

K-pop Activism: A Potent Political Force

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K-pop activism is a growing phenomenon in Southeast Asia, serving as an alternative means of political mobilisation and expression among tech-savvy youth.

In recent times, K-pop has been making political waves around the globe. In June 2020, K-pop boy-group BTS made headlines when along with their agency, they [contributed US\\$1 million](#) to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign in the US, citing their stance “against racism and violence”. This amount was quickly matched by their fans, also known as “ARMY.”

While K-pop’s activism has been more prolific in the US, tech-savvy fans, many of whom reside in Southeast Asia, have also successfully influenced their local political scenes. Taking to the internet to raise funds and rally support, they have advocated for democratisation, freedom of speech and oppose what they perceive as oppressive or unjust regimes.

In October 2020, Thai K-pop fans joined the anti-government movement calling for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha’s resignation and increased curbs on the monarchy’s power. To support protest efforts, Thai fan groups organised fundraisers across various social media platforms. A Twitter fan page of Girls Generation raised [780,000 baht \(US\\$25,000\) in nine hours](#), and together with fan-pages of other K-pop acts, cumulatively [raised](#) over 4 million baht (US\$128,000) in one week. Proceeds went towards safety equipment for protestors and other organisations supporting the protest agenda, such as the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, which offers pro-bono [legal aid](#) for those “arrested and detained by the military”. The organisation has [credited](#) the collective K-pop community as “the single biggest donors to Thailand’s pro-democracy movement”.

Similarly, since the 1 February coup, Myanmar-based fan groups have organised fundraisers for the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against the military junta. Kai Nation Myanmar Fund Club (fan-page of EXO’s Kai) reportedly [donated food supplies](#) for protestors on 10 February, while a Facebook fan page of Blackpink posted a [screenshot](#) of their 7 million kyat (US\$4,265) donation to the Committee Representing Pyidaunsu Hluttaw.

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Mobilisation efforts go beyond the monetary aspect. Capitalising on their [digital capabilities](#), fan clubs utilise their social media channels to spread information and provide updates on political issues. In support of the CDM, Myanmar-based fan accounts of individuals and groups like [BTS](#), [Twice](#), and [Kai](#) (EXO) have used their platforms to provide information on death tolls and daily protest situations. Their posts can have a reach beyond their shores as their following may consist of overseas K-pop fans, but also because they use hashtags like #WhatsHappeninginMyanmar #SaveMyanmar to reach a wider audience. The power of such social media action is tangible – posts can garner engagements numbering in the [thousands](#). And if past precedent is any proof of their viral power: when the controversial Omnibus Law was introduced in Indonesia last October, the K-

pop community was one of those credited with helping hashtags against the law to [trend worldwide](#) on Twitter.

The influence of K-pop can also help galvanise local protests with powerful slogans. In a [now-viral video](#), a Thai man can be seen dancing to Girls Generation's *Into The New World* during protests last October. The song carries [political significance](#) as it was used during South Korea's student protest movement in 2017, which led to the eventual impeachment of former President Park Geun-Hye. Drawing on meme culture, protestors in Myanmar have also used [K-pop references](#) in their signages as a means to satirise the junta's rule. Such signages were among a deck of Gen-Z protest signboards in a [Facebook post](#) which has garnered over ninety-nine thousand shares to date, with K-pop fans and the international community expressing solidarity for the CDM alike in the comments. K-pop references thus further protest efforts by [raising morale](#) and potentially boosting coverage of the issue.

At the very heart of K-pop activism is the community's [familiarity](#) with social media platforms, fast fingers, and mobilisation know-how – skills that fan clubs frequently utilise to secure exclusive merchandise and propel their idols towards awards and new records. For some fans, the call to action lies in the desire to be like their idols, who may be seen as role models upholding values like respect and equality, as with the [case of BTS with the BLM movement](#). For many others, their K-pop identity intersects with their [national identity](#), and fan communities are a platform where they can find like-minded individuals to [support what they deem to be a worthy or patriotic cause](#). The powerful combination of tech-savviness and cause makes them a force not to be trifled with.

Indeed, as K-pop and its fan communities grow to become a global language and movement in their own right, it may increasingly become an alternative avenue for political expression and information. This is especially significant with greater state regulation on traditional media and news channels in the region – the International Federation of Journalists' 2019 Southeast Asia Media Report named "[arrest or detainment by authorities](#)" as one of the two greatest threats to the media, while press freedom [took a tumble](#) in 2020.

K-poppers, too, may soon have to grapple with similar curbs – both [Thailand](#) and [Indonesia](#) increased social media restrictions during protests last year. Governments may also move to ban K-pop groups directly if they are perceived to be associated with their politically active fans who go against the government agenda, even if these groups do not publicly endorse their fans' actions. Such restrictions, however, will likely not deter fans. Their technological capability means they can [adapt](#) to changing regulations, while a clampdown on groups may even incite fans – many who are [fiercely protective](#) of their idols – to mobilise further.

Ultimately, the community's ever-growing numbers and global reach only means that they will play an increasing role in future political conflicts of Southeast Asia, for better or for worse.

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