-educated young people are more likely to question structural conditions and, given the lack of adherence to democratic principles, tend to have less trust in politicians. Interestingly, a quarter of all respondents (26 per cent) felt the voting age of 18 was too low.

Young people generally prefer to discuss politics with friends rather than family. At local and municipal level, they primarily turn to their

*chef du quartier*, a kind of neighbourhood head or spokesperson, to tackle and find solutions to their problems. They consider elected mayors and members of parliament to have little use in this respect. While around half of respondents know the name of a parliamentarian, 89 per cent say they do not know how to contact an MP. A large majority would be in favour of involving traditional or religious authorities in political decisions – despite this being illegal in some countries. This leads to the conclusion that such authorities have a better understanding of young people's lives and enjoy a higher level of trust than elected politicians. It seems that the executive has not yet become aware of this deficit of trust. For example, Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara recently appointed 14 new district governors: 13 men and one woman, not one of them below 50. The caption beneath a photo of the new ministers stated that the president wanted a modern and decentralised Côte d'Ivoire to speed up the development of regions far from the economic hub of Abidjan for the Ivorian population.

### **32 per cent of respondents say they never talk about politics.**

---

The fact that 32 per cent of young respondents say they never talk about politics is sobering but hardly surprising. At 40 per cent, this tendency is particularly pronounced among young women. There is widespread dissatisfaction among youth party members, but it is rarely expressed in public. This is because the parties lack processes for a constructive, transparent dialogue that take young people's interests seriously. That youth associations are often led by people in their forties and fifties also illustrates this. Young people involved in civil society organisations often say they are apolitical in order to avoid any proximity to traditional politicians. However, there is no lack of interest in shaping the future of their countries; half of all respondents – all of them living in capital cities

and economic centres – said they were involved in civil society.

### *Bad Governance and Fear of Food Insecurity*

An analysis of those respondents interested in politics predominantly reveals similarities in terms of socio-political challenges. Besides concerns about unemployment and the difficulty of finding steady employment, bad governance is a recurring theme. Trust in state institutions and administration is low, especially in the education sector. Criticism is levelled against the military's interference in national politics, and corruption is perceived as systemic and a major obstacle to development.

## **The threat to food security emerges as a key challenge for West Africa as a whole.**

---

Many of the respondents also mentioned the threat to food security as a key challenge for the respective countries and for West Africa as a whole. Concerns in this regard are fuelled by the continent's strong dependence on trade in goods and the fact that, despite the abundance of resources in a region where large swathes of the population are smallholder farmers, countries are far from being self-sufficient. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation due to partial border closures for people and goods. The young respondents made no mention of the final, concrete implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) or even projects such as the common African passport as solutions for creating greater mobility and food security through economic growth. This may be due to the abstract nature of these political projects, but perhaps also to a lack of confidence in the African Union (AU) and its 54 member states, which are responsible for implementing and actually applying the free trade agreement. In terms of foreign policy, young

West Africans attribute great importance only to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations when it comes to regional or international organisations. However, ECOWAS is increasingly struggling with its reputation as an exclusive club for West African heads of state that fails to build an integrative structure for the benefit of West African societies.

The issue of food security represents a thematic bridge to climate change. Viewed in isolation, young West Africans do not perceive climate change to be a major concern. However, issues like water shortages, droughts, and deforestation are certainly viewed as related to climate change. People who work in agriculture are ever more aware of changes to dry and rainy seasons and how lakes are drying up. For example, in 2021, Côte d'Ivoire – a country that, by regional standards, has a well-developed infrastructure – suffered major power cuts and energy supply problems because the water level of several dams was too low for energy generation. Research into the individual causes leads people to a clear conclusion – climate change is seen as a consequence of Western industrialised nations' economic development. Those nations have caused the problem, so now they are expected to find and finance the solutions.

### *Growing Awareness of the Issue of Security*

The issue of security is increasingly becoming one of interest and concern for young people in (West) Africa. The understanding of the term is distinct and encompasses the complexity of security as a concept in its military and social facets. Specifically, respondents mention the often-inadequate security surrounding elections, the proliferation of weapons and drugs, xenophobic attacks, and ethno-religious conflicts. Some of them blame it on tribalism or poverty. Another current reason is the spread of Islamist terrorism in the Sahel region, with a number of groups increasingly targeting the coastal countries on the Gulf of Guinea. There have been a growing number of attacks such as on military



posts in northern Côte d'Ivoire. The US, France, and China, among others, are named as key foreign policy partners, while Russia and regional partners such as Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger are seen as important actors in the area of security policy.

**Young People in Southeast Asia –  
Disenchantment with Political  
Parties but Not with Politics**

Courage and motivation – this attitude characterises the youth of Southeast Asia as they



Risky protest: When young people in Myanmar take to the streets against the military coup or (as pictured) in Thailand against irresponsible COVID-19 policies, they have to fear for their safety or even for their lives.

Source: © Cory Wright, Reuters.

young people of the KAS Political Dialogue Programme Asia, it is clear that this is a prevalent attitude across other countries in the region, too. These observations are confirmed, inter alia, by the results of a non-representative survey conducted by the Regional Programme. It involved more than 350 young people aged 18 to 35, mostly with higher levels of education<sup>15</sup>, in Southeast Asia<sup>16</sup>.

### *Climate Change and Corruption Are a Cause for Concern*

Courage and motivation are needed to protest political injustice nationally and to tackle pressing concerns about the future of the world, such as climate change. Here, the survey shows commonalities as well as differences between Germany and Southeast Asia. Even though only a fraction of all young people actively participated in the Fridays for Future protests in Germany, the latest Shell Youth Study<sup>17</sup> reveals that climate change and pollution are seen as the main challenges. This applies across all social strata in Germany, although economic hardship is still a major problem for those on lower incomes.<sup>18</sup>

The respondents to the KAS survey share similar concerns: 65 per cent view climate change as the most serious global challenge. This is followed by COVID-19 (59 per cent), inequality, and poverty (around 30 per cent each). The question of the three most serious national challenges leads to a shift in this emphasis. Only 15 per cent of respondents mention climate change and pollution among the three most urgent issues for their country. This is because climate change tends to be viewed as a multilateral problem. Instead, corruption is seen as the biggest national challenge (50 per cent). This result is in line with the findings of other studies.<sup>19</sup> In Southeast Asia, the term corruption may incorporate various

try to shape their future. Both are urgently needed when young demonstrators fearlessly and indefatigably protest against the military coup in Myanmar, or against the government's inadequate COVID-19 policy in neighbouring Thailand. Yet, based on extensive contact with



aspects of unlawfully exercising public power for private gain, including government officials exceeding their authority or failing to perform their proper duties, poor management of public funds, and monetary incentives to vote for a particular party in elections. Clientelism and patronage are still firmly anchored in Southeast Asia's social structures. After corruption, COVID-19 (45 per cent) comes a close second in the respondents' perception of domestic challenges. More than half say their economic (55 per cent) and personal (61 per cent) situations have worsened since the outbreak of the pandemic. Around 20 per cent believe lack of democratisation and related indicators such as freedom of expression, human rights, and the rule of law poses challenges to their society.

Young people in Southeast Asia have mixed feelings about their own future and that of their country. Their life goals mainly involve building a career and starting a family, along with happiness, health, and the feeling of "helping to create positive change" (all between 35 per cent and 40 per cent). It is worth noting that they tend to rate their own prospects as good, while adopting a generally pessimistic view of their country's future on the whole. In contrast, over 50 per cent of young people in Germany are optimistic about their country's future.<sup>20</sup> The bleak country prospects may be caused by the dissatisfaction of respondents in Southeast Asia with their government and political system. Fewer than 15 per cent of respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied. This is linked to the desire of the majority (over 90 per cent) for greater youth participation in politics. This dissatisfaction includes the politicians, who are seen to ignore the opinions and concerns of young people (over 60 per cent). Many Southeast Asian countries have hierarchical societies where age and experience are highly valued. Some countries have formal political structures for youth engagement at national and local levels, but these are all too often democratically illegitimate, are run by senior party politicians, or are instrumentalised as training grounds for the children of influential politicians. Therefore, there are opportunities for young people

to get involved in (party) politics, but they are often not open to all or have a limiting effect. For example, this may be the case when opportunities for youth participation are not linked to implementation capacities or when young people are prevented from participating in other forums due to the existence of youth councils. In Germany, by comparison, young people are more satisfied with their politicians and generally less negative about the political processes.<sup>21</sup>

## The desire for change is reflected in strong civil society engagement.

---

### *Civic Rather than Political Party Engagement*

The respondents to the KAS survey are mostly politically interested. Hence, it is not surprising that 15 per cent of respondents – a high number in comparison to the total population – are members of a political party. However, most respondents (85 per cent) are not member of a political party and their reasons are disillusioning: 37 per cent say that they do not feel represented by any of the existing political parties, which correlates with their dissatisfaction with the political system and politicians. Some respondents also criticise the political climate and the integrity of parties and their members. There is a clear desire for change, but there seems to be limited scope for achieving this in national politics. The party systems of many Southeast Asian countries render it difficult for young people to really engage in party politics, particularly for those without an influential family background or a good economic standing. In some countries, working in opposition to the government can be risky and have negative consequences. Overall, clientelism is often part of appointing political positions and in many cases parties serve as an instrument of the political (and economic) elites to mobilise voters and gain access to state resources. Additionally, it is difficult for young people to identify with a party due to the lack of clear programmes and the fluidity of party systems.

Dissatisfaction with the political system and disenchantment with political parties lies in stark contrast to the keen interest in politics and strong engagement in civil society by the youth. The KAS survey reveals that young people in Southeast Asia are unhappy with their country's political system, but this does not translate into discontent with politics as a whole. Instead, they are somewhat or very interested in political events (86 per cent) and like to keep up to date with the news. According to a 2014 UN survey involving more than 17,800 young people from South and Southeast Asia, 65 per cent of respondents in the Philippines, 60 per cent in Indonesia, 67 per cent in Thailand, 52 per cent in Malaysia, and 75 per cent in Vietnam follow political news.<sup>23</sup> The desire for change is reflected in strong civil society engagement. 72 per cent of respondents to the Regional Programme's survey are involved in non-governmental, university, or community organisations. This high figure may be related to the respondents' high levels of education, since social and political engagement correlates with the education level. According to the UN survey, 58 per cent of Indonesian youth with tertiary education are politically and civically engaged (for example, through petitions and protests), compared to just 44 per cent with lower education levels.<sup>24</sup> In addition to shortcomings inherent in political parties the aforementioned organisations may be appealing because results can be seen more quickly in comparison to political decision making with voting, negotiating, and having to make compromises. Hence, "creating positive change" is achieved sooner. Social media plays an important role here, too.

## **The US enjoys a much better reputation than China.**

---

A quarter of all respondents to the KAS Regional Programme survey are also actively involved in protests. An example of this is the democracy movement in Thailand, where students call for the removal of the Prime Minister, a

new constitution, and a redefinition of the role of the monarchy. They have been subjected to violence and arrest as a result.<sup>25</sup> In Myanmar, young people are also risking their lives in the struggle against the military coup of February 2021, as mentioned earlier.<sup>26</sup> Strong political interest combined with dissatisfaction and disenchantment with political parties, while also being socially and politically engaged in other forums and online – these trends could be observed in Southeast Asia a decade ago<sup>27</sup> and have persisted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pillars of democracy – free elections and a functional opposition – received widespread approval in the KAS survey. Remarkable are the answers on whether a rigid leader is needed to effectively run the country. 39 per cent agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 31 per cent disagree or strongly disagree. 30 per cent are undecided on this issue. However, a rigid leader is not only associated with negative attributes, such as limiting freedom, but can also be seen as a leader who guarantees order and progress. Young people's understanding of democracy in Southeast Asia is closely tied to good governance – effective and transparent government actions.<sup>28</sup>

### *Preference for Regional Solutions*

How important are multilateral solutions for young people and who are the main players in the region's security architecture? Around 35 per cent of respondents mentioned the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) when asked who should be their country's main partner on multilateral issues. Although ASEAN has not yet been successful in building a determined and united opposition to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, it still enjoys deep appreciation among the region's youth. This is certainly linked to the realisation that the giant to the north can only be countered through closer regional cooperation. Interestingly, China and the US – the systemic rivals striving for hegemony in the region – are seen as equally important for the foreign policy of the respondents' respective countries (each with

around ten per cent). However, the US enjoys a much better reputation than China. Against this backdrop, the EU also increasingly positions itself as a key partner for the region. Still, more needs to be done to capitalise on this momentum. ASEAN, China, and the US have stronger economic, security, and political ties in the region. On the other hand, the EU and its Member States are (still) struggling to increase their engagement in the region.<sup>29</sup>

### **In 2019, young people in Latin America were spending almost twice as long on social media as North Americans.**

---

The focus of young people in Southeast Asia is on the social and political challenges in their own countries. The region's youth are articulating their dissatisfaction and are calling for change. They are drivers of political and social transformation by increasingly demanding a greater say in society and questioning hierarchical structures.

#### **Material Needs Predominate among Latin America's Youth**

Faced with digital transformation and new protest movements on the one hand, and traditional problems such as corruption and social dislocation on the other, Latin America's youth are at the heart of social and political upheaval in the region. Young people's lives have been turned upside down by strict lockdowns and they have been impacted by the pandemic at a particularly formative stage in life. The latest UN survey of young people aged 15 to 29 in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>30</sup> reveals that 52 per cent of

respondents have experienced stress and anxiety in connection with the pandemic. For Latin American youth, who were already comparatively heavy internet users, the pandemic intensified the shift of many activities to the virtual space. In 2019, young people in Latin America were, on average, spending nearly three and a half hours a day on social media – almost twice as long as their North American counterparts.<sup>31</sup>



A young Brazilian woman mourns her mother who died of COVID-19: The pandemic has hit the region particularly hard and so the concern for the health and material well-being of their own family is currently at the forefront for young people in Latin America. Source: © Bruno Kelly, Reuters.

According to the above-mentioned UN survey, 93 per cent of young respondents consider themselves to be well-informed about the pandemic. Opinions about how their own governments have responded to the pandemic are more differentiated, however. While 30 per cent describe the response as “bad” or “very bad”, a similar percentage (32 per cent) consider it to be “regular” and 38 per cent evaluate it as “good” or “very good”. Only 21 per cent said that their own

family had received support from a government programme during the pandemic. 16 per cent of respondents said they had either lost their jobs or had employment restricted as a result of the pandemic (such as through reduced working hours or loss of earnings). In light of this, it is hardly surprising that the list of personal concerns about the future is dominated by worries about the family’s financial situation with 64 per cent, followed by fear of losing a family member



and a delay in their studies (50 per cent respectively). In turn, “political conflicts” are given much less priority at 32 per cent.

### *Crisis of Confidence in Democratic Institutions and Parties*

Having said this, young people have been and remain the protagonists of numerous social and political struggles. This is especially true for the social unrest that hit Latin America prior to and during the pandemic. The most prominent example of this is Chile, where a predominantly youth-driven protest movement led to the drafting of a new constitution. Renowned Chilean sociologist and author Carlos Peña points out that, besides substantive demands, the “generational” factor should not be overlooked in the protests. This is because as the influence of traditional sources of authority such as churches, trade unions, and political parties begins to wane, young people’s activism is more strongly shaped by their subjective experiences, consumption, and an ever-growing range of influences.<sup>32</sup> This is not only the case in Chile. Over the past months and years, it has also applied to other – otherwise very different – arenas of social mobilisation and political protest, including in Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia, Cuba, and Peru. The common thread in all these developments is that calls for mobilisation have primarily taken place via electronic media and been supported by fairly loose, largely non-institutionalised alliances. These protests, mainly led by young people, are often directed against the perceived inability of an ossified political system to adequately respond to their demands for greater participation, more rights of all kinds, including for diverse social groups, more prosperity, and greater educational justice. In this context, political parties were often perceived as part of the political system that they are fighting against.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to this activism, various studies and surveys show that youth participation in formal democratic bodies such as political parties, and in elections, was already on the wane before the COVID-19 pandemic. Lowering the voting age

to 16 in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador has done nothing to change this. It is interesting to note that in many Latin American countries, the right to stand for election to various offices such as municipal councillors, members of parliament, or the presidency is only granted from the age of 21, 25, 30 or even 35 (in the case of the office of senator or president in Brazil and Chile).<sup>34</sup>

### **Early indications suggest that the coronavirus pandemic has actually led young people to further distance themselves from formal political bodies**

---

In fact, early indications suggest that the pandemic has actually led Latin American youth to further distance themselves from traditional political bodies.<sup>35</sup> The fact that many young people’s trust in their political elites has continued to decline is also a common thread running through a non-representative survey conducted by the Regional Programme Party Dialogue and Democracy in Latin America. This survey involved more than 350 young people aged 18 to 35 with links to the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and with high levels of political engagement. In this group, 31.7 per cent of participants said they were dissatisfied with their political elite, while 33.7 per cent were pessimistic about their country’s future. However, another finding is even more telling. When asked if their peers were interested in politics, only 36 per cent answered in the affirmative.

### *Main Concerns: Corruption, Poverty, and Educational Justice*

For both old and young alike, but especially the young, one of the region’s age-old problems remains its greatest challenge – corruption. In this respect, the region has long performed poorly in international rankings. In recent years, a series of spectacular corruption scandals,

such as revelations surrounding the Lava Jato trial, have brought the issue into the focus of public debate and further shaken the population's already low levels of trust in their political establishment. Unsurprisingly, 57.3 per cent of participants in the KAS survey named corruption as the main problem in their country – followed by poverty, which was mentioned by 32.6 per cent of young respondents. The pandemic has significantly exacerbated social problems for young people. According to the above-mentioned representative UN survey, 31 per cent of young people have perceived food shortages in their community – a figure that rises to 44 per cent for respondents with a migrant background and 45 per cent for those from indigenous groups.

For young people, poverty and inequality are particularly striking in the education sector. In most Latin American countries, education is underfunded and characterised by a strong private school sector; which is largely accessible only to children from high-income families. Although more than two-thirds of all high school graduates attend public schools, they make up just one quarter of all students at state universities. Half of all children are still unable to read and write properly when they leave primary school. 90 per cent of these children are from families in the lowest income brackets.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, it comes as no surprise that educational justice is a key element underpinning political demands of young respondents in the KAS survey, the majority of whom are in academic education. In Latin America, access to top universities is much more restricted than in Europe. It is more closely linked to issues of social advancement than in the rich industrialised nations. In Europe, tertiary education tends to afford more opportunities for personal fulfilment and development, whereas the KAS survey suggests that Latin American youth are more focused on the material aspects, which are linked to secure, stable and well-paid employment. Overall, young people's optimism about their future increases in proportion to their level of educational attainment.

Another interesting aspect of the KAS survey is that despite most respondents considering climate change to be one of the most urgent global challenges (59.2 per cent), ahead of poverty (47.9 per cent), it lags far behind in their assessment of the main political challenges faced at home (just 10.4 per cent). Here, the top positions are occupied by corruption (57.4 per cent), education (41.6 per cent), unemployment (38.8 per cent), poverty (32.6 per cent), and drug trafficking (20.2 per cent). In Latin America, climate strikes and similar protests are at best a marginal phenomenon limited to better-off areas. It is clear that young people feel their lives are more impacted by problems affecting society as a whole – the lack of economic and political stability that afflicts their livelihoods – as opposed to more abstract issues such as climate change.

### **Young people tend to pay very little attention to China's role in Latin America.**

---

The same applies to foreign policy issues. The European Union (37.8 per cent) and the US (19.8 per cent) are perceived as positive reference points for Latin American countries' foreign policy. The EU is seen as a model of best practice for domestic policymakers, while the US is mainly viewed as a destination with more opportunities. Most respondents believe that their country's foreign policy should entail cooperation with other states. However, at 30.4 per cent, a relatively large proportion of respondents say this foreign policy should primarily pursue national interests, also independent of multilateral organisations. As far as China is concerned, ignorance reigns. Measured against its future global significance, huge levels of Chinese investment, and the massive political pressure that Beijing exerts in large swathes of the region, young people tend to pay very little attention to the country.

## Need for New Channels of Communication

Compared to previous generations, who often fought against authoritarian systems in their formative years, today's Latin American youth have largely grown up in democratic state structures, despite their deficits. While previous generations often regarded democracy as the goal of their political engagement, today's youth are primarily focused on these democratic systems' existing or perceived shortcomings. The danger is that protests against these shortcomings will transform into a growing distrust of democratic institutions and decision-making processes per se. In order to prevent this, institutions and parties are urgently required to establish new communication channels on the real-life concerns of young people and provide true opportunities for participation. Latin America's democracies will only be fit for the future if they take the demands of young people seriously, while also actively building systems of social consensus.

*- translated from German -*

---

**Elisabeth Hoffmann** is Coordinator for Family and Youth at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

**Florian Karner** was Head of the Regional Programme Political Dialogue West Africa at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

**Katharina Hopp** was Trainee in the Regional Programme Political Dialogue West Africa at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and now works in its Evaluation Unit.

**Alina Reiß** is Trainee in the Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung based in Singapore.

**Sebastian Grundberger** is Head of the Regional Programme Party Dialogue and Democracy in Latin America at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and runs the Uruguay office.

**Dr. Thomas Schaumberg** was Trainee in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Uruguay office and now works in the Department for Latin America.

**Laura Rubio** was an Intern in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Uruguay office.

- 1 Shell 2019: 18<sup>th</sup> Shell Youth Study (Summary), in: <https://bit.ly/32hFyo5> [25 Oct 2021].
- 2 Jugendrat der Generationen Stiftung 2021: Umfrage offenbart: Vertrauen junger Menschen in die Politik ist tief erschüttert, 24 Jun 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3vVlbb2> [7 Sep 2021].
- 3 Hübner, Christine / Eichhorn, Jan 2018: Wie haben junge Deutsche 2017 gewählt? Wahlverhalten junger Wähler\_innen zur Bundestagswahl 2017: empirische Analyse, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, in: <https://bit.ly/2ZGBk8v> [7 Sep 2021].
- 4 Paragraf 7 Abs. 1 SGB VIII, in: <https://bit.ly/3jQeu5c> [19 Jun 2021].
- 5 African Union 2006: African Youth Charter, 2 Jul 2006, in: <https://bit.ly/3Ej7w0y> [19 Jun 2021].
- 6 Hajjar, Bandar 2020: The children's continent: keeping up with Africa's growth, Islamic Development Bank, in: World Economic Forum, 13 Jan 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Ijpc4u> [6 Dec 2021]; United Nations 2019: Growing at a slower pace, world population is expected to reach 9.7 billion in 2050 and could peak at nearly 11 billion around 2100, 17 Jun 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3CmRgei> [19 Jun 2021].
- 7 KAS 2021: 2000 jeunes et leurs ambitions citoyennes en Afrique de l'Ouest, Jun 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3Cqojhy> [25 Oct 2021].
- 8 UNESCO 2021: Côte d'Ivoire - Participation in Education, in: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ci> [23 Jun 2021].
- 9 Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, Josephine / Logan, Carolyn / Gyimah-Boadi, Emmanuel 2019: In search of opportunity: Young and educated Africans most likely to consider moving abroad, Dispatch 288, Afrobarometer, 26 Mar 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3jNBIsQ> [8 Jul 2021].
- 10 Pew Research Center 2013: Despite Challenges, Africans Are Optimistic about the Future, 8 Nov 2013, in: <https://pewrsr.ch/3vZxBPo> [20 Oct 2021].
- 11 African Development Bank 2019: West Africa Economic Outlook 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3ErwxGL> [20 Oct 2021].
- 12 The World Bank 2021: The World Bank in Africa: Overview, 2 Jun 2021, in: <https://worldbank.org/en/region/afr/overview> [20 Oct 2021].
- 13 Agence française de développement 2021: AFD Atlas Africa: High concentrations of extreme poverty, 12 Feb 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3nC1VM9> [20 Oct 2021].
- 14 Koné, Par N. Yussef / Silwé, Kaphalo Ségorbah / Koné, Joseph 2020: Élection présidentielle 2020 en Côte d'Ivoire, Document de Politique No. 69 d'Afrobarometer, Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3vWfBVM> [19 Oct 2021].
- 15 Still in school (5 per cent), high school graduate (8 per cent), bachelor's degree (62 per cent), master's degree (22 per cent), PhD (1.5 per cent).
- 16 The respondents came from Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

- 17 Shell Deutschland Holding 2019: Youth Study 2019. A generation speaks up, Weinheim/Basel.
- 18 Ibid., p. 314.
- 19 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2014: Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and South-East Asia: Exploring political attitudes of East and South-East Asian youth through the Asian Barometer Survey, pp. 43 / 46, in: <https://bit.ly/3CCwLdC> [18 Oct 2021].
- 20 Ibid., p. 63.
- 21 Ibid., p. 48.
- 22 Croissant, Aurel 2016: Die politischen Systeme Südostasiens. Eine Einführung, Wiesbaden, pp. 126-128, 178-180, 267-270, 312-315, 413-415.
- 23 UNDP 2014, n. 19, p. 22.
- 24 Ibid., pp. 29 / 60.
- 25 Phoborisut, Penchan 2021: Thai youth's struggle for democracy may fizzle but political contention continues, East Asia Forum, 11 May 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3CCV7Em> [15 Jul 2021].
- 26 BBC News 2021: Myanmar coup: The young rebels risking their lives for the future, 6 Mar 2021, in: <https://bbc.in/2Z1gi9r> [15 Jul 2021].
- 27 UNDP 2014, n. 19, p. 74.
- 28 Ibid., p. 36.
- 29 Grare, Frédéric 2021: The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy: A chance for a clear message to China and Europe's allies, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 22 Apr 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3CNR741> [16 Jul 2021].
- 30 United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) 2021: Encuesta de las Naciones Unidas sobre Juventudes de América Latina y el Caribe dentro del Contexto de la Pandemia del COVID-19, Jun 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/2ZNOJf1> [12 Aug 2021].
- 31 Navarro, José Gabriel 2020: Social media usage in Latin America – Statistics & Facts, Statista, 13 Jul 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2GB8wEE> [5 Oct 2021].
- Duarte, Fernando, 2019: Los países en los que la gente pasa más tiempo en las redes sociales (y los líderes en América Latina), BBCWorld Service, 9 Sep 2019, in: <https://bbc.in/3w1wLBD> [5 Oct 2020].
- 32 Peña González, Carlos 2019: La crisis social en Chile y sus implicancias para América Latina, Diálogo Político, 19 Dec 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3EAE8mE> [1 Nov 2021].
- 33 Grundberger, Sebastian 2020: Strategic Partners under Pressure, International Reports 4/2020, 1 Dec 2020, p. 42, in: <https://bit.ly/3BwUoD9> [1 Nov 2021].
- 34 Muñoz Lima, Rosa 2020: Jóvenes en América Latina: ¿Creen en las urnas? ¿O en las calles?, Deutsche Welle, 11 Aug 2020, in: <https://p.dw.com/p/3gnNp> [18 Aug 2021].
- 35 Leyva Muñoz, Olivia 2021: Pandemia y participación política de los jóvenes en América Latina, Estudios 46, pp. 113-134, in: <https://bit.ly/3w2T3mz> [1 Nov 2021].
- 36 NPH Kinderhilfe Lateinamerika: Bildung in Lateinamerika: Ein kaputtes System, 4 Aug 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3nPbKGn> [5 Oct 2021].