



# E-NEWSLETTER

*The Official Publication*



## DEMOCRACY IN ASIA AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH



# DEMOCRACY IN ASIA AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH

*Rere Marselina*

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*In recent years, waves of demonstrations have emerged across Asia—from Bangkok to Seoul, from Manila to Jakarta, and from Bangladesh to Nepal. These events reveal a clear reality: young people are no longer spectators in the journey of democracy. They are present in the streets, in digital spaces, and within social movements, raising their voices for transparency, justice, and meaningful participation.*

*Beneath this growing energy and idealism, however, lies a paradox. Democracies in many Asian countries are facing a crisis of trust and institutional stagnation. While the younger generation strives to expand the space for freedom and social responsibility, many governments have responded with restrictions on civic space, digital surveillance, and even the criminalization of dissenting voices.*

*Amid this tension between hope and reality, this edition of the ALL Forum E-newsletter explores the theme of democracy in Asia and the role of youth. In the Voice of Asian Youth section, four young writers from different countries share their perspectives, critiques, and hopes concerning the democratic challenges in their societies. In the Theology & Spirituality section, Aloysius Pieris, SJ offers a reflection on Asian Christian identity as a guide from the past for the present and the future. This issue concludes with the Message of the Month by Dr. Paul Hwang, addressing the ongoing crisis of democracy in Asia and the significance of youth engagement.*

*The articles in this edition are more than analytical reflections—they are expressions of awareness and commitment, inviting readers to rekindle the democratic spirit that upholds justice, human dignity, and an inclusive future.*

*Enjoy reading!*

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# SEOUL SPRING: AS I EXPERIENCED IT

*Jang Sohyeon - South Korea*



**On December 3, 2024**, I was on my way home after finishing classes at school. In a KakaoTalk group chat with my friends, one of them suddenly sent a message: the president had declared martial law. At first, I thought, “That must be fake news.” But in real time, former President Yoon was indeed declaring martial law. I hurried home and told my dad. He also said, “That must be fake news,” but as soon as he turned on the TV, there it was—President Yoon announcing martial law. “It’s real!!!!” Both my dad and I were shocked, and that night, we couldn’t sleep.

Martial law is a word that, for someone born in the '90s like me, had always felt distant—something I only read about in history books or saw in movies. The film *A Taxi Driver* (2017, directed by Jang Hoon) portrays the period after President Park Chung-hee was assassinated on October 26, 1979. Under the Choi Kyu-hah administration, the military junta, led by Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, gradually consolidated power. On May 17, 1980, martial law was expanded nationwide: the National Assembly was dissolved, universities were-

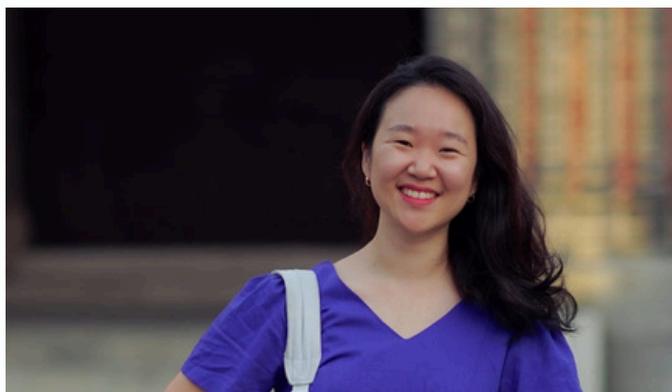
closed, and political activities were banned.

Citizens in Gwangju took to the streets to demand democracy, facing illegal oppression, and many lost their lives. The protagonist, Kim Man-seop, an ordinary taxi driver in Seoul, is offered a large sum of money if he drives to Gwangju before curfew to pay overdue rent. Accompanying him is Peter, a German journalist. Upon arrival, Kim witnesses firsthand the military’s violence and the citizens’ resistance.

*The Attorney* (2013, directed by Yang Woo-seok) is set against the backdrop of the 1981 Burim case. Twenty-two members of a social science reading club were arrested without warrants, tortured, and prosecuted. Students and citizens had gathered to discuss democracy and engage in reading groups, but the junta labeled them as dangerous threats and suppressed them. Martial law and political security cases were not mere political measures—they were instruments to stifle citizens’ freedoms and democratic aspirations. The attorney in the film, based on former President Roh Moo-hyun, defends students’ rights in court, exposing the military junta’s abuse of power and unjust martial law measures, fighting to uphold democracy and protect citizens.

The martial law I had only seen in movies—the one that should never happen again—happened once more in South Korea on December 3, 2024.

During this time, members of the National Assembly gathered inside to block the martial law, while citizens stood guard outside. Voices demanding that armed conflict never happen again converged. Martial law ended within a single day, but its reality struck us as if it had stepped straight out of a film.



*Photo: Jang Sohyeon - South Korea | AYVATF Alumni*

Citizens flooded the streets, refusing to let a president who endangered the nation remain in office. From the moment martial law was declared, they gathered daily in front of the National Assembly, singing and calling for President Yoon's resignation. The ruling party cautiously began defending him, but citizens would not back down. After finishing work each day, they went out to the streets with friends and family. Until President Yoon's impeachment, citizens kept coming out.

One day, after a protest with a friend's family, we went to eat fried chicken and drink beer. It was the dead of winter, and our bodies were frozen solid. As soon as we entered the restaurant, we felt the warmth. In that old-style chicken shop, people who had been protesting nearby gathered in small groups. Watching the news, we began talking to the uncle sitting next to us. My friend's parents, as well as the men at the next table, had participated in democratic movements in the past. They spoke of the importance of learning from history and ensuring past mistakes were never repeated. For the first time, my friend and I felt the weight carried by adults in their 40s and 50s. In that moment, we confronted a history that must never repeat itself and witnessed the power of citizens to prevent it. Human strength may be limited, but we could see what ordinary people, coming together, could achieve. Even when the future seemed bleak, people gathered and moved toward what was right. When asked about Korean history, I answered, "We already have a generation that resisted." And so, the Seoul Spring returned once again.\*

# BUILDING DEMOCRACY TOGETHER: A REFLECTION AND CALL TO THE YOUTH

*Andavao D. Diwangan - Philippines*

I'm an Indigenous youth from Mindanao, and I've come to see how easily peace and democracy can be shaken. For us, peace is not only about the absence of war, it is about our land, our culture, and our duty to care for the rivers, forests, and the life that surrounds us. When these are taken, peace disappears. And too often, we're not even asked when decisions are made. Some of our leaders face threats just for standing up.

The best part of joining the AYA/ATF 2025 in Indonesia was sitting with other young people from different countries in Asia. We told our stories. We listened to each other; some spoke about struggles, others shared hopes. In those simple moments, I saw how our faith, our fight for justice, and our care for creation are never separate. They all go together. It felt like looking in a mirror. Different country, but the same struggles. I remembered my own community while watching people hold on to dignity despite poverty and neglect. It struck me again that peace without justice is fragile, and democracy loses its meaning when ordinary voices are not heard.



*Photo: Holding hands in solidarity at the AYA/ATF Yogyakarta 2025 Program*

The plenary talks made me realize more deeply how power -and greed affect the everyday lives of people like us. And in the workshops, it felt like real conversations. We asked questions, we wrestled with ideas, and sometimes even disagreed. But in the end, we tried to imagine new paths, new possibilities, grounded in solidarity.



*Photo: Plenary during the AYA/ATF Yogyakarta 2025*

As an Indigenous youth, I often find it difficult to raise concerns. Too many times, our words are set aside, and I have felt it myself being told to stay quiet, as though my voice carried no value. But our stories are true, and truth has weight. We may not hold high offices, we may not hold positions of influence or possess material wealth, yet our voices remain, and they carry weight. The Catholic Church and other faith groups have stood with us. They defend dignity, speak against injustice, and walk with the Indigenous. That gives me hope. But honestly, it's not just their fight. It's also ours. Especially us, the youth. These days, I notice how fast misinformation travels online, often reaching people before the truth has a chance to be known. That's why we need to push back. Stand with those who are left behind.

Use whatever space we have in our schools, our communities, even social media to speak out. Silence won't save us. Silence only helps injustice grow stronger. Peace and democracy won't just drop into our laps. We need to fight for them. Work for them. Build them ourselves. Not with fear, but with courage. Not with despair, but with hope. And always with solidarity, and with care for creation. To my fellow youth, silence is complicity. Our voices give us strength. We must continue to use them, while we still have the chance to be heard.\*



*Photo: Andavao D. Diwangan - Philippines | AYA/ATF Alumni*

# THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY IN INDONESIA: A HOBBSIAN WARNING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR ASEAN DIPLOMACY

*Ferdinando Yuke Da Cruz - Indonesia*



## Introduction

Two decades after the 1998 Reformasi, Indonesia's democracy was once hailed as one of the most remarkable achievements in Southeast Asia. Direct elections, press freedom, and civic participation were celebrated as milestones in the country's transition from the authoritarian New Order regime. Yet, recent political developments suggest a troubling regression. The 2024 elections, the rise of dynastic politics, and waves of mass demonstrations against the House of Representatives (DPR) indicate that the substance of Indonesian democracy has steadily eroded.

To better grasp this situation, it is instructive to revisit the ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), an English political philosopher who lived through civil war. In his seminal work *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes articulated the notion of a social contract, whereby individuals surrender part of their freedoms to a sovereign authority in exchange for security. Without such -

authority, Hobbes argued, human life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>1</sup> Yet the Hobbesian social contract was never meant to serve as a blank check: if rulers fail to provide security and instead abuse their power, the very essence of the contract collapses. Hobbes' framework thus sheds light on the paradox of Indonesian democracy, which appears functional in its procedures but hollow in its spirit.

## Hobbes' Social Contract and Indonesian Politics

The Reformasi of 1998 can be understood as a new social contract: the people rejected authoritarianism and embraced democracy as the foundation of governance. The expectations were clear—political freedom, fair representation, and a state committed to protecting citizens' rights. Yet the trajectory of Indonesian politics today reveals an erosion of trust. The 2024 election illustrates this crisis. A major controversy erupted when the Constitutional Court altered the minimum age requirement for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. This change clearly appeared to benefit one particular vice-presidential candidate, Gibran Rakabuming, who is none other than the biological son of the former president, Joko Widodo. Many citizens perceived the ruling not as an act of judicial independence but as a calculated maneuver to entrench dynastic power. The increasingly overt practice of political -

dynasties illustrates how authority is now tilted toward familial and oligarchic interests rather than the people. As a result, the democratic arena, which should ensure fair competition and equal opportunity, has been reduced to a playing field for a narrow elite.

This dynamic evokes Hobbes' defense of absolute monarchy, albeit in a different form. For Hobbes, sovereign monarchy was necessary to guarantee stability. In Indonesia, however, dynastic politics undermines the very essence of democracy and erodes the legitimacy of the social contract.

The crisis of trust has become even more visible in mass demonstrations against the DPR, particularly in response to contentious issues such as the weakening of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) or the ratification of the new Criminal Code (KUHP). For many, the DPR no longer functions as a genuine representative body but rather as an extension of elite interests. In Hobbesian terms, citizens originally surrendered certain freedoms for the sake of security; yet when the state itself becomes a threat to civil rights, the contract can be said to have been violated.

## Implications for Indonesia's Diplomacy in ASEAN

The decline of democracy in Indonesia is not merely a domestic concern; it also reverberates in the regional arena, particularly within ASEAN. For years, Indonesia was regarded as the "democratic locomotive" of Southeast Asia. However, as the quality of its democracy has declined, that perception has begun to fade.

Other ASEAN states—many of which operate under semi-authoritarian systems—



*Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto during President Prabowo's first diplomatic visit after becoming President of Indonesia.*

may interpret Indonesia's democratic backsliding as validation of their own governance models. Rather than serving as an exemplar, Indonesia risks forfeiting its moral authority to champion democracy and human rights in regional forums. Moreover, fragile domestic political stability diminishes the credibility and effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomacy. ASEAN requires strong leadership, but such leadership is difficult to sustain when domestic democracy suffers a crisis of legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> In short, the "death of democracy" in Indonesia is not merely an internal predicament; it also undermines Indonesia's capacity to contribute meaningfully to the region.

## Conclusion

Reading Indonesian politics through the lens of Hobbes' social contract exposes a sobering irony. The state, which ought to function as the Leviathan to safeguard its citizens, has instead become a vehicle of elite domination. Indonesia's democracy remains procedurally intact, yet its core—the sovereignty of the people—has been increasingly disregarded. Consequently, many citizens now perceive democracy in Indonesia as effectively dead. Should this trajectory continue, the country risks losing its strategic role both in the eyes of its own people and in the regional arena.

The solution lies not only in improving electoral procedures but also in restoring the broken social contract by rebuilding public trust, strengthening independent institutions, and resisting oligarchic capture. Hobbes reminds us that without legitimate authority, human life descends into chaos. Yet Indonesia faces a different peril: authority exists, procedures are in place, but justice and popular sovereignty have withered. This is where democracy dies slowly—and where the urgent task is to revive it.



Photo: Ferdinando Yuke Da Cruz - Indonesia | Social Studies Teacher

Some practical measures to reinvigorate democracy in Indonesia include: (1) Enhancing political literacy among citizens so they remain critical, politically aware, and resistant to money politics and disinformation; (2) Strengthening civil society and independent media to serve as counterweights to power rather than instruments of oligarchy; (3) Reforming democratic institutions such as the General Elections Commission (KPU), Constitutional Court (MK), Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), and the DPR to ensure independence from elite interference; (4) Restricting dynastic politics and oligarchy through stricter regulations on nepotism and conflict of interest to prevent a disguised monarchy; and (5) Restoring the credibility of Indonesia's diplomacy within ASEAN, where a healthy domestic democracy would once again allow Indonesia to stand as a genuine model of democratic governance in Southeast Asia.\*

(1) Hobbes, T. (1651/1996). *Leviathan*. Ed. Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(2) Weatherbee, D. E. (2023). *International relations in Southeast Asia: The struggle for autonomy* (5th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

# CURRENT STATE OF PEACE AND DEMOCRACY IN SRI LANKA

*Shashira Vismith - Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka, an island called the 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean' is a land of natural beauty and famous for the hospitality of the people. Sri Lanka's documented history goes back 3,000 years, with evidence of prehistoric human settlements dating back 125,000 years. After being colonized by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British over 443 years, we celebrated 77th National Independence Day this year. Sri Lanka has long grappled with the intertwined challenges of peace and democracy.



*Anti-government protesters protests calling for the resignation of Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on July 09, 2022. (Photo by Buddhika Weerasinghe/Getty Images)*

## The 2022 Economic Collapse and the Rise of Youth Activism

Emerging from a brutal 26-year civil war that ended in 2009, the country has since navigated a complex path toward reconciliation, institutional reform, and democratic consolidation. However, recent years - particularly following the economic collapse of 2022 have exposed deep structural vulnerabilities, political instability, and social fragmentation. Amid this turbulence, one demographic stands out as both the most affected and potentially the most transformative: the youth.

Until 2024, Sri Lanka's democratic institutions remained fragile. While elections continue to be held regularly and civil liberties are largely intact compared to authoritarian regimes, governance is marred by corruption, nepotism, and weak accountability mechanisms. The 2022 Aragalaya (Struggle) movement; a mass uprising led predominantly by young people forced the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and triggered a rare moment of cross-ethnic, cross-class solidarity. It was a watershed event demonstrating that Sri Lankan youth are no longer willing to tolerate misgovernance passively.

Yet, despite this powerful assertion of democratic will, systemic change remains elusive. The same political dynasties implicated in the economic crisis have reconsolidated power, albeit under new leadership. The 20th Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 2020, had significantly expanded presidential powers, weakening checks and balances. Although the 21st Amendment in 2022 sought to claw back some of those powers, implementation has been inconsistent. Public trust in state institutions from parliament to the judiciary remained low, especially among the youth.

As the people experienced the power of people after being divided into races, cheated with fake promises and hopes for many years, majority of them realized the deep rooted corrupted political agendas. They began to open up, ending the political blindness and only thinking about the -

prosperity of the people and country. The current government came to power at the end of 2024 as a result of people's wish to change the corrupt political governance. Most of the people believe in people's power and individually working for the change they hope for. The present Government is playing a big role in it and I hope the people won't be betrayed.

Peace, too, continues to be an unfinished project. While open conflict has ceased, the root causes of the civil war, including ethnic marginalization, militarization of the North and East, land rights disputes, and lack of accountability for wartime atrocities remain inadequately addressed. Tamil and Muslim communities continue to report discrimination and surveillance. Reconciliation efforts are going on by the government and independent social workers.

## **The Youth: Catalysts for Transformation and the Path Forward**

Sri Lanka's youth who constitute nearly 25% of the population under the age of 30 find themselves at a crossroads. They are inheritors of a broken system but also its most dynamic challengers and potential rebuilders. Youth engagement in Sri Lanka today takes many forms: protest movements, digital activism, community organizing, independent journalism, and grassroots peace building.



Youth in Sri Lanka during the Moving School Sri Lanka Program ( November 2024) | Credit: ALL Forum

Young activists leveraged social media during the Aragalaya protests to mobilize millions, circumvent state censorship, and articulate demands for good governance, constitutional reform, and social justice. Their slogans "Go Home Gota," "We Want a System Change, Not a Regime Change" captured not just anger but a sophisticated understanding of structural failure.

Beyond street protests, youth-led campaigns such as #GoHomeGota2022, Stand Up Lanka, and the Hashtag Generation have evolved into sustained civic movements pushing for transparency, anti-corruption measures, and inclusive policymaking. University students, once politically active through party-affiliated unions, are increasingly forming non-partisan collectives focused on human rights, environmental sustainability, and inter-ethnic dialogue.

In post-war regions, the youth are quietly leading reconciliation efforts organizing mixed-community sports events, bilingual education initiatives, and trauma-healing workshops. These bottom-up efforts often achieve more than top-down state programs, which suffer from bureaucratic inertia and political tokenism. For example, youth groups in Jaffna and Batticaloa have created safe spaces for intergenerational dialogue about the war, challenging silence and stigma while fostering empathy across ethnic lines.

However, significant barriers remain. Political parties continue to co-opt or sideline youth voices, offering token representation without real decision-making power. Economic hardship with youth unemployment hovering around 25% forces many to prioritize survival over civic engagement. Brain drain is decelerating compared to previous years, skilled young professionals who were thinking of -

emigrating in search of stability and opportunity seem to hope and trust the current government.

In the past those who stayed had to face repression: journalists and activists report increased surveillance, legal harassment under draconian laws like the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), and online smear campaigns. But the current situation is more positive and people are experiencing freedom to express themselves.



*Photo: Shashira Vismith - Sri Lanka | AYA/ATF Alumni*

To harness the energy and idealism of Sri Lankan youth, structural reforms are urgently needed. First, constitutional reform must ensure greater youth representation, perhaps through reserved parliamentary seats or mandatory youth councils at local government levels. Second, civic education should be revitalized in schools and universities to foster critical thinking and democratic values. Third, international donors and civil society must invest in youth-led peace building and entrepreneurship, not just as beneficiaries but as partners and leaders. \*

## THE NEW QUEST FOR ASIAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY: GUIDELINES FROM THE PIONEERS OF THE PAST (A SUMMARY) - PART 1

*Fr. Aloysius Pieris, SJ*



Georg Evers comes to one's mind when one hears the Jesuit General's invitation to the Jesuits in Asia to become Jesuits of Asia. Though European, Evers engaged both the Asian-Jewish heritage of Christianity and Asia's contemporary realities, supporting Asian theologies and theologians. In response to the Jesuit General's challenge, this essay highlights features of Asian Christianity which have been emphasized also in Evers' life-time work. Also, in this essay, I seek to sift the stepping stones from the stumbling blocks in the path of those Christians in Asia who yearn to become Christians of Asia.

### **Lessons to Be Learned from the Nascent Church's Westward Expansion The Jewish Christian Identity and Gentiles**

Not only the quest for Asian Christian identity but even the basic comprehension of Christian identity itself is not easy, as historical research continues to give differing views on Christianity's origins. As Wolfgang Stegemann concluded in the 2002 Bologna symposium, Christianismos began as a new people, rooted in Christ's death, chosen by God—drawn from the Gentiles yet transcending all boundaries, for in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek.

This conclusion is indisputably valid. But this also raises a crucial question: if Christianity is universal, must Asians shed their cultural identity to preserve Christianity's own? This question forms the core of discussions on Asian Christian identity and of today's theology of inculturation. The problem becomes more complex when the Jerusalem Assembly's decision not to impose circumcision on Gentiles (Acts 15) is used as scriptural justification for inculturation among non-Christians.

It is likely that "inculturation" was not the main concern of the Jerusalem Assembly. Instead, its deeper lesson was discerning what was not essential to the identity of the nuclear church, which was still largely Jewish. Thanks to Church's long experience, guided by the Spirit, the Assembly required new converts only to avoid food offered to idols, blood, meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality. Beyond this, the apostles also urged evangelizers, as Paul recalls in Galatians, to "remember the poor."

Hence, what happened at Jerusalem was a very Jewish decision by the Jewish disciples of the Jewish Messiah to free new converts from a religious law that even they admitted was too heavy for themselves. To force it on non-Jews would have been like testing God. This difficult and controversial decision created tension, but looking back, it became necessary for new theological growth.

In today's theological terms, the Jerusalem Assembly set a missionary policy that rejected cultural domination in the name of religion--domination that was seen as incompatible with the best of biblical-Jewish spirituality. Paul highlights this in his rebuke to Peter (Gal 2:14): if Peter, a Jew, lived like a Gentile, how could he force Gentiles to live like Jews? Was this cultural domination—common among Gentiles—what Paul something wanted the church to avoid?

Josephus Flavius noted that justice was the shared value of all religions and that Jews in the diaspora showed great religious tolerance, likely in line with Roman religious freedom. Yet, it was Greek culture—not Roman—that truly dominated the empire. The memory of the Maccabean revolt against Greek rule was still alive, but Greek influence remained strong for centuries. Even Paul, a Hebrew, had to use Greek to speak to Christians in Rome. This was because Alexander's conquest spread not only military power but also Greek culture—its literature, arts, institutions, architecture, and schools that trained a Greek-speaking elite shaped by Greek thought. Many early Christian thinkers received a Greek *paideia* in these “pagan” schools, even up to the third and fourth centuries.

This species of cultural domination was as perfect and holistic as anything Greek could be, and Asia would not see anything similar until many centuries later under Christianity. Hence, we do well to study the Greek prototype against the background of the Jerusalem policy.

## **The Power of Language and the Christian Identity**

The most powerful weapon of cultural domination is language. Natives who could not speak Greek were considered uneducated and mocked as *barbaroi*. Conquerors often replaced native tongues with their own, because a people's dignity is tied to their language—their cultural DNA.

In first-century Galilee, the Greek-speaking elite regarded Jesus—the Word made flesh in Jewishness—and his Aramaic-speaking disciples as *barbaroi*, rural peasants unable to carry God's Word beyond their ghetto. No wonder, Christian identity, was revealed at Pentecost. The Resurrection of the “barbarian” Jew released the power of God's Word, heard by the people from different nation in their own language (Acts 2:8, 11). This showed that Christianity's universality lies not in imposing one language, but in the Spirit's power to speak through all languages. The Jerusalem Assembly later confirmed this: the Spirit creates unity through diversity, while uniformity divides.

Furthermore, between Pentecost and the Assembly, Greek-educated Jews like Paul and Barnabas expressed the Jewish-Christian tradition in the *lingua franca* of the dominant culture. They were men and women of the Spirit, deeply rooted in their Jewish tradition while also well-versed in the global culture around them.

Thus, the broad vision and tolerance of the diaspora Jews grew into something greater—freedom in Christ, which Paul, once a fanatic, discovered after meeting the Risen Lord. But one thing should not go unnoticed: the shift from Jesus to Paul was not smooth or gradual—it was a massive cultural leap. Jesus’ world was rural and rustic, limited to Galilee, while Paul’s was urban and expansive, reaching across the Mediterranean. Jesus distrusted money, but Paul had a practical business sense, securing funds, organizing collections, and managing resources wisely to support his mission.

Paul’s fidelity to his Master is unquestionable—he seeks only “to know Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). However, between the Galilean Jesus and the Apostle to the nations, there is the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Resurrection makes the messianic mission universal, while the Spirit gives the Apostles’ faithfulness a creative dimension that goes far beyond slavish imitation. Paul’s mission embodies this creative fidelity in the Spirit, which gives the apostolic mission a transcultural dynamism.

## **Transcultural Dynamism and the Fate of Christian Identity**

The leap from local to global in the post-Resurrection Church carried risks for the Gospel’s identity. In the globalized cultural ethos of this era, especially after the pastoral letters, the urban rich begun to dominate, and key Gospel values like equality of gender, race, and class (Gal 3:28) faded into Greco-Roman household norms. Without dissenting voice such as Paul, this trend went unchecked into Christianity’s westward expansion. Another lesson for today’s Asia is to discern the thin line between growth and impoverishment, for what seems a stepping stone to universality may in time become a stumbling block to the Gospel.

Here we recall Jesus’ principle in Matthew 13:52: a true disciple draws from both the old and the new. We must preserve the biblical-Semitic roots of our identity while welcoming new cultural expressions of faith. Religious pluralism is not relativism but a witness to God’s freedom to reveal Himself “in many diverse ways” (Heb 1:1). By embracing these ways, East or West, we show fidelity to our true Christian identity.

History teaches us where we have failed. In moving westward, Christianity eagerly absorbed Greek culture but, in doing so, lost much of the unique spirit of the Old Covenant fulfilled in Christ. As Aldo Magris points out, what took place was less a Christianization of Hellenism and more a Hellenization of Christianity. The Gospel seed sown among the poor of Palestine was transplanted into the soil of Greek philosophy and urban culture. This version of Christianity, inherited by the whole Church, is more of a lesson to reflect on than a model to be followed when defining our Christian identity.

Alois Grillmeier noted that Greek philosophy caused problems by presenting a “static” view of Christ as God-Man and dividing Christology (who Jesus is) from soteriology (what he does). This led to the neglect of the biblical idea of salvation. Stanislas Lyonnet warned that to recover true biblical soteriology, even in Greek-written texts like Paul’s letters, we must set aside Greek philosophical categories and read them in their original Semitic context, free from later distortions. These warnings show where Christianity went wrong: it too easily adopted elite culture and lost sight of true biblical salvation—which liberate the poor from poverty, the rich from wealth, and all from greed.

With this awareness, we must now shape our Christian identity around biblical soteriology. Biblical soteriology proclaims liberation of the whole body, not just salvation of souls—a redemption both spiritual and socio-economic for all people. This was sealed in the Covenant of Sinai with runaway slaves and confirmed in Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, where the God of Slaves and the Slave of God (ebed Yahweh) form one saving reality in the New Covenant. Dying a death reserved for slaves, this slave-God still cries from the cross: You are killing Me, your own God, when you rob My people of life.

This is the non-negotiable element of the biblical revelation that disappears when Christ is reduced to abstract “God-Man” debates of the leisure class instead of God’s Covenant with the oppressed. Christianity’s real enemy is not the other religions or atheists but the powers of Mammon—greed and injustice—that infiltrate every religion, ideology, and system. Our identity is to live as messengers of the “God of the Poor,” who demands the transformation of unjust structures, not a change of religion, as the path to salvation. This God threatens no faith or nation—unless they oppress the poor.

In our openness to “newness” God offers through Asia’s many religions, our Christian identity must remain rooted in the Covenant while allowing other religions to stay faithful to their own mission. True religious pluralism honors the unique identities of different traditions while exchanging gifts of revelation. Christianity’s contribution is to share the soteriology entrusted to us, while remaining open to what God has offered through others. It is within this perspective that we must now study the lesson that the history of Christianity in Asia has to teach us.\*

## JESUIT COMPANIONS ON INDIGENOUS MINISTRY (JCIM)

*Philippines*

The Asia Pacific Contextual Theology for Engagement Program (ACOTEP) is an immersion experience offered by the Loyola School of Theology as an intersession course. It seeks to provide participants—priests, religious, and lay people—with an opportunity to understand the ancestral wisdom and mysticism of Indigenous peoples.

This year's ACOTEP, held from 24 May to 1 June in Sabah, Malaysia, was organised by the Reconciliation with Creation ministry and the Jesuit Companions in Indigenous Ministry network.

The following is a reflection from one of the participants, **Gerald S Balugo**.

*Kopisunduan!*

This Kadazan-Dusun greeting means, “The divine in me meets the divine in you.” This Indigenous spirit of mutual respect recognises the sacred in others and invites us to encounter each person with humility and reverence. In the Indigenous worldview, this sacredness extends to all creation. The divine is not confined to temples and churches but is alive and present in rivers and stones, forests and mountains, butterflies and flowers. The world is indeed charged with God's grandeur. This deep interconnectedness with the land and all living things is the Indigenous way of life and theology—it may also be the answer to the ecological crises we face today.

During the Asia Pacific Contextual Theology Programme (ACOTEP), I was blessed to journey with others—among them,

the people in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. This programme did not simply give me new answers; it helped me to unlearn. I entered the experience with the subtle belief that I could bring answers back to our home diocese and offer formulated solutions to the silent struggles of Indigenous peoples. I had questions about inculturation and assumed it meant translating the Mass into their native language or substituting symbols within the liturgy. But I realised that inculturation is about allowing the Gospel to penetrate the culture. It is not simply about changing the form—it is about transformation. And I am not the one to define it. They are.



Our call is to journey with the Indigenous peoples. The ACOTEP experience taught me that true engagement begins with humility—with the courage to let go of being “the answer” and to become a listener and learner instead. It means entering into dialogue with the Indigenous peoples' sacred memory, honouring their stories, cultures, and understanding of the divine. It's about realising that God was already with them before the missionaries—and ahead of us.

To be honest, I still don't have all the answers to my questions. But I'm less afraid of not having them. What I have now is a deep excitement—a holy curiosity—to sit with the elders, to walk alongside them, and to listen.

To the Subanens in the Diocese of Dipolog: it is your time to tell your story. It is time for your language, theology, and culture to be heard, honoured, and celebrated.\*

*Kopisunduan!*  
*The divine in me meets the divine in you.*



## WOORI THEOLOGY INSTITUTE (WTI)

South Korea

### Commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council

In 2025, to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), the Woori Theology Institute is hosting a crucial Zoom Seminar under the overarching theme: "Toward a Third Vatican Council and a Synodal Church." This series is designed to critically evaluate the Council's legacy while charting the path forward for the contemporary Church.

The seminar schedule features two particularly significant sessions focusing on issues that have gained urgency in the six decades since Vatican II. Session 5, scheduled for August 25, 2025, will explore "The Preservation of the Created Order and Ecological Practices Not Addressed by the Second Vatican Council." Following this, Session 6 on September 29, 2025, will analyze "Global Transformations after the Second Vatican Council and the Social Responsibility of the Church."

제2차 바티칸공의회 폐막 60주년 기념  
 2025년도 우리함께 월례 줌세미나

### 제3차 바티칸공의회와 시노드 교회를 향하여

5회차 \_ 제2차 바티칸공의회가 다루지 못한  
 창조질서 보전과 생태적 실천  
 (발제: 유정원 / 사회: 박현준)

일시: 2025년 8월 25일(월) 저녁 7시 30분

제2차 바티칸공의회 폐막 60주년 기념  
 2025년도 우리함께 월례 줌세미나

WTI  
 Woori Theology Institute  
 60주년 기념

### 제3차 바티칸공의회와 시노드 교회를 향하여

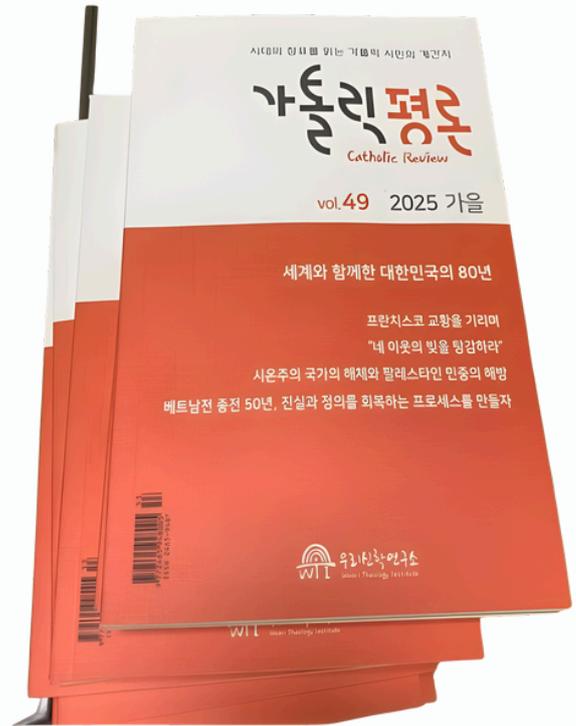
6회차 \_ 제2차 바티칸공의회 이후 세계의 변화와  
 교회의 사회적 책임  
 (발제: 박현준 / 사회: 이찬수)

일시: 2025년 9월 29일(월) 저녁 7시 30분

## Catholic Review Examines 80 Years of Korea and Global Solidarity

The Catholic Review, published under the guiding motto, "A Quarterly for Catholic Citizens Reading the Signs of the Times," has officially released its latest publication, Vol. 49 (Autumn 2025). This substantial issue—printed in 3,000 copies and spanning 260 pages—takes on the timely main theme: "Eighty Years of the Republic of Korea in Solidarity with the World."

Featured articles include: "In Honor of Pope Francis," on the Jubilee "Cancel the Debts of Your Neighbor," "The Dismantling of the Zionist State and the Liberation of the Palestinian People," and "50 Years since the End of the Vietnam War: Building a Process to Restore Truth and Justice."



## INTEGRAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY (IRDS)

*India*

On the 23rd of August, IRDS successfully organized a Youth Workshop at IRDS center. The program brought together 30 young participants, consisting of 24 girls and 6 boys. A few boys were unable to attend as they were engaged in a sports event held in Tirukoilur, organized by the District Administration, where some of our young leaders took part. Despite this, all the IRDS team members were present to facilitate and guide the sessions.

The workshop focused on two major issues identified by the youth: the protection of commons in their villages through proper implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) works and ensuring proper wages for workers. Since many of the youth had participated in the Gram Sabha meetings of their village Panchayats on the 15th of August, where they passed resolutions for the proper implementation of MNREGA works, the scheme has already been initiated in several villages. They also discussed the issue with their parents, neighbors, and members of the Village Action Committee to build wider awareness and support.



The second issue discussed was related to agriculture. With the onset of farming activities in some villages, the youth had been monitoring the use of traditional millet and gram seeds distributed in their areas. They expressed satisfaction with the results and noted the encouraging increase in the number of women practicing organic farming.



Another key highlight of the workshop was the discussion on forming small groups of young people across the target villages. These groups would initiate self-employment activities such as producing organic fertilizers and pesticides, collecting and distributing traditional seeds, and promoting the exchange of traditional food materials among consumers. The youth decided to begin these initiatives by the end of the year. Furthermore, they committed to preparing lists of interested young people to present in the next youth meeting, scheduled for the last week of September.

The workshop which began at 10:00 a.m., concluded at 5:00 p.m. It was highly encouraging and left a very positive impact on all participants.\*

## EAST ASIA EVANGELIZATION CENTER (EAEC)

South Korea

### Enhancing Capability: EAEC Volunteer Workshop at Yongmun

The EAEC recently conducted a two-day workshop for its dedicated volunteers. The event was held on July 7 and 8 at the Yongmun Training Center. The EAEC has been supported by devoted volunteers starting from donations to organizing various programs for supporters, translating foreign language books into Korean and making a manual for those who are interested in mission or evangelization and spirituality of martyrdom.



### Academy Zoom Discusses Japanese Shrine Worship

The 6th Zoom meeting of the academy was held on July 27, focusing on a critical and timely issue: "Japanese Shrine Worship and the Korean Church (Mission, Martyrdom, and the Vatican)." The discussion was expertly led by Dr. Hwang Kyung-hoon. The academy zoom call has been dealing with main and current issues happening in East Asia to which the Church should respond. Its membership consists of not only scholars but pastors and lay church workers from Korea, Japan, and Taiwan at the moment.

### Seonggyo Yoji (聖教要旨) Meeting at EAEC

Seonggyo Yoji experts, senior Fr. Lee Seong-bae from the Archdiocese of Daegu, Fr. Kim Hak-ryeol from the Diocese of Suwon, and Professor So Soon-tae meeting at EAEC on Aug 29. The Seonggyo Yoji is the first indigenously produced Catholic catechetical text in Korea, serving not merely as a doctrinal summary but as a significant work that articulates the essence of faith in the language of Joseon scholars.



Photo: Academy Zoom Discusses Japanese Shrine Worship



Seonggyo Yoji (聖教要旨) Meeting at EAEC

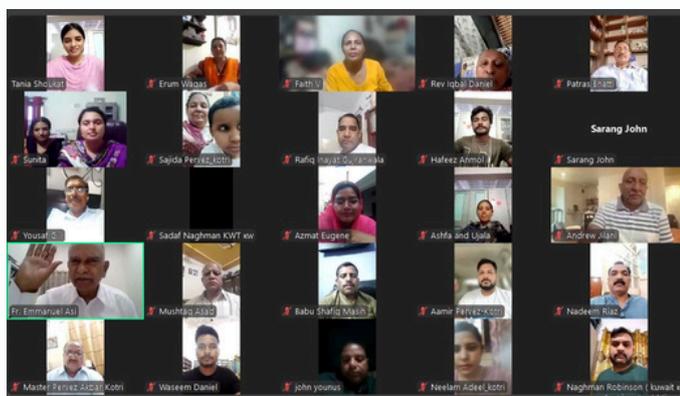
## MAKTABA-E-ANAVEEM PAKISTAN (MAP)

*Pakistan*

### Online Sessions: Contextual Theology for Laity

Contextual Theology for Laity-Online Sessions is a three-year project (2024-2026). Two evening sessions are conducted on Saturdays twice a month. The total registered members for the Online Sessions in 2025 are 65 from different cities of Pakistan and from Overseas Australia, Dubai, California, USA, Kuwait. A total of 6 online sessions are conducted.

The following topics were presented by the speakers: Puran Bhagath by Rev. Rana Youab, Role and Ministry of Women by Ms. Erum Pervez, Universal Churches and Local Churches by Ms. Sana Iqbal, Blessed among the women-Vol-II by Ms. Anita Kiran, Gawahi by Mr. Shamoon Gill, and Women's Gospels' by Ms. Neelam Adeel. All together 259 participants attended these sessions.



### Theological Capacity Building Program (TCBP): Theology of Liberation

Maktaba-e-Anaveem Pakistan (MAP) successfully conducted its annual four-day Theological Capacity Building Program (TCBP) from June 24 to 27, 2025, at the-

Franciscan Friary in Karachi. The central theme was "Theology of Liberation." The program hosted 51 participants from across Pakistan, aiming to deepen their understanding of liberation theology. The event featured opening remarks by Ms. Sunita Hameed, an introduction to MAP by Ms. Siama Shoukat, and a talk on aims by Mrs. Alishbah Javed Akhtar (Directress-MAP).



The core sessions and workshops covered key topics such as: Introduction of Liberation Theology (Ms. Naureen Akhtar), Option for the Poor (Mr. Hamid Henry), Salvation and Liberation (Ms. Sana Iqbal), Church and Liberation (Mr. Shamoon Gill), and Spirituality of Liberation (Ms. Afshan Erum).

The program concluded with the awarding of certificates to all 51 attendees by Mrs. Alishbah Javed Akhtar and other MAP officials.

### Seminar: Faith and Freedom

In celebration of Pakistan's 78th Independence Day, the Maktaba-e-Anaveem Pakistan (MAP), organized a seminar on August 14, 2025. The event took place at the Theological Institute for Laity (TIL), Sadhoke, joined by 89 participants,

under the theme: "Faith and Freedom." The event started with a flag-hoisting ceremony to honor the nation's freedom.

Mr. Yousaf Masih opened the seminar with a prayer, and a candle was lit to symbolize unity, peace, and hope. The participants launched a book titled "Salvation and Liberation" and presented a tableau about faith and freedom. The main speaker, Mrs. Alishbah Javed Akhtar (Directress-MAP), spoke on "Freedom, Faith, and Peace." She stressed that true freedom is both political freedom and the spiritual freedom found through faith in God.



She said that freedom and peace are gifts that must be nurtured through justice, love, and respect, using quotes from the Bible. Master Joseph Nayer, Mr. Ayub Jacob, and Pastor Saleem Masih shared their final thoughts, urging everyone to live peacefully and unitedly.

## Celebration of 1700 Years of the Nicaea Council

Maktaba-e-Anaveem Pakistan (MAP) held a three-day seminar from July 17 to 19, 2025, at the Theological Institute for Laity (TIL), Sadhoke, to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD).

The seminar focused on the significance of the Council and the Nicene Creed, affirming the divinity of Christ and promoting Christian unity.

The program began with a Eucharistic prayer led by Rev. Fr. Inayat Barnard, Rev. Emmanuel Asi, and Rev. Fr. Salman Manzoor.



The program began with a Eucharistic prayer led by Rev. Fr. Inayat Barnard, Rev. Emmanuel Asi, and Rev. Fr. Salman Manzoor.

Speakers presented various theological and historical topics, including: Occidental and Oriental Background of Nicaea (Fr. Shahzad Aquinas, OP), Historical and Political Context (Fr. Raphael Mehnga, OP), The Council: Then and Now of 1700 Years (Fr. Emmanuel Asi), The Ecumenical Dialogue of the Nicene Creed (Ms. Sana Iqbal), Christology of Nicaea (Mr. Shahbaz Francis), and The Creed and Christian Worship (Mr. Mushtaq Asad).

A total of 50 participants engaged actively in discussions. The event concluded with a vote of thanks by Ms. Alishbah Javed Akhtar (Directress - MAP), followed by a group photo.



## Seminars: Celebration of Years of the Nicaea Council

Maktaba-e-Anaveem Pakistan (MAP) concluded a series of four regional seminars in the Archdiocese of Karachi and Hyderabad Diocese in September 2025, commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD).

The seminars aimed to promote reflection on the Council's enduring significance for faith and unity today, drawing inspiration from the early Church's vision for truth and justice.

A total of 422 participants attended the four sessions held at: September 12: Dominican House, Karachi (75 participants), September 16: St. John the Apostle Catholic Church, Latifabad (80 participants), September 17: Joti Educational-Cultural Center, Mirpurkhas (140 participants) and September 18: Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Kotri (127 participants).



## Doctrines Revisited: A Feminist Interpretation

The Women Theological Forum (WTF) of Maktaba-e-Anaveem Pakistan (MAP) held a seminar on "Doctrines Revisited: A Feminist Interpretation" on September 11, 2025, at Dominican House, Karachi.

The session, facilitated by Ms. Shahla Paul, opened with a prayer and a Bible reading.

Ms. Sonia Rizwan introduced the WTF's goal of empowering women through theological reflection.

The main speaker, Ms. Anita Kiran, encouraged the 65 participants to engage with theological concepts critically and contextually. Fr. Emmanuel Asi (Chairperson - MAP) also contributed theological observations to the discussion.

## Women and God

Maktaba-e-Anaveem Pakistan (MAP) held a three-day seminar, "Women and God," under its Women Theological Forum (WTF) platform from September 19 to 21, 2025, at the Theological Institute for Laity (TIL), Sadhoke.

The seminar hosted 51 participants from across Pakistan. It began with a prayer, a symbolic candle-lighting ceremony, and the launch of the book "Women and God."

Key speakers covered critical topics: Ms. Sana Iqbal: "Biblical Perspective on Women", Ms. Naureen Akhtar: "Our World, the World of the Bible: A Re-Interpretation" (including a workshop), Dr. Farhana Anthony Nazir: "Women's Perspective on the Bible" and Mrs. Alishbah Javed Akhtar: "Women and Patriarchy in the Church".

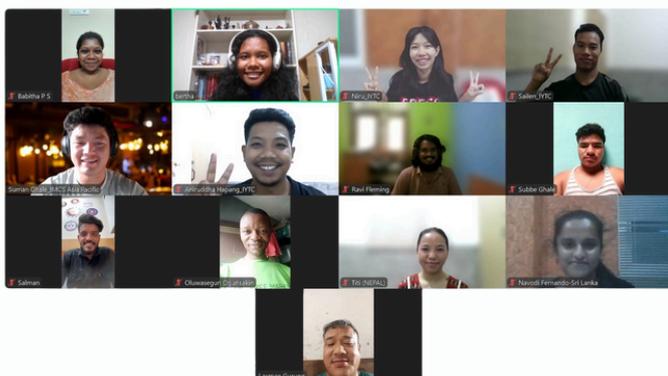


## INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT OF CATHOLIC STUDENTS (IMCS)

*Asia Pacific*

### CLAP Workshop on Combating Plastic Pollution

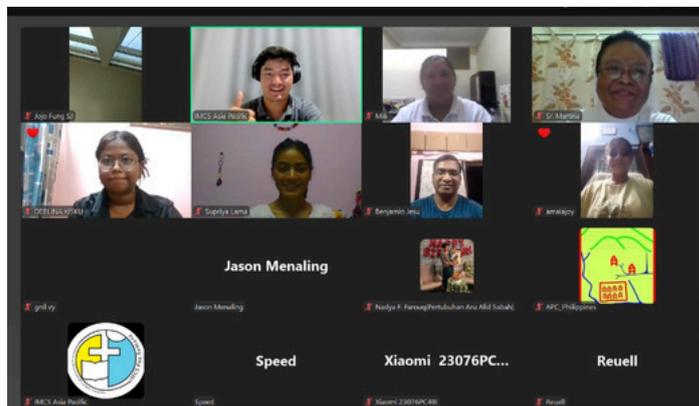
In July 2025, IMCS Asia Pacific and the International Youth Training Center (IYTC) held a four-part CLAP Workshop Series on “Combating Plastic Pollution.” Forty youth leaders from Asia-Pacific and Africa engaged in learning, reflection, and action on the environmental, ethical, and advocacy dimensions of plastic waste. With support from GAIA, Laudato Si’ Movement, and Green Army International, the series empowered participants to design faith-rooted, community projects for ecological justice.



### Catholic Peace Forum (CPF) – “80 Years Is Enough”

On July 16, 2025, the global Catholic community launched the Pax Jubilee 2025 Declaration: “80 Years Is Enough – For a Peaceful Asia-Pacific Without Nuclear Weapons.” Organized by Pax Christi, Pax Romana, IMCS, IYCS, and IYTC, the forum united bishops, youth, and peace advocates from 20+ countries.

The gathering featured testimonies from Hiroshima and Korea, reflections on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and calls for disarmament, divestment, and youth leadership. The campaign continues with prayers, education, and advocacy toward a nuclear-free future.



### Catholic Social Forum (CSF) – New York

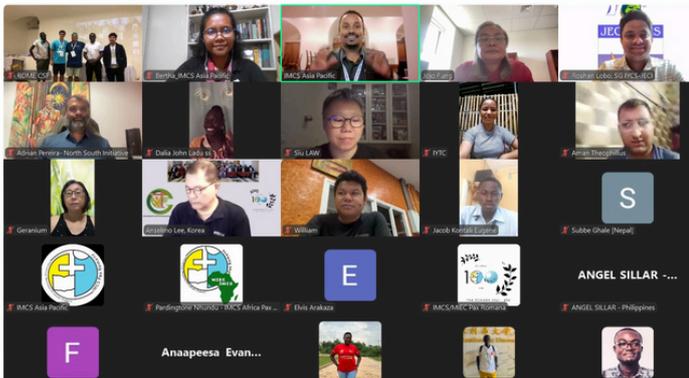
On July 20, 2025, Catholic leaders, theologians, and civil society actors met at Manhattan University for the Catholic Social Forum (CSF) 2025. Held alongside the UN High-Level Political Forum, the event reflected on Catholic Social Teaching, the SDGs, and global governance.



Speakers from IMCS, IYTC, ICMICA, IYCS, and partners stressed accountability, ecological conversion, and stronger grassroots engagement in global policy. The forum committed to follow-up actions at COP30, the UN Social Summit, and WYD 2027, advancing a Catholic civil society agenda for peace, justice, and care for creation.

## Rome Catholic Youth Forum (CYF)

On July 30, 2025, more than 70 Catholic youth leaders gathered in Rome and online for the Catholic Youth Forum 2025, a Jubilee side event co-hosted by IMCS, IYCS, and FUCI. Under the theme “Youth Engagement for a Synodal Church – Pilgrims of Hope,” the forum combined prayer, dialogue, and action.

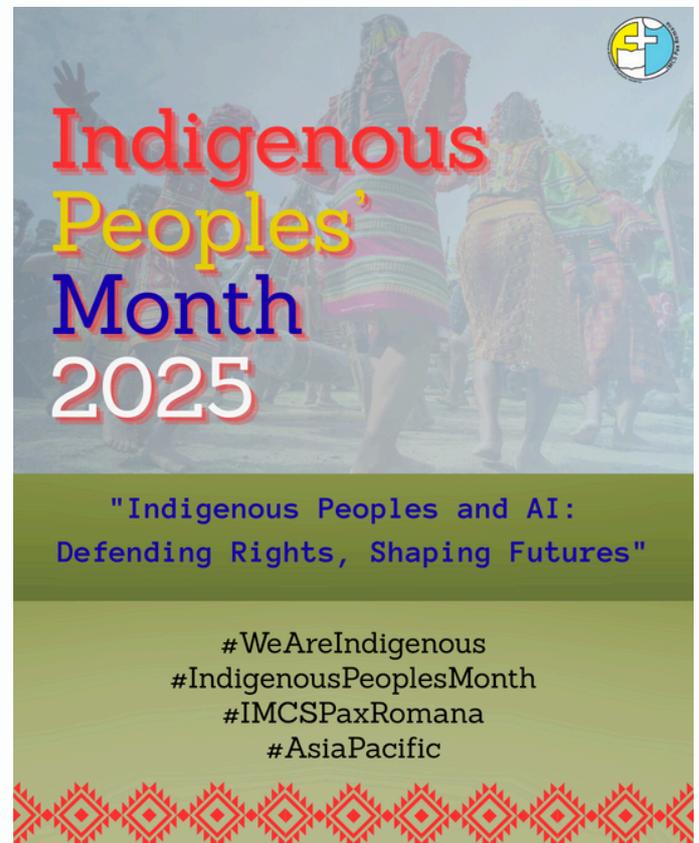


Highlights included keynotes on Catholic Social Teaching, testimonies on youth leadership, and regional updates toward WYD 2027 in Seoul. The forum affirmed youth as bridge-builders, committed to the Pax Jubilee Campaign and a Church rooted in justice, peace, and inclusion.

## Indigenous Peoples' Month 2025

Throughout August, IMCS Asia Pacific's Indigenous Peoples' Youth Commission marked Indigenous Peoples' Month with campaigns and programs amplifying youth voices on identity, knowledge, and struggles. Stories shared by Indigenous youth from Indonesia, Nepal, Malaysia, -

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India reminded the wider community of the urgent realities of land grabbing, discrimination, and cultural loss, while affirming the richness of ancestral wisdom, language, and harmony with nature.



## World Indigenous Peoples Day: Youth Cultural Preservation Celebration

On August 9, IMCS joined partners ASW, AIPP, RTRC, and RAOEN for a vibrant cultural celebration highlighting the links between self-determination, food sovereignty, and cultural survival. Indigenous youth from across Asia shared their experiences of protecting food systems, land, and heritage through grassroots initiatives.

Speakers from India, the Philippines, and Bangladesh emphasized the importance of cultural resilience amid climate change and land alienation, while cultural performances from Nepal and Indonesia showcased how identity and tradition remain alive when passed to the next generation.

## International Talkshow – “World War III Simulation: Food, Land & the Right to Life”

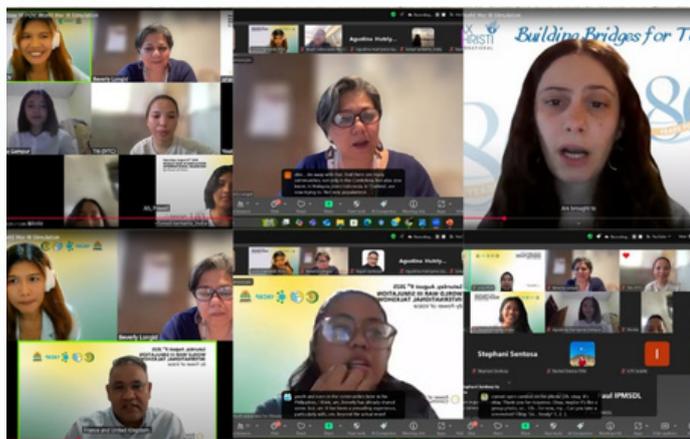
To commemorate International Indigenous Peoples Day, POV Community, IYTC, and IMCS organized a global talkshow framing present-day conflicts as struggles over food and land sovereignty. Youth activists, Indigenous leaders, and peace advocates from Asia and Europe stressed that extractive projects, militarization, and climate breakdown are the real “wars” of our time. Voices from IPMSDL, YACAP, and Pax Christi International called for stronger transcontinental solidarity, protection of Indigenous lands and languages, and ethical approaches to technology. The session ended with a call to unite youth and communities across borders in defending life, culture, and justice.



Sri Lanka’s program emphasized dialogue and community, Bangalore prioritized applied skills through workshops and project design, while Dumka integrated Indigenous cultural identity with citizenship and faith. Across the three gatherings, participants committed to carry forward their learnings through local initiatives that connect justice, culture, and public witness.

## CLAP Workshop Series – Indigenous Peoples’ Rights and the World

The August CLAP Workshop Series brought together youth from Asia and Africa to reflect on Indigenous Peoples’ struggles, wisdom, and resilience. The opening keynote by Beverly Longid (AIPP/IPMSDL) reminded participants that Indigenous identity is inseparable from land, culture, and spirituality.



## National Transformative Leadership (NTL) Program – South Asia

In August, IMCS Pax Romana carried out its National Transformative Leadership Program on Human Rights and Citizenship in Sri Lanka, Bangalore, and Dumka, India, gathering more than 100 student leaders. Rooted in Catholic Social Teaching and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the program combined reflection, cultural identity, and practical leadership tools.

A later session with Fr. Jojo Fung, SJ (ASW) offered a dialogue between Catholic Social Teaching and Indigenous spirituality, underscoring creation as sacred and shared. Participants engaged in cross-regional exchanges, comparing experiences from Asia and Africa, and concluded by presenting action commitments—community projects, advocacy campaigns, and solidarity initiatives to continue the journey beyond the workshop.

## UNRBHR Forum – Bangkok 2025

On 16 September 2025, IYTC, IMCS Asia Pacific, North South Initiative (NSI), Access Now, and Article 19 Asia co-organized the session “Who Programs Whom? Advancing Business & Human Rights in Crisis-Affected and Marginalized Communities” at the UN Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum (Asia-Pacific) in Bangkok.

The session explored how AI and digital systems impact Indigenous Peoples, displaced persons, and marginalized groups, stressing the need for ethical governance, independent oversight, and culturally relevant remedies. It affirmed that youth, Indigenous, interfaith, and grassroots voices must be central to shaping rights-based digital futures.



## International Day of Peace 2025

On 21 September, IMCS Pax Romana and partners in the Pax Jubilee Campaign 2025–2030 joined global voices marking the International Day of Peace. The call emphasized that peace is not just the absence of war, but justice, dignity, and the courage to dismantle violence.

Amid protests, repression, and attacks on human rights defenders, youth and faith communities continue to plant seeds of reconciliation and dialogue. Through the Pax Jubilee Campaign, IMCS and partners reaffirm their commitment to nonviolence and a nuclear-free future.



## ASIAN YOUTH ACADEMY (AYA) / ASIAN THEOLOGY FORUM (ATF) 2025

The Asian Lay Leaders (ALL) Forum successfully organized the Asian Youth Academy (AYA) / Asian Theology Forum (ATF) 2025, held from 16 to 26 August 2025 at Taman Eden, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The program gathered 48 participants and focused on the theme, “Asian Christianity’s Critical Approach to COP 30, UN-led SDGs, and Religious Nationalism from the Perspective of Peoples Caught in Desperate Situations in Asia.”

The program began with a three-day, two-night immersion. Participants were divided into five groups and sent to five immersion sites across Yogyakarta and Central Java, including Pondok Pesantren Al Fatah, Go Green Kalasan, Eco Village Sangurejo, Palang Putih Nusantara Gunung Kidul, and Beranda Migran Cilacap.

Following the immersion, the program continued with three days thematic workshop sessions divided into three different topics. After the workshops, the program proceeded with the Asian Theology Forum (ATF), featuring 12 speakers and followed by a plenary discussion with participants.

The AYA/ATF program concluded with participants presenting their local action plans, returning home with renewed purpose and solidarity.



Photo: Group Photo Asian Youth Academy (AYA)/Asian Theology Forum (ATF) Yogyakarta, 2025



Photo: Workshop Asian Youth Academy (AYA)/Asian Theology Forum (ATF) Yogyakarta, 2025



Photo: Immersion Go Green Kalasan Group - AYA/ATF Yogyakarta 2025

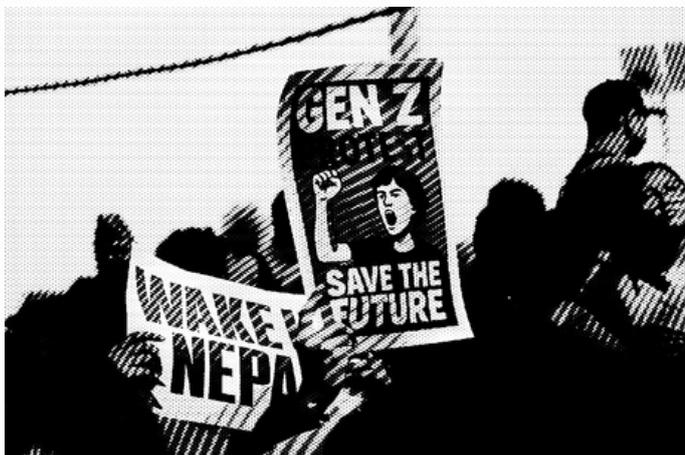
# THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN ASIA AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH

*Dr. Paul Hwang*

Recently, anti-government protests that began in Indonesia have spread like a domino effect to Nepal, East Timor, the Philippines, and beyond. The driving force behind this great wave is 'Gen Z,' born after the mid-1990s. While the protests may seem different on the surface, they share a common foundation, that is, anger at corrupt, privileged elites and resistance to inequality. This is more than a mere expression of discontent. It is a powerful cry shaking the old order in each country and demanding a new democracy. This is why some are saying that the 'Arab Spring' of 2010 could be re-emerging in Asia. The youth of Asia are now at the forefront of the fight for democratization.

## **Why Are the Youth at the Center of the Streets?**

The older generation asks: Why is it that today's youth, in particular, are so angry and taking to the streets? The reason is that they are living in a qualitatively different era from previous generations.



*Photo: Gen Z Protest in Nepal, 2025*

Above all, they are 'global citizens' connected digitally. Through social media, Gen Z sees not only the lavish lifestyles of their own country's corrupt politicians but also how democracy and social justice function in other nations. For them, the standard of fairness is no longer the domestic past but a universal global standard. This connectivity makes injustice all the more intolerable and, at the same time, serves as a channel for sharing strategies and courage for resistance across borders.

Secondly, they have not been co-opted by the logic of the establishment. While the older generation may hold nostalgia for the stability and growth of the industrial era, Gen Z has experienced low growth and precarious labor from birth. To them, the old system is not something to be protected, but an obstacle to be overcome as it robs them of their future. With relatively little to lose, they can demand systemic change more boldly.

Lastly, as shown in the recent protests by citizens in Hong Kong and Myanmar, they organize in a horizontal and decentralized manner. Whereas past democracy movements centered around specific leaders or large organizations, today's protests take the form of a flexible network, gathering and dispersing spontaneously through social media. This makes it difficult for authoritarian governments to suppress them by arresting leaders or dismantling organizations.

## **What Should Religion, Especially Christianity, Do?**

At this moment of historical transition, religion, and Christianity including the Catholic Church, faces a momentous question. In many Asian countries, religion has been deeply intertwined with the mainstream social order. At times, it has acted as a handmaiden to unjust power, teaching conformity to the existing system. However, as young people cry out for justice and democracy, religion can no longer remain silent or side with the establishment. Regrettably, we have not heard news of the Catholic Church's participation in this path toward democracy. The Catholic Church must follow the life and teachings of Jesus in justice, and proclaim justice and peace. Therefore, the Church must fulfill repeatedly spoken of 'good believers' must be 'good citizens' at the same time. This implies that we, the Church, must be a voice that speaks the truth. The Church must clearly point out the structural evils of corruption and inequality and urge those in power to repent and change. It must inform society that the anger of the youth is not a mere emotional outburst but a yearning for justice.

It must be a safe haven. Just as the Church in South Korea served as a sanctuary for protesters and a bastion of human rights during its past democratization movement, the churches of Asia must also provide a space where young people, weary from fighting for justice, can rest spiritually and physically. This is the very practice of becoming the 'field hospital' that the Pope speaks of.

Furthermore, it must be a place of education for justice. The Christian faith demands not only personal salvation but also the transformation of social structures. The Church should teach young people values such as human dignity, the common good, and social justice, helping them grow into more mature democratic citizens.

The voices of the young people crying out on the streets of Asia today, including all the youth who have participated in our ALL Forum's programs, are not mere noise. They are a call from heaven to end an old era and open a new one. How Christianity chooses to act in the face of this great wave of change will determine whether it will remain a relic of an old era or be reborn as a midwife for a new democracy.\*

We invite you to submit your writings/articles to be published on the website [www.asianlayleaders.com](http://www.asianlayleaders.com) and our E-newsletter.

Writings can be in the form of articles, opinions, poetry, or activities that you have done. Feel free to send it through our contacts below:

Email: [info@asianlayleaders.com](mailto:info@asianlayleaders.com)

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