



THE GREAT ASIAN PUSHBACK

INTERVIEWS WITH CHANGEMAKERS

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Special thanks to our distinguished guests who, everyday, face the challenge of fighting against autocracy and pushing for democracy. Gratitude to the CALD member-parties and CALD leadership for upholding the liberal values that keep freedom alive.

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Do You Hear the People Sing?

BY SENATOR FRANCIS 'KIKO' PANGILINAN

"If you never hear 'No,' then you're not asking for enough," says a signboard hanging at a novelty shop.

Adding spirit to it, I add: "There is always time for pushback."

The Great Asian Pushback is a podcast series that takes us to a big village to listen to and learn from stories of people of diverse origins but whose history and future are interwoven.

From the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Malaysia, voices of dissent are being raised against violations of basic rights, recognition, equal opportunities, and justice—always upholding democracy.

They tell their stories of protest and hope from the streets, digital highways, and even clandestine hideaways. Their unfeigned narration will take one to their grief, fury, and aspirations that make us see that the struggle, no matter how difficult, will have a clear end.

The podcast series begins with young voices reckoning their value amid the digital community.

From promoting wellness topics, a content creator now organizes fellow youth into discussions about current issues.

She says that the youth is a “force and voice to be reckoned with,” and that young people should use their voice for a purpose. Another founded a tech startup focused on education.

The series shifts to high gear with narration from a doctor-turned-politician in Myanmar who has been charged with high treason. He rallies neighbor nations to do something, stressing that the “Myanmar crisis has become an ASEAN crisis.”

A human-rights lawyer in Cambodia facing charges of conspiracy to commit treason recounts her experience as a prisoner at the age of seven, and how vividly she remembers the stench of jail and the feel of the cold shackles scraping against her skin.

A member of the Hong Kong Democratic Party says she feels lucky she can still grant interviews while she is still free. If and when she is arrested, she says, there will be others who will carry on the fight.

Putting emphasis on ASEAN's role, a former member of the Malaysian Parliament pushes for a more engaged regional alliance that will show political will and promote democracy in the region. “Why can't ASEAN be at the grassroots level?” he asks.

These voices and others tell us that this is not the time to give up. From different battlegrounds and motivated by separate interests, one thing connects us as a big community in this region: To make democracy work to improve lives, we have to fight for it.

Some of us may have held the line in the past, but now it's time for us all to push back.



PART I

THE YOUTH RISING





JANINA VELA

**"I choose to use my platform not only
for myself, but also for my country"**

OCTOBER 25, 2021

The stakes are high in the 2022 elections in the Philippines. The country will vote for a new president after six years of Rodrigo Duterte's strongman rule.

President Duterte unleashed a violent drug war, leading to thousands of killings. He instilled fear in the public, in the media, and in the co-equal bodies of government. His response to the pandemic has been ineffective; the Philippines has been in one very long wave of COVID-19 since March 2020. And as if rubbing salt on a fresh wound, public funds meant for the pandemic response have been misused, showing a blatant abuse of power.

Where is the Filipino youth in this current political landscape? Our guest for this episode is Janina Vela, a content creator with her own YouTube channel that has a huge following. She is on Twitter as well. Janina is known to speak her mind on social and political issues. Only 22 years old, she is active in a youth-vote campaign.

We're happy to have you, Janina!
Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback!



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY





JANINA VELA (JV)

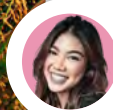
I'm so happy to be here. It's such an honor.

MARITES VITUG (MV)

You've been exposed to a lot of young people, you've been speaking in different webinars for the youth. What are your impressions of the young today?



JV I have been more exposed now, and honestly, [it was] only in the last two years, because I was really living in this privileged bubble for a while. I can't really speak as if I know a lot or I've been widely exposed to the realities in the Philippines.



My political awakening, something that pushed me into the political realm, was when I took offense with the way our government officials or even our candidates would regard voters and the Filipino people. My mom said I shouldn't use this word, but I feel like the Filipino people are sometimes treated as stupid and kept stupid through vote-buying, free t-shirts, a smile, and a kiss. What happens is that that the cycle becomes the norm in politics, which is *trapo**.



**Trapo* is rag in English; Filipinos also use it as an abbreviated reference to traditional politics, at the same time alluding to its dirty nature.

Growing up, I learned about the Philippines as the “sick man of Asia,” a Third World country. I thought it was our fault that we were stuck there, left behind by Japan and Korea. As I grew up, I became aware and saw that Filipinos are intelligent, have the ability, competence to perform in whatever sector they’re in. I’ve been thinking: “Why aren’t we seeing progress despite our potential?”

That’s why education was actually one of the things that pushed me into moving into the political realm. For many years, I’ve seen that Filipinos have been forced to think in a certain way. My dream is that Filipinos will not only be taught what to think, but also how to think, how to dissect, how to discern who among the candidates are the best.



What happens is that we get the very bare minimum yet we rejoice. Politicians think they’re good because they were able to do the bare minimum, as if it were a victory for the Filipino people. I want the Filipinos to see that they deserve more and that they deserve better.

M V I watched a number of your YouTube programs and, from being confined to beauty tips, you expanded to commentaries on political and social issues. What do you think is your role in the 2022 elections? Are you active in any voter-education activity?



J V I’m a co-convenor of We The Youth Vote, a voters’ coalition for the youth. We believe in the youth vote because we’ve seen the **stat s** Comelec [Commission on Elections] projects 61 to 63 million voters for the 2022 national elections. Out of that, 40 million voters are from the youth, Gen Z, and millennials. Nobody can dispute these numbers.



**“We are a force
and a voice to be
reckoned with.”**



We decided to pull together influencers, media, those from the corporate sector—anybody who believes that [he or she has] a purpose in this nation. Together, we're working not for one party, not for one person. But we are working toward acknowledging the youth's voice, the potential they have, and maximizing it to its full limits.

MV The pitch is to register and go out and vote. Do you also do voter education on specific issues, on the types of candidates they should vote for?



JV We are about to finish our first leg, the push for voter registration, and we are about to start voter education. But because we are a nonpartisan organization, issues are not really our forte as much as just the principles and the values of choosing who is the good candidate to vote for. And so that's where we're focused on. But on the Janina Vela channel, Janina is partisan.



MV By partisan, you mean you will endorse candidates?



JV I have not explicitly endorsed a candidate yet for the 2022 [presidential] election. But in 2019, I made a good brief on the senatorial candidates I was voting for and an in-depth video on the mayor that I was voting for in my city. Hopefully, if my school load permits, I can do these for the 2022 national elections.



Janina Vela ✓
@janinavela

In situations of injustice, neutrality only benefits the oppressor.
Pick a side. Be partisan. You have the right to choose what to stand up for.
I hope you choose justice.

MV Have you been watching the youth in Thailand and Hong Kong who have been protesting? What is your impression? Why aren't the youth here in the Philippines marching on the streets?



JV That's a very good question. I am only aware as far as Twitter trends go on what's happening in Thailand and Hong Kong. I can't speak for all Filipino youth, but what I noticed is that we're just starting, we're in the "rude-awakening" phase. It's sad that it took a pandemic for us to have this political awakening.



I'm very proud of my generation so far, no doubt. A lot of us don't realize the value of our rights until they're taken away from us. We don't see the privilege we have until it's gone—and that's something that we've seen in the last two years. This has pushed the youth to start to move slowly because it's systemic.

The idea that politics is only for the adults' conversation—I wanted to take away that stigma with a series on my channel. I show that we can be passionate about pop culture—I love Taylor Swift—but also love our country. I want to be involved in what's happening not only in showbiz, but with the candidates in our national and local elections as well. The youth had difficulty becoming part of the adults' table, so the youth are making their own table now if the adults don't want to listen.



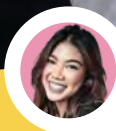
MV In the future, do you see yourself joining a political party? Or do you think the youth should lead their own political party?



JV Wow! That's a big question. In a few years, we'll see. But definitely I see so much initiative, determination, passion in the youth, and it's not far from happening, that unity will come. I believe it's not just the individual voices that matter but the collective effort, connecting various platforms to make a big platform for the youth.



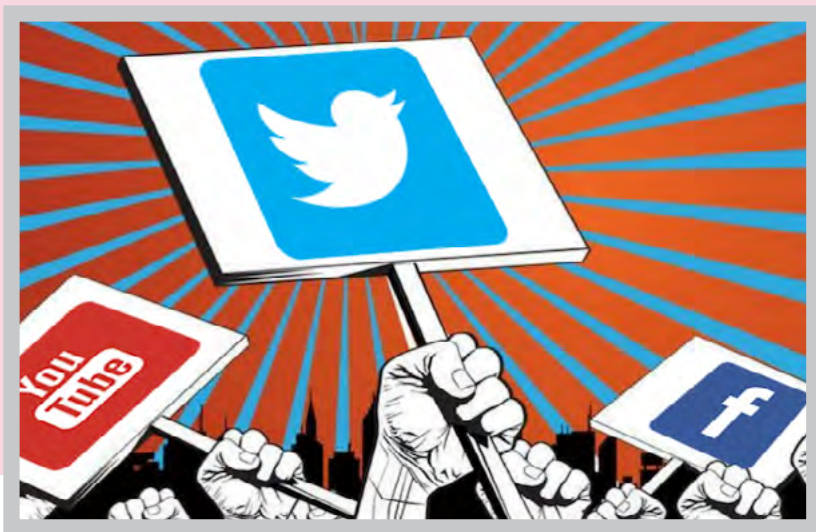
MV In your experience in the past two years, what motivates or inspires the young people to get involved in national and political issues?



JV Because of the reach of social media, my heart is suddenly connected to a farmer in Mindanao or the Visayas, and that has never happened before in the history of the world. Then, it was only what was read in the newspapers that was the stuff of conversations in family reunions. But now it's happening every day on Twitter, on Instagram, being exposed to the world, beyond your household, to stories and emotions and lives that have nothing to do with yours. Everybody has become interconnected. And that's the beauty of social media in the context of the political world.

MV Since you're very wired, your generation is very connected, there's an outward-looking attitude as well. Does social media make it easier for you to mobilize the youth?





JV Absolutely. Without mentioning any political party, we've seen how trends have tipped the scales for some candidates. Even with trolls, the bombing of one color has really mobilized people using that kind of intimate connection social media has with every single person. It's a positive thing. But it can also be used as a weapon.



MV Can you talk about social media as a weapon, the dark side, and how you counter it?



JV When I posted my Martial Law video, that was the first time that I had ever been troll-bombed. I have been canceled a bunch of times. But it's fine.



MV Don't you get intimidated by all these, the negativity?



JV I would get very intimidated especially when I was [still] new in social and political influencing. When I got canceled, I cried, I was really down, and I took a break from social media. But now, I've got a thick skin. I've become stubborn, with my beliefs and convictions becoming more solid.





Regor Coh 2 weeks ago

Hi Janine could you please vlog more 🤔🤔 whatever you want to do to crank down Marcoses.,It's time coming BBM next year for President.,Dapat alisin na Mga dilawan walang saysay puro lang kayo paninira.,



Foule Kuruketoz 3 weeks ago

Kulang ang alam sa kasaysayan o bulag sa katotohan haha BBM pa rin👉



janieyy0103 1 month ago

Effort pa girl. Galingan mo pa. Double time sa paninira.

Some say my opinions are controversial. I always make sure that airing them is worth it. I always anticipate the hate. I anticipate the trolls and the worst things they will say. I always ask myself, "Is it worth it?"

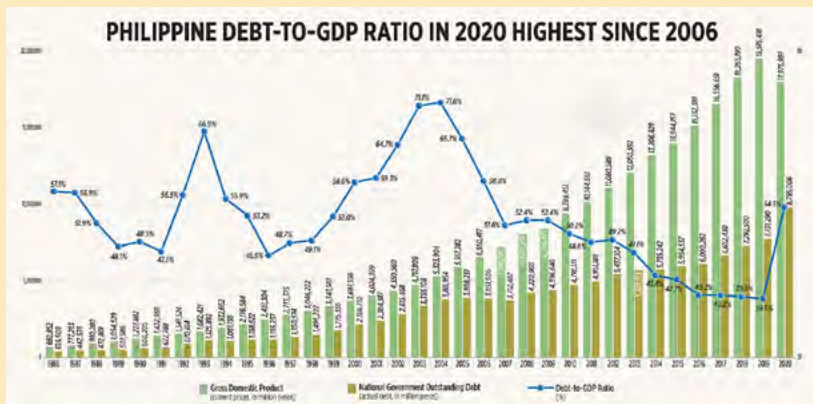
In my Martial Law video, I anticipated being red-tagged, called a communist, and even jailed or fined. I thought about all these even if it was outrageous. But I knew that years from now, I would regret not speaking up, not giving a voice to the victims of Martial Law. It was something I had to process for days. I was anxious, I was shaking, I was palpitating, but the answer every single time I had that conversation with myself was: "This is worth it. This is what I will choose again and again, to use my platform not only for myself, but also for my country."



MV That's inspiring. When the trolls reacted to your Martial Law video, what did you do? Did you starve them?



JV I guess I starved them. As an influencer, I want to get more views so I can educate more people, enlighten them. Many made propaganda videos against me, calling my content fake news even if I used scholarly journal articles as reference. It was an organized army, thousands of comments. They were trying to mock me online through videos but they linked to my Martial Law video. I gained more views! I wasn't bothered because my monetization has gone up. In terms of my videos with political content, the Martial Law series were the most viewed.



MV Let's go back to the May 2022 elections. Why do you think this is so important? Some say this is the fight of our lives, the stakes are high.



JV What the pandemic has done is that it put every decision of our leaders under a microscope because suddenly everybody is directly affected. Everybody is experiencing the slow vaccine rollout, the laws being passed that are not helpful. We've seen that we reap the benefits or suffer the consequences of every single decision that our leaders make. The loans in the last two years rose to trillions of pesos. We will pay for these, especially the youth.



“...years from now, I would regret not speaking up, not giving a voice to the victims of Martial Law.”



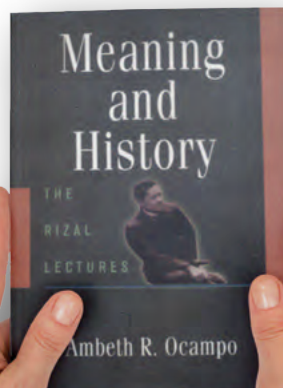
Decisions made by our political leaders affect us. It is our right to choose our public servants and how we want to be served. The idea of a public servant is getting lost. I rarely ever call a politician a public servant anymore. That's very sad. There are only a few that I can call public servants because others are serving only themselves.

We know that the elections can make history and determine our future. You can't stay neutral anymore because neutrality benefits the side of the oppressor. And even abstention only benefits the party you don't want to win. It's that simple.

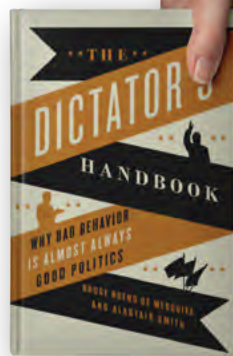
MV Do you consider yourself an activist? Who or what shaped your ideas?



JV I think if we define an activist as somebody who engages in social and political issues, the issues of our nation as a Filipino citizen, then yes, I could be called one. But I don't look at myself every day and tell myself, "Janina, you are an activist." I just feel like I'm fulfilling my duty as a Filipino citizen, loving our nation, and exercising one's right of suffrage.



In terms of influences, I began with books. Ambeth Ocampo's *Meaning and History* was one of the first books that changed my life, also *Why Nations Fail* and *The Dictator's Handbook*. When I read *The Dictator's Handbook*, I learned that politics is a game that leaders play. That was so heartbreaking for a 19-year-old. And so I told myself, "I want to learn the rules so that one day the people can win." That's why I ended up in political science, because how can I help fix a system that I don't understand?



These books were my rude awakenings so it's hard not to act after gaining awareness. When you see the reality, you can't turn back from it. And I saw the reality, and that's why I ended up taking political science in college.

M V Do your parents encourage you to speak up? Who are the influences in your life?



J V My parents have always been supportive. But they never really told me to study politics. That was never in the discussion. We're not a political family. My dad is a pastor. My *Lola* Helen Vela and *Lolo* Orly Punzalan were in broadcasting, in Radio Veritas... And I feel like they have been influences in my life in terms of that bravery and courage to speak up not only for yourself, but for others as well.



M V Before we close, can you give a shout out or message to those who are listening to us, especially the young ones? They can take a leaf from you.



J V Don't forget that we have the numbers. Your *tita* or *lola* or *lolo* can't say that you're young and don't know anything, or what the trolls say that you have not contributed to the country. The right of suffrage is there. You're a Filipino citizen, you were born and raised in the Philippines, nobody can take that away from you. It's not a matter of finding your voice because you already have it, but it's a matter of using your voice the way you believe is right for our nation.





I hope, as we exercise our right of suffrage—some of us for the first time—we think about our countrymen who need more, we think about their needs. And look at the platforms of the candidates, what he or she is fighting for, his or her legacy. Always remember that voting is your right, your duty, and your power to end the cycle of traditional politics of corruption, of oppression. It's your power to change the narrative of the Philippines, where we don't have to be remembered as the "sick man of Asia," where the world looks at us and they see EJKs [extra-judicial killings] or they see the greatest robbery of government in the Guinness Book of World Records.



It's time the Philippines, the Filipinos, are victorious. It's time we get what we deserve and not just the bare minimum.

M V You said the youth have their voice and they should use it. But where will they get the courage to use their voice? In your case, where do you get your courage?



J V I get my courage from the youth. It's teamwork, it's connecting platforms. I get my courage from you, you get your courage from me. I will speak to whom I can speak to. You speak to whom you can speak to. We all have very unique voices, unique perspectives and stories. And that's the beauty of our diversity. Everybody can do his or her own part.



“It’s not a matter of finding your voice because you already have it, but it’s a matter of using your voice the way you believe is right for our nation.”



If you’re having a hard time finding the courage, just look outside your house, immerse yourself in the stories of other Filipinos. And pop that bubble of misconception that nothing will ever change. At the end of the day, it’s a choice.

I’m afraid for the outcome. I’m afraid for tomorrow. I’m afraid that I’ll get canceled and red-tagged. But the bravery stays. Bravery is not the absence of fear, but doing what you need to do in spite of it. You just have to choose to be brave and focus on hope, no matter how small it is, even if darkness is all over.



I remember that in 2019 all my senatorial candidates lost, but my mayor won and defeated a 27-year political dynasty. I chose to think that there’s more to do and there’s hope. So I focus on the symbol that my mayor gives me and say it’s possible. I just tell myself, “Don’t give up.”

M V On that inspiring note of choosing hope, we end the interview. Thank you so much, Janina, for making time. It was a pleasure.





PARIT WACHARASINDHU

**"If we want political change,
we have to remain hopeful"**

AUGUST 27, 2021

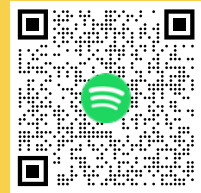
In 2020, we saw Bangkok rocked by huge anti-government demonstrations. They were led by a new generation of Thai students and the youth. They demanded that Parliament be dissolved, that the Constitution be rewritten, and also called a stop to the harassment of critics. Underneath all these is a deeply divided country, from its economy to its politics.

It has been more than a year since these protests took place. Today let's turn our attention to Thailand. I will be speaking to Parit Wacharasindhu, a former member of the Democrat Party, a 28-year-old promising activist and leader. Currently he heads a technology startup focusing on education. Parit will be joining us from Bangkok.

Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback. I am very glad that you're able to spend time with us.



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MARITES VITUG (MV)

Let's talk about the big picture. Thailand has been described as one of the most unequal societies in the world, that it's a highly divided country, politically, economically, and socially. Do you see these divisions and inequality as the most pressing problems of Thailand?



PARIT WACHARASINDHU (PW)

Certainly, inequality in a broad sense is probably one of the biggest problems that Thailand currently faces—economically, socially, and politically. There are about eight dimensions of inequality that are rising in Thailand. If you spell out the first letters of the eight dimensions, it spells out the word “Thailand.”



The first one is the letter T, which stands for technology. We are seeing a digital divide, especially since COVID has come in. The quality of life of people who are able to access the online world is much better than people who could not. Students who have access to smartphones can continue to learn online whereas students who are not able to access smartphones cannot.

The letter H stands for healthcare. We've had a lot of healthcare inequalities in terms of access. Thailand has three public healthcare schemes: one for civil servants, one for social security for employees, and then one that is the national healthcare insurance. The budget that is being allocated per person for [each of] these three schemes is very different. The per-person budget for the civil-servants scheme is much, much higher than for the national healthcare plan. Although everyone can access healthcare as a right, the quality of services and treatment each one gets is very different.

Letter A stands for sense of affluence. We see rising income and wealth inequality. There have been moves in the past to try and close this gap through land taxes and inheritance taxes, but they have not been too fruitful or effective. Thailand is now number three among countries with the most unequal wealth.



The letter I stands for identity. We see problems of gender inequality, including sexual harassment problems, chasing women in Thailand. I tried to push for same-sex marriage back when I was in the Democrat Party, but that still has not happened.

Letter L is on learning, mainly inequality in education, which is an area that I'm currently working on through my startup. In the top schools in Bangkok, people have to compete to get the limited seats because they have a high level of teaching quality. Whereas in the majority of schools in Thailand, more than 50 percent of schools are small schools with fewer than 120 students, and most have insufficient number of teachers. So you end up with one teacher having to teach multiple grade levels, which is an almost impossible task, no matter how talented that teacher is.

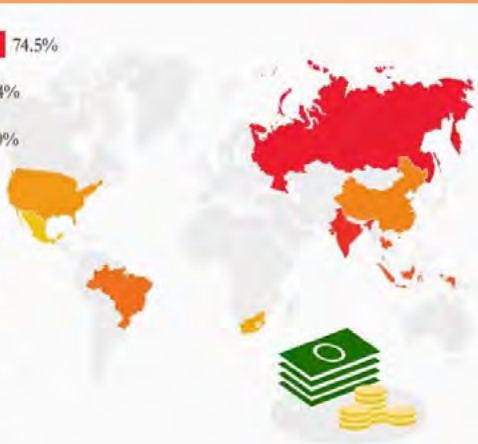
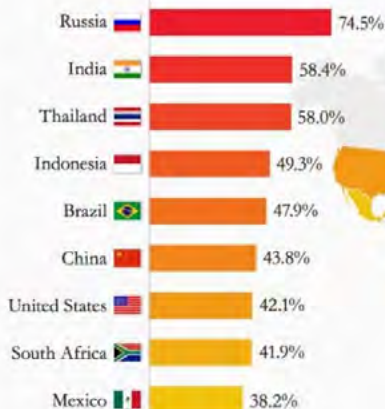
Letter A stands for area. We see inequalities between different regions. Bangkok has about a 10th of the population of Thailand, but has about a third of the GDP. Thailand is a country where most of the developments rely for capital on one city, which is a problem that's been around for quite a long time.

Letter N stands for natural resources. This has to do with land inequality. Some people hold a large amount of land, whereas the agricultural workers who are relying on good quality land to earn their income don't own their own land.



THE WORLD'S MOST UNEQUAL COUNTRIES

Share of total wealth of richest 1% in selected countries in 2016



The final one, letter D, stands for democracy. We are operating under a Constitution that does not give everyone an equal right. We don't have a one-person, one-vote [system]. To elect the prime minister, apart from the 500 elected MPs, you have 250 unelected senators who were appointed by the military government back when [it was] in power to vote for the prime minister. When you calculate mathematically, it means that the Prayut regime, which controls these unelected senators, has more than or has an equivalent of 19 million combined votes of the people. So even if 19 million people want the country to head one way, if the Prayut regime wants the country to head the other way, the latter will win.



MV How do you attack these eight dimensions? Do you start with D, democracy? Is there a hierarchy?



PW I don't think we can prioritize one over the other. They are all equally important. But you are right with the premise that the letter D or political equality is the first step toward fixing all these. Because if you try to fix all the others but you don't democratize the country, then it becomes very difficult.



For example, if you still operate under the present Constitution... Let's say there's a policy to redistribute the budget to create a sufficient and high-quality welfare state in the country. That can never be implemented since we're still operating under this semi-democratic system. Even if the policy can gather the mandate or the approval from over 50 percent of the population, but if it contradicts with the interests of the Prayut regime, which is backed up by oligopolies in Thailand and a network of military [officers] and large companies, then it's very hard to see that push through.

If you look at the distribution of the national budget, even though we're facing COVID, the budget for healthcare fell, the budget for education fell, but the budget for certain mid-military units rose.

So letter D is the biggest problem that we need to fix.



M V How do you make Thai society more democratic? Is it through amending the Constitution? Is that the first step that you should take?



P W Yes, the Constitution is a big issue. To have a society that's fully democratic, you need two things. One is a democratic system, and secondly, the democratic culture. These two things are going in opposite directions in Thailand. On the one hand, you have a society fueled by technology and is becoming more loud in its push for democracy, a new generation pushing not just for democratic rules, but also for policies that embody the democratic values of equality and liberty.

They're not just calling for free and fair elections or for a democratic Constitution. They're also calling for policies like same-sex marriage, abolishing conscription.



On the other hand, you have a system and a set of laws, especially the Constitution, that are backward. So unless you fix the Constitution, it's going to create conflict that we see on the streets.

It's a question of how and what we should do to fix the Constitution. First, just to give context on what the problem of the current Constitution is, it falls short of democratic standards, both on its origin and content. It was written essentially by the people in power, the Prayut regime back when they were in full dictatorship mode. It was written by a few people behind closed doors. Even the current justice minister, who was one of the key ministers under the Prayut regime then, openly said in an interview that the Constitution was designed to serve their interests. So they're quite blatant about this in the sense that it was written to extend their power beyond the military government transition toward the election.

It also has an undemocratic process of ratification. There was a referendum but it was an unfree and unfair one. People who opposed the Constitution were not allowed to freely campaign. A few people who came out to talk about why we should vote "No" were arrested.



On the content, we have a Constitution that has increased the powers of many unelected bodies that are controlled by the Prayut regime. You have an unelected set of senators who can vote for the Prime Minister. We have this new mechanism called a 20-year national strategy plan, which, on the surface, may seem harmless. But it says that if any government comes in and doesn't do the policy that is in line with this plan that's been written by the Prayut regime, then the government could be ousted from office. At the moment, it is not being used because Prayut is in charge. But if a different government comes in, this weapon could be activated.

To fix it is hard because the Constitution stipulates that, to amend any article, you need the approval of at least a third of the 250 Prayut-appointed senators. Anything that contradicts the interests of these senators has been voted down. So this is why people are losing hope with this parliamentary process. That's the kind of the conundrum that we're in at the moment.



M V But are you still doing educational campaigns, information campaigns, on the Constitution? Are you still hopeful given that the past efforts to amend the Constitution have reached a dead end?



P W Yes, I'm still hopeful. If we want to see political change, we really have to remain hopeful. Since I left the Democrat Party after the election, I formed a group called CONLAB, which stands for Constitution Laboratory, where we try to educate people about the current problems of the Constitution. We held workshops both offline and online, almost like a hackathon-style event, to get people to come and draft their own their dream Constitution, and in the process, understand what are the problems with the current Constitution.





Recently, we joined with another group to form an umbrella group called “Re-Resolution” where we went around and did a campaign to collect signatures to submit to the Parliament, a formal channel that is supported by the current laws. If you want to submit a constitutional amendment draft, you need 50,000 signatures from the public. We went around since April and we now have 150,000 signatures, three times more than what we actually needed, which we submitted to Parliament. Hopefully, they’re checking through the signatures to make sure that these are valid. After that, hopefully this draft will be debated in Parliament.

The reason we remain hopeful is because we see that even though on paper, it looks like the senators would never vote for anything against their interests, we noticed that in the past couple of times where constitutional amendment drafts were considered in Parliament, a few senators switched their stance because of public pressure. When the public pressure was very high, back last November, there were 50 senators who voted to remove their own power to elect the Prime Minister, which is the biggest problem with this current Constitution.

M V Are your signatories from the youth? Or are they representative of a large sector of Thailand?



P W We haven’t had a formal analysis but checking through documents, it’s probably true that the youth is the larger segment of the 150,000 signatures. But we also see people from various geographies and regions, all age groups.



M V Do you see the public protests and the avenue you're using to amend the Constitution complementing each other? Public pressure from you and also the parliament of the streets.



P W Yes, they definitely complement each other. That's important. This draft that we have submitted to Parliament is not going to pass if there's no public pressure. The timeline is going to be crucial because when this draft is going to be debated in Parliament, hopefully there will be public momentum. Otherwise, it's going to just get voted down by MPs and senators as had been done before.



M V On the personal level, why are you so interested in politics at such a young age? What led you to this?



P W I actually feel old, because if you look at the protest leaders at the moment, they're so much younger than I am. There's a very personal anecdote. Before I joined politics, I was a consultant at McKinsey, quite a stable job, enjoying what I was doing. But the reason I decided to leave was because I always dreamt about doing politics. Because I felt that was the best way to change the country at a structural level. If you do other jobs, yes, you can contribute to the country in some other way. But if you want to really change the country, you need to change the structure, the laws, the policy. And that means entering politics, and getting the mandate from the people to do that.

The reason I decided to leave at that particular time was because I felt that after so many years of a dictatorial regime, there were a lot of people in my generation, and maybe younger, who felt that it was time to do something about it. I felt that the country was at a point where what happens today is going to shape what is going to happen in the next 10 to 20 years. It's an important inflection point. If anyone is ready to come in and try and push for change, they need to do it now, with the country and the world changing at a faster pace. It also means that there are a lot of gaps the youth can really fill in and lead in certain policy areas. There's a greater space for the youth to have a voice and to really take on the leadership. It was time for me back then—I was 24 or 25 years old—to quit my job in the private sector and come down this path.



M V What shaped you personally —your education, your upbringing, the values your parents taught you?



P W Paradoxically, what led me to seeing more problems about Thailand and giving me more motivation to try and to change Thailand was when I got a scholarship to study abroad, in the U.K. The problem is that when we see things like inequality in education, inequality in healthcare and start to ask questions, the response I get will be something along the lines of “It’s always been like this, you can’t fix it.”

But when I went to the U.K., I saw a different world. I saw two countries. If you start comparing U.K. and Thailand, they have many similarities. It’s almost the same geographical size, the same population size, and supposedly the same political system—a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarch. But some of the outcomes are contrasting.



“Entering politics is the best way to change the country at a structural level.”





In Thailand, my parents are state-hospital doctors. So I see firsthand the level of inequality and the quality of treatment at different hospitals in different areas. But in the U.K., you have this national health service. And you see that if you fall ill, regardless of where you are in the country, you are almost guaranteed to have a good quality hospital next to your home. If you go to the closest school to your home, you're almost guaranteed that the quality is not as unequal as we see in Thailand.



I remember when there was a military coup in Thailand, I was in the U.K. studying. It was a concept that was completely bizarre to me. In the U.K., we see political conflict happen in Parliament, via elections. In Thailand, why does the army have such an important role to play? In the U.K., no one knows who the head of the army is. No one cares. But in Thailand, that is such an important position that all political analysts talk about.

It's not impossible for Thailand to change. It just needs a group of people to come in and try to drive the country toward where we want it to be. So that's my first motivation for entering politics.

M V Do you have any plans to join a political party? Give us a peek into your future.



P W My top priority now is this startup, a big decision for me to undertake after I left the Democrat Party. Education is one of the most important problems that Thailand faces. Almost every problem that we see in politics cannot be entirely solved without improving the education system. If you want the country to grow economically, you need to equip people with the right



skills. That means reforming a very outdated curriculum in higher education that does not do enough to equip people with the kind of competency and critical thinking, or the communication and teamwork skills that are needed. We have to ensure that every child gets equal access to high-quality education.



I will try and make an impact on the private sector with this startup in education technology. I still believe that, in the long run, structural change needs to happen through politics.

M V How do you inspire other younger people to be engaged like you, hoping to change Thai society?



P W I don't think they need inspiring. The youth in Thailand are more active and more engaged than ever. They use their political rights and choose the party that they want to represent them. They are also active in terms of checking and balancing what the government does at every critical step. A lot of time, these actions have actually resulted in the government shifting its policy.

During the COVID crisis, when the government was going to buy new submarines using a lot of taxpayers' money, the youth-led groups voiced out their opposition. It became the number one hashtag on Twitter. In the end, the government had to back down. So you're seeing this kind of youth-led movement outside Parliament creating some impact.



2020

Popular social movement hashtags in Thailand

#15ตุลาไปราชประสงค์

#16ตุลาไปแยกปทุมวัน

#ธรรมศาสตร์และการชุมนุม

#มีอบ14ตุลา

#เยาวชนปลดแอก

#สมรสเท่าเทียม

#หยุดคุกคามประชาชน

#milkteaalliance

#respectdemocracythai

#whatishappeninginthailand

#สิ่งที่เกิดขึ้น ๖๕



We need to push the people in power to start compromising because right now the country is almost in a democratic tug-of-war. There's tension that is encapsulated or is visualized by protests on the street. And the longer this regressive system does not change, the longer that the people in power do not compromise and do not listen.

The younger generation feel that the only way they can get change is to protest in the streets. And that is a process that has happened over the past seven years.

You put yourself in the mind of an average protester who's 25 years old. When she was 18, instead of voting on her first election, there was a military coup that took that right away from her. And she has, since the university days, been used to just one prime minister. When she was 21, it was probably the first time she went to the ballot box.

In the general election, she knew that she was up against 250 elected senators, but she still came out to vote anyway, to elect a party that would be her representative. Then one year later, that party was dissolved. So she no longer has a representative in Parliament. And then the next year, she signed a draft constitution, which was submitted to Parliament—but which was voted down. So over the past seven years, we are talking about a young generation that has been very patient in trying to drive change amid an unfair set of rules that has been put in place by the people in power. That change is not happening.



Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit
@Thanathorn_FWP

I always say soft power like music and literature is a critical force to push the society towards progressive future. Rap Against Dictatorship has done a great job with [#ประเทศไทย](#). They show the world that we Thais do not surrender to the Junta's rule.

YouTube



Tweet your reply

What I'm worried about is if the government does not give way and try to compromise, the younger generation is going to lose hope with these formal channels and they're going to look at more informal channels to try and drive change. And then it's [going to be] harder to predict where it's going to lead. For me, it's less of a role to inspire the youth, but more of a role to pressure and convince the people in power to give way and compromise toward these inevitable winds of change.



M V A final question, Parit. Because we are in a pandemic, how has this affected your work in the campaign for a new Constitution? Also, what is the impact of the pandemic on Thai politics?

P W COVID has definitely meant that physical forms of protesting have been harder. In terms of our constitutional movement, we were able to get signatures online. In terms of the protesters on the streets, they had to find new ways to protest. The physical activities are on the fall. But I think the dissatisfaction with government is on the rise.

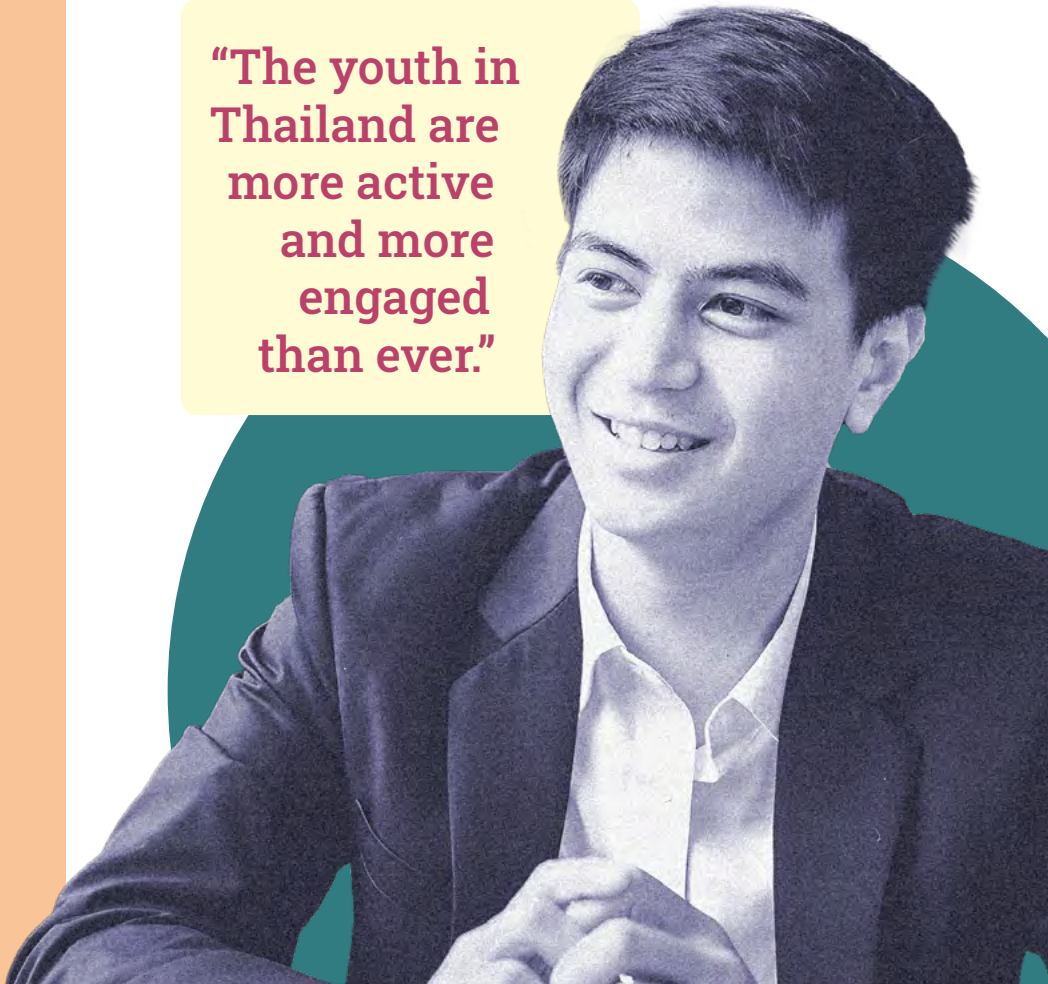
The COVID crisis and political crisis are not two separate things. They're intertwined. So when you have non-transparent politics, it means that we don't have transparency on the vaccine plans, we don't have transparency on decision-making that led to the country choosing one vaccine over the other, we have no transparency in terms of the contracts that the government entered with other vaccine vendors.

The other thing is: People realized that no matter how dissatisfied they are with the government in terms of their handling of this COVID crisis, they cannot change anything. Because the Constitution dictates that even though more than 50 percent of the population want change, if the unelected senators do not want change, then nothing's going to happen. In a way, COVID has highlighted the political crisis that we are in, and people are starting to see that.

MV Thank you so much, Parit. It's been a fascinating conversation. It's also refreshing to listen to a young voice explain Thailand to outsiders like us.



**"The youth in
Thailand are
more active
and more
engaged
than ever."**





ROGER HUANG

**"The Milk Tea Alliance is
more than just a transnational
movement...It is here to stay"**

AUGUST 13, 2021

Milk tea is served differently in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar. But this brew gathered together young people from these places in South East and East Asia, all of them fighting for democracy. They have formed a loose network of activists called the “Milk Tea Alliance,” with a seemingly anti-China sentiment. They don’t have visible or identifiable leaders, they are social-media savvy, they cross-promote causes by activists, and resist authoritarian leaders.

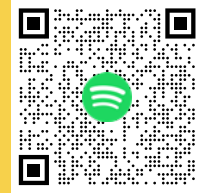
Hongkongers are up in arms against Beijing. Same with the Taiwanese. Myanmar is struggling against the military junta. The Thais are on the streets, protesting military rule.

I will be speaking to Dr. Roger Huang on the nature and prospects of the Milk Tea Alliance. Dr. Huang is a lecturer at Macquarie University and has extensively studied this phenomenon. He is joining us from Sydney.

Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback, Dr. Huang. We’re glad that you can join us in this series of podcasts.



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MARITES VITUG (MV)

First of all, can you tell us about the symbolism of the milk tea?



ROGER HUANG (RH)

It's interesting because milk tea just happened to be such a popular drink in all of the so-called members of this Milk Tea Alliance. You have the *chai yen*, which you can get in any Thai restaurant anywhere in the world. You have in Hong Kong the *nai chai*, the milk tea that's been there since British colonial days. In Taiwan, there's the *boba* tea that everyone knows very well. In Myanmar, you have the hot version of the milk tea that is found in the streets of the major cities and towns. You have this common drink in the everyday life of people in four countries, territories, ingrained in their identity.



MILK TEA ALLIANCE

#TAIWAN #THAI #HONGKONG



M V What led to the Milk Tea Alliance? What factors triggered its formation?



R H The basic background was just a fruitless kind of Internet activity by a Thai pop star. [He tweeted what seemed to be his support for Hong Kong's independence from China.] That led to Chinese netizens attacking him, demanding an apology. We have seen this consistently happening; when something is said or written anywhere in the world that the Chinese nationalists do not like to hear, they attack them with a toxic kind of nationalist rhetoric.

Two factors grew this alliance. One is this overreach of Chinese nationalists trying to police the Internet, even outside of China. Two, you have a new generation of digital natives, all these young people who grew up comfortably using the Internet, using social media. They were born in an era when social media came into prominence so, to them, it's very natural that the digital space is an extension of their everyday reality.

Citizens or netizens who have had years of a relatively free and open Internet are suddenly exposed to this kind of toxic, ultra-nationalistic agenda from the Chinese. It makes them angry, whether in Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or elsewhere, and that simply does not bode well for the young generation.



M V The Alliance is basically a digital and online movement. Is that a weakness or a strength? Or both?



R H The Milk Tea Alliance is an imagined digital political community. A lot of this has taken place on the Internet, through social media. Twitter plays a big role, also Facebook and other social-media platforms. You don't have any borders, there are no restrictions. It's instantaneous as long as people have access to the Internet or at least ways to access the Internet through VPN.

Information, tactics, and strategies can be exchanged very quickly. You have the technology to translate to different languages. This broad alliance of people from very different contexts, Myanmar, Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even in the Philippines, tapped netizens in Malaysia, in Indonesia, as well as here in Australia. The Internet allows people to come together to share ideas, strategies, and show solidarity and support for one another. That is definitely a strength.

The weakness, if you look at it more closely, these four core members—Myanmar, Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong—have very different demands and political agenda, focused on the local contexts. In the context of the latest member, Myanmar, that was a very reactive thing because the military coup in February led them to join this digital alliance.



"...the alliance has a proud democratic vision for the region. But they also have very different political contexts that they have to address."

In Thailand, one of the original founders, the trigger that allowed the building of this alliance was very much focused on reforming their political system, away from the long, lingering military rule that has controlled the political economy of that country. In Hong Kong, it was the shrinking political and civic space because of Beijing's hard crackdown, the introduction of a national security law. Myanmar, Hong Kong, Thailand—they are the ones being attacked by their own government. They are the underdogs fighting against the authoritarian establishment.

Taiwan is a bit of an outlier given that it is the only democracy in this alliance. It's not fighting against a state actor. It's a kind of model, the ideal democracy in Asia that countries like Thailand and Myanmar, and city states like Hong Kong can emulate. But at the same time, they do share that kind of common fear of a rising Chinese authoritarian system and influence over the region.

The strength is that, broadly, the alliance has a proud democratic vision for the region. But they also have very different political contexts that they have to address.

MV In Myanmar, there was a physical protest led by the Milk Tea Alliance, it wasn't just a digital protest. The Milk Tea Alliance could spill onto the streets as well.

RH That's why I call this Milk Tea Alliance an imagined digital political community because most of the activities are on the Internet as hashtags. The exchange of information is increasing in importance as it is a documentation of history.

Unfortunately, in Myanmar, five young activists chose to jump off from an apartment building when the military was trying to arrest them [in August 2021] and this was publicized all over the Internet. The digital alliance has moved offline, into the physical space. This has happened for some time.



In the Thai street protests, they bring pro-Taiwan, pro-Hong Kong, and pro-Myanmar protest symbols, flags, and banners supporting one another's movement. This is manifested in the physical street protests. In Taiwan, for example, you had students rally in support of the anti-coup movement in Myanmar, in support of the Thai students' demand for political reforms. Even here in Australia, you've had Milk Tea Alliance rallies. They actually call themselves the "Milk Tea Alliance," with Thais, Australians, Hong Kongers coming together rallying, showing their support for people back in Asia.

MV One thing about the Milk Tea Alliance, just like the Thai and Hong Kong protests, is that they don't have fixed or identifiable leaders. How does this work? How does this even keep the Alliance together?

RH This is certainly a double-edged sword. This leaderless movement is not exactly new. You've seen transnational movements in the past, whether it's the earlier generation of anti-globalization protests, or against the Iraqi war, and more recently, Black Lives Matter, in the United States.

In the Hong Kong context, they have long had this idea to "be like water"—like Bruce Lee's idea that if you're flexible, you can do more things, you don't have this fixed leadership. There's a lot of truth to that because you don't have just one unifying figure. Then if authorities crack down on, say, opinion leaders and student activists, others might still step in and continue this kind of pro-democracy movement.

But that's, of course, also a weakness. When you don't have greater organization and coherence, it's hard to really advocate your agenda and try to reach some sort of political settlement. At the end of the day, unless you have a revolution—let's be honest, how will the political establishment even be willing to concede? You need someone that you can sit down with and have a discussion. This is not a popular opinion, especially in Myanmar. But the way I see it, you need to have greater coherence and greater unity.



The movement has evolved. There are opinion leaders and communities that are actively trying to achieve greater coherence among the different members. For example, in Thailand, the president of the Student Union translated textbooks and books on political history and a selection of human-rights texts by dissidents. So you have seen people actively trying to understand other movements. In Myanmar, a hip-hop collective produces rap music videos against the junta, inviting rappers and hip-hop artists who are producing music videos from almost everywhere. You have Indonesians, Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, this collection of international artists producing a music video with a clear message that's not just focused on their own movements, but saying [that] we need to work as a region to fight against regional authoritarianism.



MV Do these members of protest movements share lessons with each other? What are the key lessons?



RH They have learned from one another different strategies and tactics, what to do if the police use rubber bullets or tear gas. We've seen umbrellas used in Hong Kong and that's been replicated in Thailand, Myanmar. There are also strategies and tactics on the use of social media technology, using telegram with encrypted messages, trying to protect one another.

If you're trying to look at a successful strategy to dismantle an authoritarian government, that has not been learned yet.

The difficulty comes from the fact that the Milk Tea Alliance grew from a reactionary response. It was a response to the situation that was getting worse.

In Hong Kong, which arguably was the one that really started this new wave of student-led protests, it was because the Hong Kong government was becoming more repressive. It was dismantling the old liberal civic space.





In the Thai context, it was because the government, in alliance with the Constitutional Court, dissolved the Future Forward political party, which the young generation supported.

In Myanmar, it was because of the military coup that replaced the National League for Democracy. There were a lot of missed opportunities during the time of Aung San Suu Kyi, when people we think who are democratic and liberal missed using that chance to actually change the norm.



The Milk Tea Alliance can only do so much as underdogs. But it's important to continue to build this real norm, this real respect for liberal democratic progressive values. Don't waste it, don't cut out your potential allies and your current allies for short-term benefits. A good example was when the leader of the Future Forward party met student activists from Hong Kong, and he was criticized by the Chinese Embassy. He [Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit] said something like, "I'm a Thai, why should I listen to what the Chinese have to say? I support my democratic brothers everywhere." This is a position that I think a lot of people involved in the Milk Tea Alliance has taken, that we are all brothers and sisters committing to this vision.



That is the key here, we need to be persistent and continue to build this community that is genuinely respectful of these liberal democratic values that we aspire to. It is going to be a long process. I think people need to have realistic expectations that these deep-rooted regimes won't be replaced overnight.



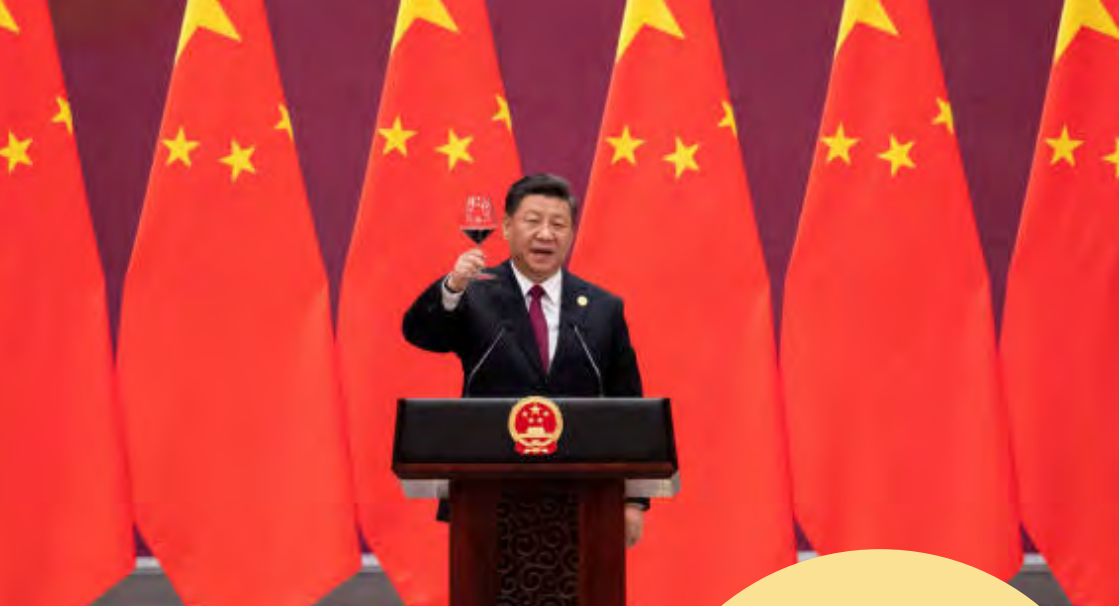
"It's important to continue to build...this real respect for liberal democratic progressive values. Don't cut out your potential allies and your current allies for short-term benefits."

M V Apart from being anti-authoritarian, the other layer in the alliance is an anti-China sentiment. Is that carried across all the four members?



R H The China factor is a backdrop, reflecting the changes taking place globally, and also regionally in the Asia Pacific, the rise of authoritarian leaders. During the Obama era, people were excited about democracy, that it was going to change everything and everyone's going to be more democratic. A lot of the mainstream rhetoric was that democracy was going to spread, especially with social media, with Facebook and Twitter, societies will open up. This has been proven to be false. We've seen democracy suffer, even in old political establishments, whether in the United States, U.K., here in Australia, and also especially in Asia. We've seen democratic institutions being attacked everywhere, especially in the four members of the alliance.





This resurgence of authoritarianism is provoking people who are more democratic and progressive and liberal minded to say, "Look, we need to stop this." Now, China is the model of successful authoritarian governance. It's the world's second biggest economy, it's pulling its weight in international forums, bullying older, established democracies, like here in Australia,

where we really felt the economic and political coercion of China. So there is a rejection of China's global reach and its political and economic clout in the region. China is effectively the largest economic and political power in the Asia Pacific, the largest trading partner for many countries, which are uneasy about this big neighbor who is not democratic, who's not willing to help promote liberal progressive values, given that they're obviously quite repressive back in China themselves.



"There is a rejection of China's global reach and its political and economic clout in the region."

M V Do you see the Milk Tea Alliance as a sustainable but loose organization? Or is it going to be spasmodic? It will come up when they're needed, then rest when they're not.



RH There have been data scientists who have looked at the Milk Tea Alliance. This is more than just a transnational movement because it is more of an ideology, an idea that as long as people continue to engage with it, then this movement itself will not disappear. Sure, you'll see times when people might not tweet hashtags, but it doesn't mean the force is not there, so is the availability of people to keep on coming in and out.

Social media allows people to engage with one another online when physical protests fade out. It allows the protesters, both in the digital and offline space, to come back quickly again, when they can find that political opportunity.

The Milk Tea Alliance is here to stay. You will see ebbs and flows. You'll certainly see times where the members seem to be very quiet, [but] that doesn't mean that the movement will disappear.

MV The Milk Tea Alliance is going to be a threat to China in terms of the popular perception of the youth in the region.

RH There are two things that need to be considered. One, the Milk Tea Alliance demonstrates that China, despite its economic and political clout, has failed to sell itself right, to persuade people to organically and genuinely like the Chinese system. Its soft power has completely failed. Of course, you will find people who do support the Chinese system, especially those with economic ties, the economic and political elites. But the young generation will come of age and will one day take over these important positions.

China should be worried that people are only willing to support the Chinese system because of the economic incentives, not because it is a superior system. When these Milk Tea Alliance progressives come into positions of power, that could really change the dynamics where Asia might again move closer back toward the other superpower, the United States.



MV A final question. If you were to give advice to the Milk Tea Alliance people, what would it be? What gaps do they need to fill? Or what do they need to do?



RH Greater kind of understanding and exchanges between the different members is necessary. There is growing evidence of international collaboration. If you want to move this movement beyond your own country, then you need to have this greater unity and cohesion with the others.

In terms of the immediate real goal of trying to topple the authoritarian regimes, there needs to be a healthy skepticism of where this is going. Everyone needs to be realistic.

But one thing that you really might need to consider is, how do you try to find potential sympathizers and collaborators from within the regime? The only successful case of genuine democratization, the transfer from an authoritarian to democratic government, is Taiwan. Taiwan wasn't a democracy really until early 2000. We went through a democratic transition in the 1990s. But that really was because there was a regime insider within the party, President Lee Teng-hui, who sadly passed away last year. Everyone remembers him as the father of Taiwan's democracy.

So how do Hong Kong or Myanmar or Thailand try to find the sympathizers? It's not going to be easy. I don't have an answer to that question myself. But I think it is important to try to find that weakness, a person or a group of people within the regime who might be sympathetic, who might be able to help change the norm. And there might not be one, especially in the Hong Kong context, which is very different because it has that added layer of direct influence from China.

MV Thank you so much, Roger, for giving us your time. We will watch what will happen to the Milk Tea Alliance.





P A R T I I

DISTRESS SIGNALS





DR. SASA

**“We will lay down our lives for
the cause of democracy”**

AUGUST 13, 2021

Myanmar is in grave crisis. In February, the generals launched a coup, deposed the civilian government, and detained Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders. Massive protests erupted on the streets of Yangon and other parts of the country. Thousands have been arrested and hundreds have been killed.

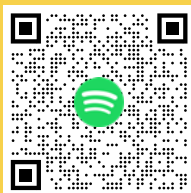
Six months after the generals shattered democracy in Myanmar, opposition to the military junta continues. I will be speaking to Dr. Sasa, a medical doctor turned politician. He is the international envoy for the former civilian government, which has formed the National Unity Government or NUG. The NUG is composed of officials who have been democratically elected and who now vow to get back the reins of power.

Dr. Sasa, who goes by one name, joins us from an undisclosed location. Dr. Sasa, welcome to The Great Asian Pushback. Thank you very much for making time for us.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR
MYANMAR?



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MARITES VITUG (MV)

It looks like the military junta will not give up power. What then are your immediate goals? What do you want to achieve in the short term?



DR. SASA (DS)

My country, my people are suffering. The COVID-19 crisis has remained unchecked. It is out of control. Half the population of Myanmar could be affected by COVID-19 in the coming weeks. We are facing a nightmare. A humanitarian crisis is coming, 6.4 million people of Myanmar are facing starvation in the coming months. More than a million people have fled their homes due to aggressive military operations.



Our immediate plan is a call to relieve our people from this great man-made tragedy of human suffering. We are working around the clock talking to international community donors for COVID-19 vaccination, oxygen, and humanitarian assistance. Our hope and prayer is that we will be able to vaccinate 20 percent of our population by the end of this year. If we cannot control these new COVID-19 variants, there will be a fourth or fifth wave.



M V So the NUG wants a pause, like a ceasefire, so that humanitarian aid can come in during this crisis. Are you seeing humanitarian aid for vaccines, medicines, and testing of COVID-19 coming in?



D S We have been saying it clear and loud to the international community, to the UN Security Council, that this military junta in Myanmar has zero respect for the international community, for ASEAN, our ASEAN brothers and sisters. There was a five-point consensus reached in April on Myanmar by ASEAN, but nothing has been done on the ground. We are engaging with the ASEAN Special Envoy and the Brunei Ministry of Foreign Affairs so that this mission will succeed.

What we are doing is telling the United Nations Security Council to impose special measures on the Myanmar military, that they stop attacking medical personnel who are saving lives. There have been 264 attacks on medical frontliners and medical facilities. More than 20 medical personnel have been killed by the military junta and our hospitals and medical facilities are being occupied. More than 600 medical personnel fled their homes due to illegal arrest warrants issued against them. The military junta is stopping oxygen supplies. This is unacceptable.



The UN Security Council has called for a global ceasefire. No one should be thinking of attacking medical personnel when we are facing a pandemic. No one should be thinking of attacking hospitals and medical facilities in this darkest moment in the world. But in Myanmar, it's the opposite. The UN Security Council has to intervene. Our hospitals and our aid workers should be protected, respected, and set free from fear of being attacked by the military junta.



There are three lines in Myanmar: the line in front of cemetery, the line for oxygen cylinders, and the line to the ATM machines.



"The military has stolen and taken over our democratically elected government. They are destroying everything. Myanmar has no government now."



MV Is the NUG also working to have yourselves recognized by the UN and other international organizations?



DS The people of Myanmar have spoken clear and loud in the 2020 general elections. They don't want to live under a military dictatorship anymore. They have lived under the military for the last several decades, 74 years of suffering and pain. That destruction is enough. All they want is democracy and freedom to have a stable life, prosperity, and peace. Myanmar is a part of the global community. So the United Nations and the international community have the responsibility to respect the people of Myanmar and uphold their will.

This is the first time in the history of Myanmar that we have a National Unity Government. The people of Myanmar have accepted us as the legitimate government of Myanmar. There is no other elected member of parliament in Myanmar except the NUG. It is very important that the UN General Assembly give the credential to the National Unity Government of Myanmar.



M V Do you think ASEAN is doing enough? The envoy from ASEAN is supposed to intervene and help the Myanmar people. What has happened so far?



D S ASEAN has now come out of its policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its members. The Myanmar crisis has become an ASEAN crisis. If we run away from this crisis, it's not going to work. The people in Myanmar are dying every day in this man-made crisis.

ASEAN's special envoy has to come up with an inclusive strategy. That means that it has to engage everyone and everyone has to come to the table. No one party or organization can solve this problem. So internationally, domestically, the ASEAN envoy has to engage with the NUG, CRPH [Committee Representing Pijdaungsu Hluttaw, a Burmese legislative body in exile], other organizations, and of course, the military junta. The envoy has to engage with our big neighbors, and internationally with the UN, EU, the United States of America, Australia, U.K., Canada.

ASEAN is now in the best place to bring everybody together and to put pressure on the military junta to end this violence, to release political prisoners, and to begin thinking about how to move away from this crisis. The chaos in Myanmar is bad for ASEAN. The crisis in Myanmar is bad for China and India, it is bad for everyone.



"The Myanmar crisis has become an ASEAN crisis."

MV You talked about inclusion. Is the NUG working with other groups against the military junta?



DS We are comprised of elected members of parliament from the 2020 general elections. NUG is comprised of ethnic armed organizations, civil-society organizations in Myanmar, political-party members, so we are the most inclusive body in Myanmar. We are engaging with all the stakeholders in the country and also outside of the country. We are ready to engage with our neighbors, with ASEAN, the UN, EU—everyone. Some of the engagement is behind the scenes. That means that we cannot talk about it for security reasons.



"Unity in diversity is our greatest strength."



My country is a diverse country, multi-ethnic, multi-religious. We are bringing people together and unity in diversity is our greatest strength.

MV Is a dialogue with the generals an option? Or is it not? And if it's an option, what are the red lines, the talking points?



DS Before we talk about a dialogue, they have to stop killing the people of Myanmar. You cannot talk to your killer. That's very simple.

They have to stop arresting the people of Myanmar illegally and torturing them and begin withdrawing all those military gunmen at large.

These practical conditions have to be met. Otherwise, talking about dialogue is a waste of our time.



M V Dr. Sasa, how about the armed option? I understand that the NUG has a People's Defense Force. What are the prospects of really forming a unified armed opposition against the junta?



D S The people of Myanmar have been forced to defend themselves. Early on, we called on the UN Security Council to activate the mechanism of R2P or Responsibility to Protect. The UN members adopted it to protect their countries and the people from killings. But in Myanmar, the military institution, known as the Tatmadaw, is against the people of Myanmar. They have declared war on the people of Myanmar. They who have sworn to protect us have become the killers.

No one has agreed to wait and be killed in his own home or his own village. The PDF —People's Defense Force—are the freedom fighters. They are simply defending their families, parents, their brothers and sisters, their towns and cities. If there are no military junta forces, the murderers coming to my village, there's no reason for me to defend my village. What's happening is that the people of Myanmar are being forced to defend themselves. They are not attacking the military junta. They are only defending the people, defending democracy.



[Meanwhile], the Civil Disobedience Movement or CDM remains strong. It is the most peaceful movement against the military junta. And the military generals' act of terrorism is being defeated by this non-violent movement. Nationwide protests, strikes, remain strong.



M V This looks like a long battle that the NUG is facing. What keeps you going? Where do you get your strength and your courage?



D S It's our hope. We have hope for the future, a future without the military dictatorship. We have made it clear. We have no future with the military dictatorship. We have no future with crimes against humanity. We have no future with human-rights violations, atrocities, ethnic clashes, genocide. Enough is enough.

"Our future for a new Myanmar is coming. That keeps us going."



Our future is called the Republic of the Democratic Union of Myanmar where peace, prosperity, freedom, and democracy await us. Where all the rights of the people of Myanmar, regardless of race, religious culture, ethnicities, gender will be equally respected, promoted, and protected by our Constitution. Our Constitution will be based on federal democratic principles and it will be drafted by the people of Myanmar, no longer by military generals.

Our commitment is also our strength. We will not surrender. We will not rest. I am giving my life every day for the cause of democracy and freedom.

We have been threatened by the military junta. But it doesn't matter. We will achieve the future by laying down our lives, if needed. We are ready.



M V You fled Myanmar because of all the threats and the danger to your life. Is there still pressure coming from the junta? Are you being surveilled, wherever you are?



D S A few weeks ago, in New York, two men tried to kill our ambassador to the United Nations [Kyaw Moe Tun]. Thank God, thanks to the United States of America for standing up to arrest those two men.

I have been charged with high treason by these military generals. In a way, I'm proud that I have been charged with high treason because I stand up for freedom and democracy and human rights. What have I done wrong? I have not killed anyone. They have arrested 7,000 people for the crime of freedom of expression, nothing else. This shows you that the military junta will do everything to stay in power.

We know that what we're doing is dangerous. We know that it is risky. But we have no other choice. We have to do it.

M V My final question. What would you say to the people outside Myanmar who are supporting the cause of democracy and sharing your dreams for a better future? What is your message to these people?

D S Freedom is universal. It's not only for Myanmar. Right now, the people of Myanmar are defending the values of freedom and democracy. This is the time that the people of Myanmar need your help and your support. Please help us, please talk to your government about us, please spread the news of what's happening in Myanmar to your people and to your country as much as possible.

We have to talk about the abnormalities that are absolutely outrageous, unacceptable. No one should accept this crime against humanity. No one should legalize these killings. We should consider that the deaths of the people of Myanmar are also the deaths of the ASEAN people.

M V Thank you very much, Dr. Sasa. That was quite a call. It's loud and clear, and we hope it inspires our listeners and viewers.



THEARY SENG

**"This regime cannot take away
my freedom of conscience"**

AUGUST 27, 2021

Cambodia has one of the most repressive regimes in Southeast Asia. Its prime minister, Hun Sen, has led the country for 36 years. In the 1970s, Cambodia went through a dark period under the Khmer Rouge regime, which presided over the killing of about 1.7 million people.

Our guest today experienced the horrors of the genocide that killed her parents, imprisoned children including herself, and executed people before her very own eyes. I will be speaking to Theory Seng, a Cambodian-American human rights lawyer and author of the memoir *Daughter of the Killing Fields*.

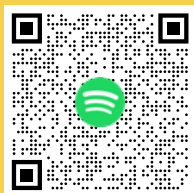
When she was seven, Theory and her relatives fled Cambodia. Eventually they ended up in the United States. In 2004, she returned to the country of her birth, which is now her permanent home. She founded the Cambodian Center for Justice and Reconciliation, as well as CIVICUS, the Center for Cambodian Civic Education.

Theory will be joining us from Phnom Penh. Welcome to the Great Asian Pushback, Theory. We're so happy to have you.

FROM REFUGEE
TO ACTIVIST



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MARITES VITUG (MV)

First, we'll talk about your case, because that seems to be the hottest news about you today, that you've been charged with conspiracy to commit treason and "incitement to create social disorder," and that you're one of more than 120 citizens being tried. Please tell us about your case. Why is this happening?



THEARY SENG (TS)

The charges of treason and incitement are prima facie absurd. It's ridiculous. It's not based on fact, it's not based on law.



It's a mass trial, the first time in recent Cambodian history since the Khmer Rouge that we have this mass trial of at least 120 dissenting voices, including mine. We can't keep track because every day it seems like there's a new case arising, that someone has perpetrated incitement or committed treason.

It took me by surprise, relatively speaking, because I had not been very active in civil society because of the overall repressive environment here in Cambodia. My organization has not been really active. But then it was very opportunistic for this regime to come after me, at this moment in time, even though I have been very active publicly in advocating for human rights, and being one of the frontliners in leading civil society on human rights, rule of law, and on justice issues. And I've had run-ins with this Hun Sen regime before, but never an actual court case.

[Among the] charges is conspiracy to commit treason, a very popular charge of this regime, and the other popular charge that has been issued left and right to dissenting voices in Cambodia and outside as well, whoever is opposing this regime, is incitement to create social disorder. These are run-of-the-mill charges now in Cambodia.



MV There has not been a mass trial for many years. Do you know if there's a specific trigger that urged the government to do this?



TS It was very, very opportunistic for this Hun Sen regime to come after me and to have this mass trial. Because of the overall repressive conditions and environment here in Cambodia, the press has been effectively silenced. The journalists have fled or have self-censored themselves if they are still within the country. For example, the regime closed down Radio Free Asia's office. Civil society is also effectively silenced with the closing of the U.S. National Democratic Institute office here.

The NGO law [Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations] is effectively used as a weapon, like the sword that hangs over any opposition, any dissenting voices within civil society. The only real opposition party has been banned by this regime. It hasn't been able to dismantle the infrastructure really. And of course, it can't. It can't extinguish the spirit of dissent and the opposition. Sam Rainsy, the opposition leader, is in self-imposed exile in Paris. Mu Sochua is an exile in the United States, and many of the other elected opposition officials are either detained or have escaped to neighboring countries like Thailand, Malaysia. So it creates an environment where there is a vacuum of dissenting voices and support for dissenting voices.



I'm one of the very rare voices inside the country. So I've been using social media which allows for greater reach. And this regime thought, "Ah, it's time to go after her." So they thought, "Well, since she no longer has the supporting environment of the opposition party, civil society and the press, it's the ideal time" to go after me. They're thinking that I would quietly leave the country because I also have a U.S. passport. I'm a dual national, but that was a wrong calculation for this regime because I chose to stay.



M V You've been to court to attend hearings. Were you able to defend yourself since you're a lawyer, or did you get your own lawyer?



T S I chose not to have a local Cambodian legal representation. I chose to self-represent because I want a direct voice. But I have a very famous international counsel in Jared Genser, who is known for his work to release political prisoners all over the world. I attended the first court hearing on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 2020. And this is only 20 days after I learned about the charges against me.

Initially, the others charged with me thought they would not show up. But when they realized that I was going to show up, some of them who were in the country decided to show up. That was also a strong message to the regime of resistance. I had prepared a statement, and I started to read from the prepared statement, but I was cut off. But I continued to fight. I remember raising my hands as if in the classroom. It was surreal.



I took the whole situation as political theatre, so I dressed as if I was attending an opera. We always use the phrase, "This is a charade, this is a sham, this is politics." So I wanted to act out what we have been saying that this is not a real court. It is a court scene, but these are actors who have to go by the script written by the politicians.

Because I'm forced to go into this hearing, I decided to physically show that this is political theater, and I'm going to act and play a role to raise the fact that this is not real. This is not how a courtroom should be conducted and if it is, it's a show and I'm going to be part of this show trial. I'm going to exaggerate my role within the confines of respect, of using legal terms, of using legal arguments, which I'm prepared to do as a lawyer. And so in the court hearing, it was communicated verbally and in my appearance that I don't take this court seriously as a legitimate court, that it is part of a show trial, and I've been forced to be an actor in it.



MV Aren't you afraid? Do you have fears you might get detained? Is that at the back of your mind?



TS I honestly can say I don't have those thoughts. Of course, I think about being in prison. But it's not fear that enters my mind. What I fear is the future of Cambodia, the survival of Cambodia. I fear for the children of Cambodia. I feel for the society of Cambodia, my heart breaks for the non-peace that has existed in this country for years without any respite. So if those can be termed as fears, yes, I have fears for the well-being of my countrymen, of my fellow citizens. But in terms of physical fear, I think more of what is the right thing to do, and that crowds out any negative thoughts of fear.



It's not as if I'm blindly going into the process. I know what this regime can do and has done to my friends, to my colleagues, to [Chea] Vichea, who was assassinated in broad daylight. He was a friend of mine. He was a union leader. And other activists like Kem Ley, who was assassinated recently [July 2021], again in broad daylight. He was a colleague of mine. A few months before his assassination, I had lunch with him at the invitation of the British ambassador.



I know this regime well. My risks are calculated with the understanding of what this regime can do. I have been to Cambodia yearly since 1995 but moved permanently here in 2004. After graduation from Georgetown in 1995, I came here every year to volunteer to look into all the prisons. Here's the irony: I had visited every provincial prison in Cambodia in 1997, with an NGO and a human-rights organization, and that was when we had road infrastructure.

But the question becomes, for me, my belief in these democratic values of freedom, of justice I've been advocating. I've been training political-party agents, perpetrators, and victims on knowing one's rights, exercising one's rights. If I believe in these values, and I'm encouraging others to take a stand, now it's my turn. The issue is so focused for me now.

I don't have family members, I don't have a husband, I don't have children. I don't have my own family. That's where they can intimidate, harass me, and that's where they could hurt me. So that alleviates one encumbrance. And the other is I don't have private property, I'm renting my home. So the only thing that they can do to me is on my physical body. I'm a Christian, I believe in God, and my life is not in the hands of Mr. Hun Sen. And Mr. Hun Sen is not eternal, justice is eternal. And as a Christian, I believe that God is with me, Jesus is with me. And if God is with me, whom shall I fear? So it's a non-issue in terms of fear, in terms of what should I do, my responsibilities. It's very simple, do the right thing.

"My life is not in the hands of Mr. Hun Sen."

M V You've partly answered my next question about why you returned to Cambodia. Why give up your life in the U.S. for a life of political uncertainty? Why exchange freedom for Hun Sen's repressive regime? Could you explain your decision-making process?



TS I have not exchanged my freedom by moving to Cambodia. Cambodia is home. I feel very, very comfortable in the United States. I'm a product of two cultures and I'm very comfortable in the American culture, having lived there as a child, as a young person, but Cambodia is home and the United States does not need another lawyer. Cambodia does. The U.S. is saturated with lawyers.

But more than anything, I have not exchanged my freedom. Freedom is the freedom of my conscience. The freedom of my mind takes primacy over the freedom of movement. And if I will be detained, it will be the limitation of my movement. But this regime cannot take away my freedom, which is my freedom of conscience. Mr. Hun Sen and his officials are more shackled and more limited in their own creativity by always using violence. The creative ones are us because we have to overthink and try to find creative ways, imaginative ways to deal with the very blunt instrument of violence, of intimidation, of harassment. We see it time and time again. Dictators and autocrats are very, very uncreative on that regard.



MV When you moved back to Cambodia in 2004, what changes did you see? What struck you most as the big changes in your home country?



TS When I moved permanently, it was an American law firm that took me back. I came to work for a regional law firm here in Asia, where I was in private practice for two years. But I remember the company had sent a car to pick me up at the airport. And I remember vividly as we're leaving the gate of the airport of Phnom Penh International Airport, the driver turned to me and he said, "Have you heard?" and I said, "What?" "Chea Vichea is dead." He didn't know that I knew Chea Vichea, the very famous union leader. And that was my introduction back to Cambodia when I returned.



Chea Vichea was killed in broad daylight by this regime, at 10 a.m., near the Independence Monument, and it was done brazenly to communicate a message. The environment was one of violence still, but there was hope. When I came back, there was a vibrancy, the residue of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, UNTAC, that opened the way for democracy to flourish in Cambodia. I came back riding that wave.

Two years later, I found myself leading a major NGO that was focusing on the rule of law, on reconciliation. It was a very robust time for civil society. So despite the poverty, despite the violence and the political wrangling, there was hope that it will be better. And there was a vibrant press and there was the opposition. Sam Rainsy was very, very active since 1995 as the opposition leader. So all the elements of support of the institutions that could help build democracy were in place, were active.



From when I came back in 2004, and through the years up until 2012, we saw people taking to the streets peacefully, tens of thousands joining democracy rallies, and Cambodians were helping each other in terms of supporting with food, cleaning up the trash. It was very orderly, a unifying moment of great hope. Those were the days.





M V You said you were very active in this NGO working on rule of law, justice, and reconciliation. What did you do to help the Cambodians? Can you tell us more about it?



T S When I joined civil society in 2006, the Khmer Rouge tribunal began operating. At the height of my organization, I had about 90 staff, local staff, plus international consultants. There was a lot of funding coming into Cambodia on justice and reconciliation in light of the Khmer Rouge tribunal, which is this mixed tribunal of Cambodian actors, of Cambodian judicial officials, and international players. Even though it's within the Cambodian court system, it's not an international court. It's an internationalized mixed court. The tribunal was established to try the crimes of the Khmer Rouge from the 1970s.

It coincided with what I was doing, with my background as a victim of the Khmer Rouge, as a person who lost both her mom and dad, and having lived through it as a child prisoner. We were given the funding to go to all the provinces and conduct public forums with victims and perpetrators from that era. The Khmer Rouge regime had temporal jurisdiction from April 1975 to the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, not before, not after, so it's a very limited time frame of about four years, the crimes committed within that time period.





There was a lot of interest because [even] the perpetrators were curious. They would show up wanting to understand the subject matter of jurisdiction or the people who could be tried. Will it be five people, will it be 100, because you know, to have lives lost in the cluster of two million, there were many, many bloody hands. They may be pulled into court.

The victims, they felt safe to speak about their experience. Having gone through that experience, if we want victims to speak, they need to feel safe, they need to feel not exploited just so that we can get their story. We had a German consultant who had expertise in psychology during those three years of conducting public forums. We had other civil-society leaders with expertise in psychology. That was one huge element of my work during that period.

I was given energy by the presence of the Khmer Rouge tribunal. We're talking about international star judges coming into Cambodia, the former head of state of New Zealand who would come to our public forum, for example. We had well-known prosecutors, well-known judges from all over the world coming to our public forums out in the boonies, in remote provinces. I was the facilitator. We had victims, perpetrators, we invited provincial officials, teachers,

monks, who could be leaders in their community and who could pass on the message. We also had about two to three radio hours per day. It was very comprehensive because we had the means and I was very conscious of the different elements needed to start the healing process because we cannot heal in one snap. It can be a lifetime process.



**"We cannot heal in one snap.
It can be a lifetime process."**

I was very aware that trauma is tactile, it is tangible in society. Every Cambodian was, is traumatized. I had PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I would say the majority of Cambodians to this day have PTSD. I remember being suicidal in high school in the United States because genocide was catching up with me. I escaped and survived. To survive was half luck, the doings of my older relatives, especially my grandmother, who was a saint. But once we had the time to think, to process, that was when everything collapsed, and high school was very, very difficult for me. So I understand the need to heal and I was very open about my traumatic experience. That's part of the healing process, the safety to speak and to express. I was very conscious to speak about my own experience so that it creates a level of acceptability, to say that I was suicidal in high school, that it's not shameful. To experience genocide and to grieve, to be broken up, that is human.

In hindsight, it was a blessing in disguise, to have gone through that experience, to be given this platform to reach out to others. And it also informed and helped me to continue to heal. One can never stop healing. We can create new identities to help balance the victim status and the survivor status but it will always inform my present situation, as all of our experiences inform our present situation and who we are today.

**"To experience genocide
and to grieve, to be broken
up, that is human. "**



M V You've seen the current prisons. Have they changed?



T S When I visited the other Cambodian prisons in 1997, many of them were literally left without physical touches from years ago. The current prison system is medieval, it's extremely crowded. But what I saw in 1997 was of literally another era, way past the medieval age, the Dark Ages.

When I was a child prisoner of the Khmer Rouge—we're talking about living in genocide. Mass graves were my playgrounds. There are two acute memories that I have been able to capture in writing. One, the spiritual experience of losing my mom in prison that night, the last night of my stay in prison. I felt the separation of body and soul. I didn't understand that as a seven-year-old but it was the beginning of a spiritual experience. The second was the stench of human flesh because my job during the day was to go and pick up dried cow manure for fertilizer. I was only seven. I was given freedom of movement. At night, they tried to chain my ankles....



M V At the age of seven, they shackled you?



T S They tried to shackle me, but I was skin and bones so my ankles could slip in and out. I managed to find two shackles from that prison area a few years ago, but I don't know where I have these now.



M V What is the role of the Cambodian diaspora and the opposition in exile?



T S The Cambodian diaspora has played and continues to play a very significant role in working for the flourishing of democracy—well, not flourishing yet. But the hope is there. It will require a fight, a peaceful fight from every corner, within Cambodia and outside Cambodia.

At the very beginning of the democracy movement in 1995, I saw Sam Rainsy start the first opposition, the real opposition party in Cambodia. I was in Cambodia at the time. It was the Cambodian diaspora, the Cambodians in France, in the United States, in Australia, in Canada, who fundraised and financially supported the democracy movement, because everyone was poor in Cambodia except for the ruling elite. Now there are financial resources among Cambodians inside Cambodia. But there's still an important role for the diaspora and they continue to be very, very active in lobbying with the senators, their representatives in the United States, France, wherever, and in networking, providing information, and continuing with giving financial resources.






Most recently, there has been legislation going through the U.S. Congress on Cambodia that has been shaped and lobbied by the Cambodian diaspora: The Magnitsky Act, which has a version in Australia, in Europe. These have also been lobbied by the Cambodian diaspora.

As a Christian, I have hope, because I have an expectation that good will prevail. But it requires that all of us who stand for justice, who stand for truth, actively do our part. Whatever faith we may hold, we know that the Creator has made us agents in the process of justice, in the process of seeking truth, and truth and justice are eternal. Normally, law and justice should be friends, should be allies, and should walk hand in hand. But in a place like Cambodia, in repressive environments, the law is oftentimes at war with justice because the regime is very good in using law, in trying to manipulate law and justice. They're two separate entities: Justice is eternal; law is man-made, it's temporal.

We take encouragement from the People Power Movement in the Philippines. We've seen it in Eastern Europe. Truth is a weapon. Truth is more powerful than a gun. We know that in history. We know that through the example of Nelson Mandela, the example of Martin Luther King Jr. Through Gandhi, we know that peaceful resistance is the only way. And it's the most powerful weapon we have. But we need to be active, we can't sit by the sidelines.



**"Truth
is a weapon.
Truth is more
powerful than
a gun."**

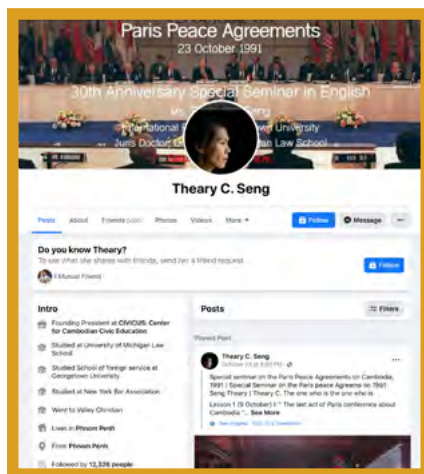
M V Are you able to, given the limitations, organize or inspire people to achieve peaceful change?



T S I would like to think that physical presence alone is an encouragement. But I've been also using a lot of social media. And I'm learning because I'm very limited in my knowledge of social media. It's a very powerful medium. The opposition supporters and officials are very active wherever they are. They're rallying their supporters inside and outside Cambodia to be on social media. And now with COVID, everyone is on social media.

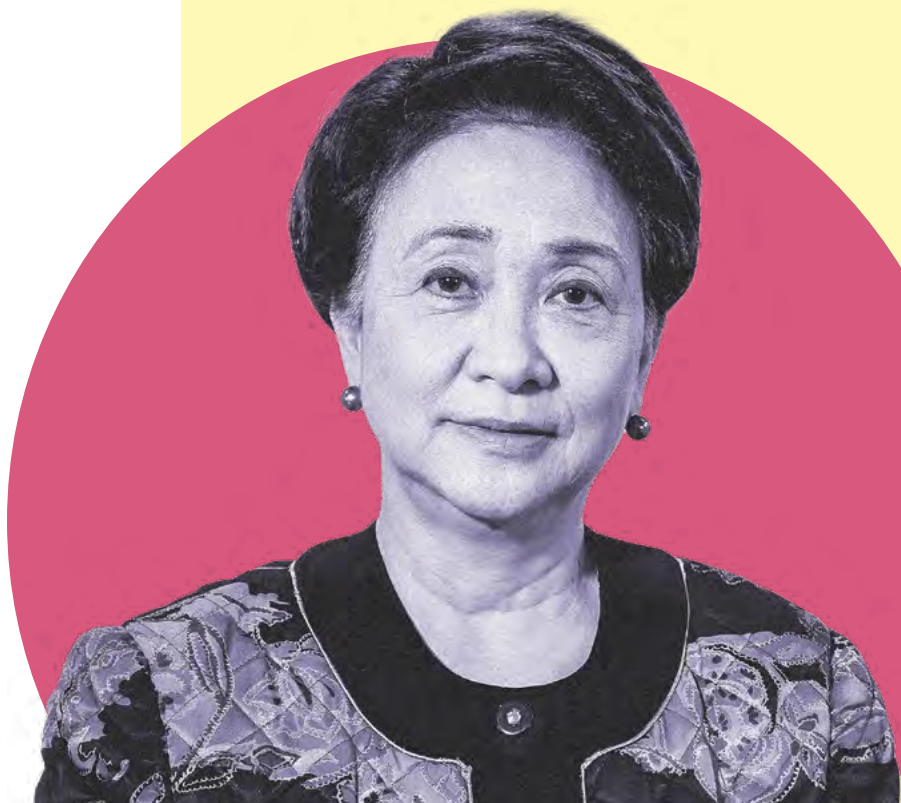


I'm very conscious that I have both domestic and international support even though domestic is hard to gauge, also to what degree Radio Free Asia continues to be broadcast in Cambodia via social media, even though the office inside the country has been shut down. The reporters cannot be known if they are working inside Cambodia. They have to take on an alias. Information is seeping in, independent news reportage is available within Cambodia via social media. I'm on social media a lot but whatever degree my sphere of influence is right now is hard to gauge. The issue for me is, what is my responsibility and to do that with all the energy I have.



M V This has been a fascinating sharing of your experience, Theory. Thank you for sharing us your hope. It is quite inspiring.





EMILY LAU

**"I refuse to accept that we will
no longer be free and safe
and have a high degree of autonomy"**

AUGUST 13, 2021

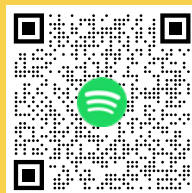
For this episode, the spotlight will be on Hong Kong, once known as the protest capital of Asia, with its vibrant civil society and free media. But Beijing has changed all that. In June 2020, China imposed a draconian national security law that has led to a crackdown on the opposition and the media, and the muffling of freedoms. Democracy activists have been harassed and sent to jail. Others have gone on self-exile.

I will be speaking to Emily Lau, a member of the Democratic Party of Hong Kong as well as CALD, on the troubles facing Hong Kong and what the future holds. She joins us from Hong Kong. Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback. How are you?

CAN HONG KONG
BE SAVED?



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY





EMILY LAU (EL)

I'm fine. Not yet arrested.

MARITES VITUG (MV)

Tell us first, Emily, how is Hong Kong these days?
What's the mood?



EL I look out the window now, it's raining. It's very cloudy. The mood is like the weather, very dark. Many people are very, very tense and worried, and some may be packing their bags, and getting ready to get out. Others may be too frightened to speak. It's very sad. Hong Kong used to be a very free, very safe, and very vibrant city. That's why so many people all over the world love Hong Kong. They've come to work here, live here, study here. We have friends all over the world, including in the Philippines and other places. But now, some people would say the city has changed beyond recognition.

I am still one of those who would talk to foreigners. I would say the game is not over. And Hong Kong people will still continue with the struggle for freedom, for human rights, for a high degree of autonomy, which was promised in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, whereby the Chinese government said, after the handover to China in 1997 by Britain, the Hong Kong people will continue to enjoy their free lifestyle for 50 years until 2047. Now we're not even halfway there.

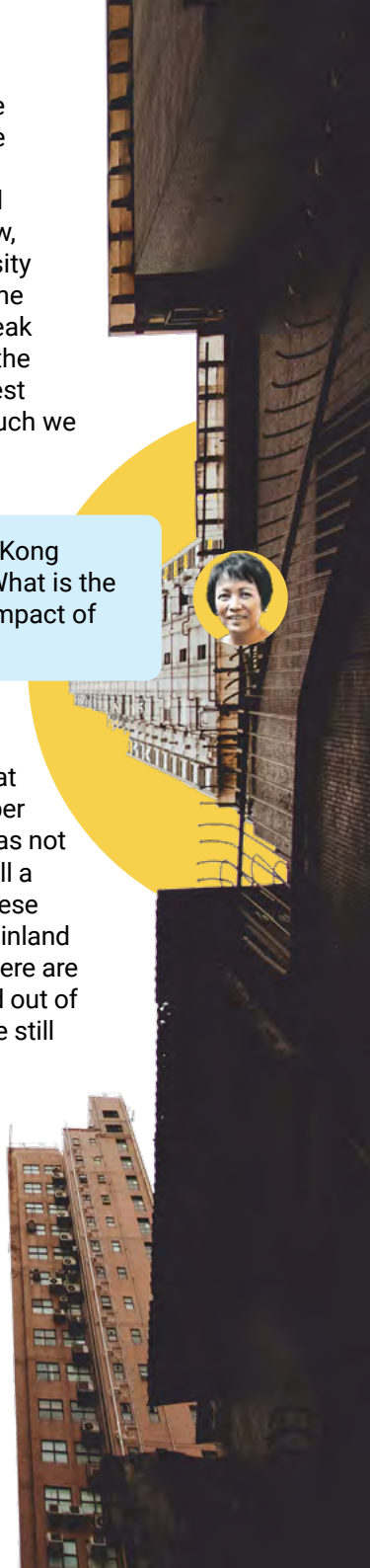


I refuse to accept that we will no longer have a high degree of autonomy, no longer be free and safe. We will continue to do our work to safeguard our free lifestyle, but in a peaceful and nonviolent way. We will not break the law, as a law professor at the Hong Kong University reminded us. They say that if you don't like the law, you can criticize it. But you shouldn't break the law. And I have no intention of breaking the law. But even then, if they still come and arrest me and others, of course, there's not very much we can do.

M V Let's talk about the business community. Hong Kong used to be a financial hub in this part of the world. What is the sentiment of the business community? What's the impact of the repression on them?

E L There are different views. But the government of Hong Kong loves to tell the media that people still come and do business. The number of foreign companies that have set up here has not dropped, investment has not dropped. It is still a very vibrant business and financial center. These companies also look at doing business in mainland China, particularly in the Greater Bay Area. There are many opportunities. But some have relocated out of Hong Kong. But by and large, the numbers are still good, and they think that it's okay.

Next week, the National People's Congress Standing Committee, which is China's Parliament, will have a meeting and they will want Hong Kong to enact the anti-sanction law, which has been enacted in the mainland. Businesses are concerned because the U.S. has enacted that law and the Hong Kong dollar is tied to the U.S. dollar. If we have another anti-sanction law, then how are the companies, the banks, going to operate?






There's uncertainty and the chief executive, Carrie Lam, has said that she doesn't want Beijing to just impose that law on Hong Kong, like Beijing did with the national security law last year. She wants Hong Kong to have some autonomy and freedom to do a local enactment of the law. Prior to that, they would listen to the concerns of the business community and others.

MV How about in the universities? How are the academics, the professors? Are they being censored? I mean, are they free to teach what they used to teach?



EL I think some academics are very worried, and the students too. In a number of universities, the management has decided to more or less cut their ties with the student unions. And something that they used to do for the student unions was to collect fees from the students and give to the student union so that they have money to operate, and also allow the student union to use the facilities within the university. But because they think the students were involved in some of the protests, they decided that they don't want to have anything to do with them. They asked the students to go and do their own thing and collect these fees from the students.

The Hong Kong University attracted a lot of attention recently. On July 1st, the anniversary of the handover, a policeman was stabbed in Causeway Bay, which is a very busy shopping area. The person who did it also killed himself. And it was big news. A few days later, one of the students' committees had a resolution saying they want to pay their respects to the person who did it. A whole lot of Hong Kong was shocked, I was shocked. The students were criticized and the student union apologized and withdrew the statement. The University decided that those students involved in that meeting who approved the statement were not to enter the campus. So things are very worrisome. And in the campuses of many universities, there used to be posters, banners, supporting the protests. But now all have been removed.



I saw a report several months ago wherein one student even reported an academic, a professor, to the National Security Police. There is a lot of fear and anxiety and some of the professors are under quite a bit of pressure. They are really worried that whatever they say would be recorded and reported. There is self-censorship. They just don't want to take risks.



M V Hong Kong used to have an independent judiciary. How's that sector affected? Are the judges, lawyers, under a lot of pressure from Beijing?



E L Most people are under pressure because the National Security Law is very sweeping and draconian. People are not that clear about the boundaries of the law. We don't know how they will be interpreted and when someone or an organization would be regarded as overstepping it and would get into trouble like the *Apple Daily*. A few months ago, it was closed down and its assets were frozen. The senior executive and journalists have been arrested, they're still in jail, not yet tried. [In December 2021, Jimmy Lai, founder of *Apple Daily*, was sentenced to 13 months in jail.]



A few days ago, the professional teachers' union announced they will dissolve, and they have close to 100,000 members. The Beijing media still went on to attack them. If these things happen normally, you can go to the courts to try to get justice. Over 10,000 people have been arrested since the protests in 2019 and about 3,000 have been prosecuted. Some have been given bail but some have not, including members of my party, and some journalists and news executives.



It seems the courts are not really able to give these people justice because if you're arrested, you are charged, then you have a trial. But the prosecution has said, especially regarding some political cases, they're not ready, they're still investigating. Then why do you lock people up? If they are tried under the National Security Law, they can have very long sentences.

I don't think I will say that the independence of the judiciary is dead. Like many other people, the judges are under pressure. But there have been statements made by various people, even in the establishment, saying the judges are free, independent, and they can act as they like. Some people may not believe in that at all, and others will hang on to it because that's all we've got. To some people, especially those families and people who've been locked up for such a long time, it is very, very distressing.



M V How about the Democratic Party and the rest of the opposition? Is there a sense of fatigue or is fear predominant?



E L There are no more pro-democracy politicians in the Legislative Council, which is Hong Kong's parliament, because they have resigned, or they've been disqualified, and some are already in prison. Also in the district councils.

Coming up later this year, there will be elections, which had been postponed for one year. [Elections were held on December 19, 2021.] There

will be elections for an election committee, which will then choose members of the Legislative Council. I guess those elections will not be very much contested, because many pro-democracy activists will not take part. Even if they do take part, they will be disqualified. Beijing has said that only patriots can be allowed to run in Hong Kong. I know there are screening mechanisms to ensure that non-patriots will not be allowed to stand as candidates.





Maybe next year in March, there will be the election of the chief executive who has a five-year term, which ends in June 2022. There is also talk that maybe the chief executive election will also be uncontested.

M V How about the young activists? Is there a chance of regrouping? How can pro-democracy activists fight back? All the channels seem to have closed.



E L I am no longer that active in the political circle. I'm not even that active in my party because I have served for many years. I stepped down so I really cannot speak for them. In my party, there are members, those few that I've spoken to, who want to carry on. But, of course, they could be arrested. And the party could face pressure to disband like other organizations, but we will carry on.

There is a determination to continue the struggle, but this must be done in a peaceful and nonviolent way. My party and I, many Hong Kong people, we're not struggling to use force and violence to overthrow the authorities in Hong Kong or in mainland China. We are just struggling to get the mainland government to keep the promises of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, whereby we can enjoy a high degree of autonomy, be free and safe to pursue democratic reforms. And that's why I say the game is not over. And I think we should be bold, we should be wise and careful. But if we are arrested, we have to make a sacrifice, but there will be others who will carry on.

"The game is not over...we should be bold, we should be wise and careful."

"If we are arrested, we have to make a sacrifice, but there will be others who will carry on."



M V Do you see the role of the international community becoming bigger? It seems that there is a pause now in Hong Kong protests. What are the steps that could be done outside Hong Kong?



E L Speaking from an international city, which I hope Hong Kong still is, I hope people in the international community will continue to pay attention to what's happening here. And of course, to support our quest for freedom, for safety, and for democracy.

M V What about the multilateral organizations, international organizations? Have they been supportive? Maybe civil-society organizations outside Hong Kong?



E L The multilateral forum that we used to be very active in is the United Nations because, apart from the fact that the Sino-British Joint Declaration was registered with the UN, Hong Kong is also a party to seven international human-rights covenants and conventions. In the past few decades, I had been to the UN many times as member of the NGO delegation to produce our shadow report on the Hong Kong government's report to these UN treaty bodies. But unfortunately, because of COVID-19, I think the operations at the UN, including these committees, have really not been very active. That is a problem.

Some are supportive. That is important. But as I said, because of the National Security Law, I don't think I should be speaking too much. Maybe I've spoken too much already. We'll see what happens, if I'm still free to talk to you again.



MV Emily, we're very interested on the personal aspect, you as an activist. You continue to speak up on issues affecting Hong Kong. Have you received threats to your life? Have you been intimidated? What keeps you going? I mean, how come you're able to speak to us so freely?



EL I have not received threats or anything. Sometimes, my name is mentioned in some news media reports, but not in such a big way. I try to be outspoken. But I don't try to break the law. But you never know, maybe my time will come up. Some people will say, "Oh, they let you speak out." So if people criticize the authorities and say there's no freedom of speech, the response may be, "Look at Emily Lau, she's speaking out."



There is a risk. My friends have told me to shut up. But I said, "No, I'm a decent, upstanding human being." It's not as if I'm saying, "Oh, nothing will happen to me." No, I'm not saying that. But that's why I said we need to be bold. We need to be wise. And we need to be careful.

MV Where's your courage coming from?



EL It's my character. I just don't like people, or even governments, walking all over me although I'm just a tiny individual. That's why even when I was a journalist, I would join delegations to go to the United Nations—they would say, to badmouth the government. But I wanted the world to know that we in little Hong Kong are very concerned.

"I don't like people, or even governments, walking all over me although I'm just a tiny individual."





I remember that it was 1988 when I went to the UN Human Rights Committee, and we told the committee that Britain was about to pull out, and we have no protection for human rights, no British citizenship, and no democratic parliament. One member said to me afterward—he was the former chief justice of Mauritius—when we were having coffee, “Miss Lau, can you tell me? How come Hong Kong, with all its economic prosperity and stability, you people have done so little to fight for democracy and human rights?”

I’m not someone who would hide behind excuses. I said, “We have not been doing much all these years. There’s no doubt about it. But that doesn’t mean the British government is right in not doing it for us.” It was the first time the Human Rights Committee had people from Hong Kong going there to lobby. And since then, the lobbying has never stopped. And the committee was very sympathetic.

I remember when I went there a few years ago, the lady member from France—she’s been on the committee for so many years—said, “We the committee, we must do something for Hong Kong. These people have been coming to us for over two decades, the Human Rights Committee must speak out for Hong Kong.” I hope that the committee as well as other human rights committees will be able to get back to work actively and will cast a watchful eye over Hong Kong because we are party to those human-rights treaties and conventions, which China allowed.



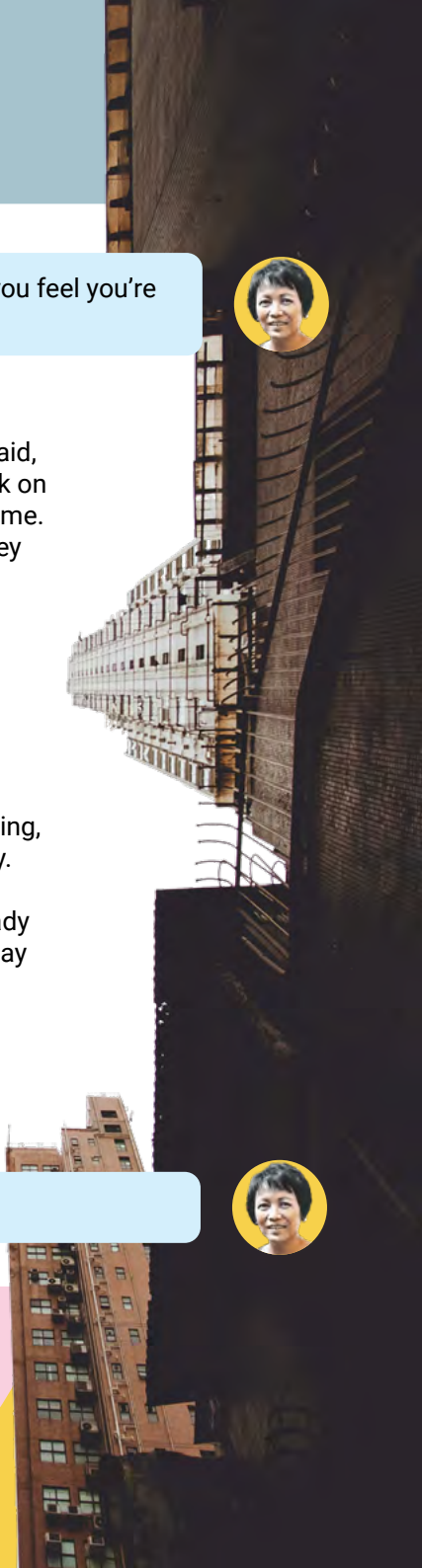
M V Do you get afraid? Are there moments that you feel you're in danger?

E L Not yet, to be honest, because as I said, nobody has intimidated me. When I walk on the streets, I don't see people following me. Other activists have complained that they have been followed. I put all of my activities on my Facebook page. So I'm not afraid.

But I have seen friends, colleagues, activists being arrested, harassed, beaten. And I have told some people to get ready, if my day comes. That is something that the activists are also doing, getting some of their friends to be ready. When the police or the national security come in, arrest us, then they can get ready and help us to get lawyers. Some may say this is the new normal in Hong Kong.

But still, my parting word is this: The game is not over.

M V Thank you so much, Emily, for speaking up.





HAFSAR TAMEESUDDIN

**"I found the purpose of my life
in being a voice for others"**

SEPTEMBER 8, 2021

The Rohingya are often described as the last, the lost, and the least. They're stateless. Neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh considers them its citizens. They have been pushed to seek refuge elsewhere, and in the process, have been victims of abuse and violence. They have long been marginalized.

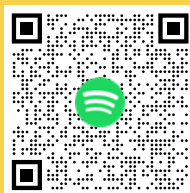
Hafsar Tameesuddin is a Rohingya who has been fighting for their rights as human beings and as refugees. While Hafsar was in Malaysia as a refugee from 2011 to 2019, she worked with a refugee community and advocated for their rights as well as gender equality.

Hafsar, 38 years old, is now based in New Zealand, where she's taking undergraduate studies. At the same time, she continues her work for the refugees. Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback, Hafsar and thank you for making time for us.

THE LAST, THE LOST
AND THE LEAST



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MARITES VITUG (MV)

Let's start with your journey. You lived for more than a year in Thailand, nearly nine years in Malaysia, and you've been there in Auckland, New Zealand for the last two and a half years. How did you make it there? Have you been given asylum there?



HAFSAR TAMEESUDDIN (HT)

I fled my country of origin, Myanmar, in early 2010, 21 years ago. I was trying to seek asylum in Thailand. But it wasn't successful because I didn't know where to go and find the organization and information I needed. I was at risk of being arrested and detained if I'm out there in the community looking for all this information. I didn't have Internet connection or access to online information. I was in Thailand for almost one year and a half.



I managed to smuggle myself to Malaysia where I sought asylum with the UNHCR, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. I was granted refugee status by UNHCR Malaysia. I spent about eight or nine years in Malaysia as a refugee where I did a lot of work with refugee communities. I then applied for resettlement with the UNHCR under humanitarian grounds. At some point, I was accepted by the New Zealand Immigration. I was resettled to New Zealand in early 2019. I am on my third year taking up Bachelor of Social Work.

As for my advocacy, I was recently elected chair of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, which keeps me pretty busy and makes me feel that I am living my purpose in life.

M V Did you choose New Zealand? Or was the opportunity there?



H T Refugees do not have the right to choose which country we want to go to. You may be aware that only less than one percent of those in the refugee camp were resettled. We applied and applied and, at some point, when the UNHCR accepted my application, they referred it to the countries that resettle refugees, which are very limited in number. New Zealand accepted my application, and I had to go through the immigration process, including an interview. I waited a couple of years for the decision on whether my petition will be accepted or not. I was accepted and I was granted residency in New Zealand.



M V Let's go back a bit. When you were in Malaysia, were you part of an organization that advocated for the rights of refugees? Can you tell us about what you did there for so many years? How did you fight for your rights?



H T I wasn't representing a single organization. First and foremost, it was very difficult for me to find employment because Malaysia did not ratify the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. This meant that I did not have the right to work or to study there. The first job that I did was in labor and it was illegal. People from the UNHCR Malaysia, they knew that I could speak English and I started to get involved in some projects by the UNHCR Malaysia and then I joined an organization called the International Catholic Migration Commission [ICMC]. They work to prevent gender-based violence and respond to the Rohingya communities and other refugee communities from Myanmar. I worked with women refugees, raised their awareness on gender-based violence [GBV] and child marriage, and also responded to the victims of GBV and child marriage. I worked closely with a caseworker from the ICMC.

My advocacy journey started after the 2012 massacre of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, a big horrific incident. My family was in the country then and I was in Malaysia. It was very difficult for me to know what was going on in the country. Being a refugee in another country, I felt very powerless. It was very difficult even to communicate with my family, to know if they were safe or not.





At that point, I thought “Do I remain vulnerable and helpless? Or is it more valuable to do something?” So I started to join different social-media activities and campaigns to raise awareness about what was happening in the country like Save Rohingya, Rohingya Lives Matter, Rohingya Voice. The most important thing was getting the information so that people will start to act. Because if they don’t know, they will never act. I was very concerned for my security and also the security of my family back in my country, so I couldn’t do all these activities with my real name. As of today, my Facebook account uses another name, same with my other social-media accounts.

In the case of the Rohingya, persecution has been going on in the country and the rest of the world did not know because we didn’t have the means of letting the world know. We have been very much cut off from the rest of the world. So I use the opportunity of having a social-media platform to raise awareness by sharing videos because we have people from inside Myanmar who can immediately send us videos of what’s happening, how people are being killed, the burning of houses. We put these online, on Twitter, Facebook and other social-media platforms.

On the ground in Malaysia, many Rohingya were devastated. People started to get together and find networks. I started to get connected with journalists from the United States, those coming to Malaysia, which became a focal point for the journalists and Rohingya to meet and share information. Slowly, I got connected to activists from different countries, also with local NGOs in Malaysia and I partnered with international NGOs from different countries. We did fundraising, conferences, webinars.



All the activism and advocacy that I did for the Rohingya was low-profile because I was very worried about the risks to my family back in Myanmar. It can mean their death, not just prison.



In Malaysia, I started to see the different layers of exclusion and discrimination that refugee communities faced. It is very difficult for many refugees in Malaysia when they do not have the right to work, when they are not legally protected, when they do not have the right to get access to education, medical treatment like other citizens or residents. I got involved in advocacy work for the rights of refugees to work, to education. When refugees get arrested, they should not be deported to their country of origin, where they escaped from for fear of persecution.



M V How was your life in Malaysia? How did the Malaysians treat you?



H T In the beginning, I didn't know the country, but later on I started to work for international NGOs. I also worked for the International Rescue Committee, which specifically works for the resettlement of refugees to the United States. Under these circumstances, my situation was different from the majority of the refugees. Even if my work was not legal, I still got reimbursements. And because I worked in the space where NGOs were active, I was way safer than many other refugees.



In the case of many other refugees, I witnessed and heard that many of my friends and many other refugees from my own communities and from different countries were exploited for their labor.

They were asked to do long hours of work. There were many cases wherein they did not get paid because the employers knew that even if they didn't pay them, there was no legal protection for refugees. The refugees got the kind of job that many local people didn't want to do. And then they got paid much less, including myself. Even if I worked for the NGOs, because I wasn't legally allowed to work, I didn't get the same amount of salary that residents got. My wages were way lower than what I should [have gotten].



MV In Thailand, did you have a similar experience?



HT No, because in Thailand, I did not have all the information and connections. I did not even own a phone. I was in a small town in the border of Myanmar. I did not have any legal documents. And I was always worried about being arrested and detained. I did not know where the NGOs were. I was just depending on support from my friends and other connections. I could not work.



MV Let's go back to Myanmar where you were born and raised. Tell us how your life was. Is your family still there in Myanmar?



HT About my family, I won't be discussing that for the sake of their security. I will skip that part about where they are right now.

I'm very happy to speak about my experience when I was in Myanmar. Before I was born, in 1982, the citizenship law in Myanmar excluded the Rohingya from being citizens of the country. I was born stateless. It means many other Rohingya who were born in 1982 and after were stateless. We are not protected by the laws of the country. We are excluded from many rights that citizens of the country should enjoy. We cannot complain or seek justice.



So it was very difficult, not just for myself. I have witnessed many other Rohingya suffering because of discrimination and oppression. Even trying to travel from one city to another city, from the village where we were born to another village, we could get arrested and detained for seven years, eight years, we can be tortured in the prison, we can be sexually assaulted. We don't have legal documents.

It is happening until now. I saw a Facebook post yesterday: 23 females and seven males were arrested while traveling from Rakhine State to the mainland of Myanmar so that they can escape from the country. They were arrested and detained simply because they were traveling within the country. The Burmese government also restricted foreigners' access to different parts of Myanmar, specifically the Rakhine State.



The daily life of the Rohingya is very horrifying and dehumanizing. The only difference was that after the genocide in August 2017, the world started to see a little bit. We started to share information and do online campaigns.



M V You were not able to go to school, you were not able to go even to your next village, right? So your actions were severely limited.



H T I could go to school. Many Rohingya could go to school. But the systematic discrimination and exclusion of Rohingya is slightly different from one township to another. Even if we are allowed to go to school, we experience discrimination on a daily basis. Sometimes the girls are at risk of being sexually assaulted by other ethnic groups. This is also one of the reasons that many parents feel insecure about sending their daughters to school, which deprive the Rohingya from getting access to education.



Even if we have the right to go to school, when we need to take the exam for high school, we need to have an ID, we need to prove that we are citizens of this country. Or we should have some sort of identification and fill up a form to get access to that exam. That is where the Rohingya people struggle.

The good thing is many Rohingya students get good grades. But then when we decide which university to attend, if we choose the university that exists in states outside of Rakhine State, many Rohingya refugee students do not get in simply because we don't have an ID. Simply because they do not want us to go to those big universities and get an education. If Rohingya get access to go to the university in their current state, within Rakhine State, again, Rohingya face discrimination every single day in the classroom, in the university, in the city. We need to obtain a travel document from the city where we were born to go to the university within the state.



If Rohingya manage to finish their university or college degree, again, we struggle to obtain a certificate to acknowledge that we have accomplished that degree because we don't have an ID. And even if the Rohingya manage to get the certificate by any means, no organization, no company, will hire you because you don't have an ID. That is a very strange requirement in our country. Because we cannot prove that we are citizens of the country since we don't have an ID, we cannot be employed.



M V You've shared with us the difficulties you've experienced since your growing-up years. How did all of these affect you and shape you to be the person you are today? You are very much involved in advocacy work, fighting for your rights as refugees.



H T What has helped me to be the person that I am today is a book one of my friends gave me, *Man's Search for Meaning*. It's about a guy who spent his life in the concentration camp and lost every hope. He needed to find a reason to hold on and to stay alive. That is a little bit similar to me, because all I could think about in my life were discrimination, oppression, bitterness, hopelessness, and desperation. I needed to find a reason why I should stay alive. I needed to find a purpose in my life. I found it in serving others, in being the voice for many others like me.

These give me so much meaning, a reason to stay alive.



I had that desire and quest in my heart to be heard. And I want the rest of the world to know what we are experiencing and going through. It is the humanitarian obligation of every person that when we see injustice happening to any other ethnic group in the world, it is our moral responsibility to respond, to take action.

That's how I found my passion, how I continue to do what I do. The unfortunate part is, every single year, instead of having fewer refugees and crises in the world, we keep seeing an increasing number of people fleeing their countries. It's like a never-ending journey of fighting for the rights of people.



"It is the humanitarian obligation of every person that when we see injustice happening to any other ethnic group in the world, it is our moral responsibility to respond, to take action."

M V Let's go to your government under Aung San Suu Kyi. Her government did not recognize the Rohingya's existence and the persecution that every one of you suffered. This is also the same as the junta. What do you expect from the National Unity Government? What is their position on the Rohingya?



H T Many Rohingya expect and hope to see an inclusive government that will treat every minority from Myanmar equally. We are very grateful to see different people from the NUG acknowledging [us] and apologizing to us. [But] in order to earn the trust of the Rohingya and to make us feel safe, they need to go beyond apologizing. They need to show action.

Many Rohingya from the diaspora keep asking the same question: If the NUG wants to be inclusive, why don't they have a Rohingya representative in their government? A week or so ago, the NUG got a Rohingya consultant who is also my colleague. It's a good sign. The hope is for the practical inclusion of Rohingya; give Rohingya equal citizenship right that every citizen of Myanmar enjoys. We are not asking for a privilege. This is our right. We are asking the same rights that other citizens of Myanmar from any ethnic group have the right to enjoy. The hope for all of us is to be able to go home to a place we will be able to call home, and where we will feel welcome and safe and protected by the new government.



M V Do you think this is the long-term solution then to the problem of the Rohingya, as long as government gives the Rohingya equal rights enjoyed by other citizens? Or would you propose other solutions?



H T The legal solution is, first and foremost, the most important thing because law enforcement and legislation of a country definitely protect a group of people. But it's also necessary to achieve understanding between and among different ethnic groups of Myanmar and for the Rohingya to be genuinely accepted. People have been brainwashed for many years. People hate to hear the name Rohingya simply for no reason. That misunderstanding, that hatred, has to disappear. And it's not an impossible mission. We need to have a genuine intention toward welcoming, accepting, and understanding the Rohingya. [There] also has to be acceptance from the public and from different ethnic groups of Myanmar as well, not only by the government. But the role of the government is essential and central.

M V What do you expect from the international community, particularly the United Nations and ASEAN. What can they do?



H T We are looking at how practically the United Nations and ASEAN can be involved to ensure the Rohingya enjoy equal citizenship in the country and have that confidence to go back home where we will be protected, and where we will be accepted and welcomed.

"We are asking the same rights that other citizens of Myanmar from any ethnic group have the right to enjoy."



On ASEAN, I'm sorry to say this again, they need to go beyond their non-interference policy. We need to rethink the role of ASEAN. Is it the policy that matters more than the lives of people? I strongly recommend that ASEAN do everything they could within their power to ensure that the Rohingya are protected and their rights are given and granted, so that they feel safe to return home. Because the solution for more than one million Rohingya is in the country, not outside, not resettlement.



MV Let's go to the present. How's your life now? Are you enjoying it or at least have some break from your work?



HT I don't honestly know about the break, but the difference is now I am grateful for the legal protection that I have. The first residency that I have in my life. Now I can tell people I belong to this country, and I can tell them that I am a permanent resident of New Zealand, which also allowed me in 2019 to travel to different countries, to go to Geneva, and to attend a refugee conference for the stateless in The Hague, and to travel to Australia. I really appreciate that.

I'm grateful that I can now go back to school and do my degree. I am also grateful that I can now expand my advocacy, activism, and become more visible. In the past, I had to always worry about my security and my family's security.

"The solution for more than one million Rohingya is in the country, not outside, not resettlement."





I don't have a break because I am a full-time student and also the chair of Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network. I really am trying to do my time management better to have a little bit of time to relax in between. But I am enjoying it. It makes me feel like I'm living a meaningful life.

M V Do you see yourself settling down there? I mean, many years from now.



"No matter where we are, what status we have, our first and foremost home is Myanmar."

H T It is quite a journey. I appreciate the acceptance and being welcomed in this country. But I think it's going to take quite a while to feel this is my home. I want to emphasize the fact that no matter where we are, what status we have, our first and foremost home is Myanmar. It will always be the same. And we never forget that that is our home, and this is my second home.



M V What gives you hope about the future of the Rohingya? You never stopped fighting because you're hopeful about the future. Where is this hope coming from?



H T In the advocacy and activism field, the changes often don't come very quick. And sometimes the changes that we see are not that big, per se. But it doesn't mean the changes don't exist. Through my journey of activism and advocacy, I have seen the impact that people can make.

The changes today we see about the NUG, about people apologizing, about refugees getting vaccination in Malaysia, refugees from Bangladesh receiving some vaccination for COVID. Those are the changes that we achieve through activism and advocacy.



More than 10 years ago, it was very difficult to be at the table, as the person with experience to speak, to contribute to decision-making. But now, looking back, it is happening. We are not there yet. But refugee participation is becoming more and more visible. We are able to participate more meaningfully, to engage more meaningfully. We have a long way to go. But along the way I have seen the impact that we have made through advocacy and activism.



M V Thank you so much, Hafsar. More power to you.





PART III

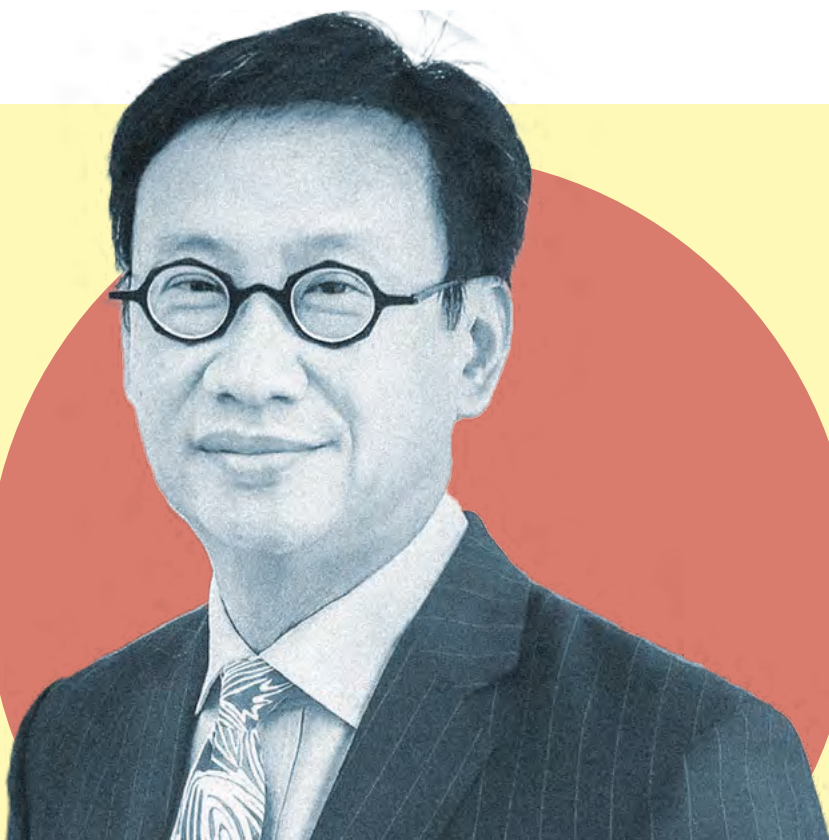
SHAKING UP ASEAN





MU SOCHUA

**“We want to be in a region that
can lead the way in ensuring
human rights and freedom”**



WONG CHEN

“ASEAN is failing because of its non-interference policy and lack of political will to defend and protect democracy in the region”

SEPTEMBER 3, 2021

Disenchantment with the ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has become palpable since the coup in Myanmar in February this year. ASEAN, composed of 10 member-countries, has been painfully slow and ineffective in helping resolve the Myanmar crisis. In April, it held a special summit on Myanmar and agreed on five points, including an immediate stop to the violence and a dialogue of all the parties to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis. ASEAN designated a special envoy to Myanmar in August. We have yet to see the results of this envoy's mission.

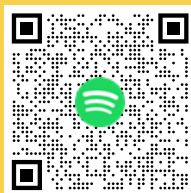
Our guests today, Mu Sochua and Wong Chen, will talk to us about the Southeast Asian Community or SEAC, a new formation that sees itself as an alternative to ASEAN. They're both founding members of SEAC. Mu Sochua was one of the most prominent women in Cambodian politics. A former member of parliament, Madame Mu Sochua is vice president of the opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party, which was disbanded by Prime Minister Hun Sen. She has been living in exile in the U.S. for more than three years now.

Wong Chen, a lawyer, is a member of the Malaysian parliament and one of the leading figures of the People's Justice Party, the biggest party in the opposition coalition. He was chairman of the Malaysian Parliament's International Relations Committee. Currently, he's chief policy advisor to the leader of the opposition, Anwar Ibrahim.

Mu Sochua is joining us from California and Wong Chen is joining us from Kuala Lumpur. Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback!



LISTEN ON SPOTIFY



MARITES VITUG (MV)

I'd like to ask Madame Mu Sochua: Briefly, tell us about the vision of SEAC and how it began. What triggered this?



MU SOCHUA (MS)

It all began in early January of this year, when we were witnessing violations of human rights in the ASEAN countries such as, for example, in Cambodia, where I am from, in Thailand, where protests were going on, even in Vietnam and Myanmar, especially, where the people are suffering from inequalities from discrimination, for example the Rohingya. We were very concerned about the human-rights situation in the ASEAN nations.



I reached out to a good friend, Mr. Wong Chen, who is with us today, because we belong to another group, the ASEAN parliamentarians for human rights. We shared the same concern. And it all started from there. So our vision is a vision of Southeast Asia communities where we put human rights, freedoms, liberties, equality, and justice first. We see that the ASEAN is no longer a grouping of democratic countries, governments. We need to find an alternative to ASEAN.



MV Mr. Wong, following up on what Madame Mu Sochua said, do you see SEAC as an alternative to ASEAN, or simply, at this point, a pressure group, a parallel group to impose pressure on them to open up and undertake reforms?



WONG CHEN (WC)



Yes, I think we are some sort of a parallel organization in the sense that we try to look at the problems that ASEAN can't solve. As you all know, ASEAN has a non-interference policy, and that ASEAN is very mixed in terms of political systems. Therefore they find it very hard to have the political will to do something united, and to uphold good democratic practices, social justice issues. We do have ambitions to be a major organization of some influence.

What we really want to do is to get to the democratic lawmakers and policy thinkers in the region to start thinking about an alternative to ASEAN or how to improve ASEAN from within.

We're not there, as Madame Mu Sochua pointed out earlier, because of the Myanmar crisis. The Myanmar crisis is a current flashpoint. But SEAC really started just before the Myanmar crisis. So we are really concerned about structural issues. We even envision, at one point, to use the European Union as a model for a Southeast Asian Parliament and a Southeast Asian Court of Justice. So it's those basic things this group is thinking, and that we should be working toward those building blocks.

Having said all that, the Myanmar coup has exposed what has been wrong with ASEAN for the last decade or so. Madam Mu Sochua, coming from Cambodia, obviously has deep concerns about Cambodian politics, and the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar—all these seem to show that ASEAN itself is completely failing because of the non-interference policy and the complete lack of political will to defend, safeguard, and promote democracy in the region.



MV Madame Mu Sochua, do you eventually see SEAC as a replacement for ASEAN? Your group is looking at the European Parliament as a model. Do you see that happening in the long term?



MS We're not optimistic about having this new organization, the Southeast Asian Community, established within the next two or three years. We have given ourselves about 10 years to get to the model that we have, for example, having a Southeast Asian Parliament like the European Parliament, even a tribunal to resolve business issues.

However, what is important is not to exclude civil society. We are very, very concerned about the voices of the people of Southeast Asia, about the economic inequality within the region itself.

The ASEAN is supposed to provide opportunities to communities that have less

access to opportunities. This economic gap is growing.

For example, the issue of migrant workers in ASEAN involves a huge population. Therefore, we have to engage those players, civil society, migrant workers, the women.

"The Myanmar coup has exposed what has been wrong with ASEAN for the last decade or so."



MV Mr. Wong, that's a very big problem posed by Madame Mu Sochua, the great inequality among countries here in Southeast Asia. What should SEAC do or what do you want ASEAN to do at this point in time?



WC It's very important to look at ASEAN or the Southeast Asian region as one united economic center. Of course, you have Singapore, on the one end, and you have a country like Laos on the other extreme in terms of development and access to capital. Even the laws are also not very clear in terms of commercial laws and issues. What we really want to do, in the big broad picture in terms of economic reality, is to get this dialogue going, including the concept of one regional bloc producing services, perhaps some of the high-end services will come from the more developed countries... There must be a concerted effort to transfer knowledge and technology down to the less developed countries.

Manufacturing, obviously, is the lower end of the services chain. So manufacturing will then move toward the less-developed countries, but some co-ownership among ASEAN investors should be the priority, open up their doors to Japan, China, U.S., or the European Union for investment.

We really need to look at the ASEAN as a bloc and increase the interaction in investment there, and also ensure at the basic level that the wealth is shared not just between the countries, but also within the country. We try to use the economic platform as a key driver toward the vision of a full democracy in Southeast Asia. These two have to go hand in hand: the economic issue and also the issues on human rights and democracy.



M V Just a follow-up, Mr. Wong. Do you think this policy of non-interference slows down economic initiatives?



W C We all know that the chronic issue in Southeast Asia, in many Asian countries, is the lack of respect for democracy and lack of transparency and accountability. And all these have a negative impact on the economy. The Malaysian economy, for instance, has been strong since the 1990s. But we've been slowing down since the year 2000 and that coincides with the idea that corruption is endemic and that governance is poor. There is a direct impact in other countries. So we have to focus on the correlation between economic sharing and political opening. Democracy is an essential element in every country that is successful in the world. So I hope that the lawmakers will be more receptive toward the ideas that we need political change as well as economic improvement.



M V Madame Mu Sochua, you mentioned earlier that you've reached out to civil-society groups. Do you see SEAC as a coalition of civil-society groups in Southeast Asia? Or is there such an existing coalition already?



SEAC

SOUTH EAST ASIA COMMUNITY



M S We have to use these assets. There are coalitions, there are networks or groups at the local level, at the grassroots level. For example, in the Philippines, your grassroots networks have a strong base in communities. But in other parts of Southeast Asia—for example, in Laos, or in Cambodia, or in Brunei—there is less of an opportunity for the grassroots networks to be part of policymaking, of decision-making. So we want to create a Southeast Asian community where the grassroots groups, civil society, the community-based organizations bring up issues.

You have the ASEAN way wherein the government officials talk amongst themselves, and then the civil-society forum is set aside. We do not want this type of model. It should be for the peoples of Southeast Asia. We start with consultations, and that's what we have been doing.



M V So ASEAN has not been doing consultations with civil-society groups?



M S They have been, but it is more of a parallel channel. In some countries, for example, in Cambodia, Vietnam, even Singapore, when you talk about civil society, where are they? There is no such thing as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly. There is not such a thing as an opposition that is not threatened by the ruling party. So therefore, we have to engage the peoples at the grassroots level and to empower them. This is the model that we want to have. The SEAC is learning from the failure of ASEAN in establishing that sense of ownership in the grassroots community.



"We have to engage the peoples at the grassroots level and to empower them. The SEAC is learning from the failure of ASEAN in establishing that sense of ownership in the grassroots community."

M V Mr. Wong, many of the founding members of SEAC are no longer with government or are no longer elected officials. You're still a member of parliament. What is the advantage of SEAC over the other civil-society coalitions in Southeast Asia?





WC We do have that slight advantage. As you know, Marites, in reality, politicians work in different ways, they like to network. Many decisions are based on personal relationships, hinge a lot on personal touch. So what we have in SEAC is that our members, the founding members, are politicians of high repute. They do have a wide network. So we have been engaging current members of parliament, legislators—some of them are, in fact, from the government side, not just opposition members. That's the real strength and difference between SEAC and most CSOs [civil-society organizations]. CSOs are not really politicians. We are mostly politicians at the moment.

Madame Mu Sochua has intentions to bring in the CSOs in a big way. But I think both the politicians and CSOs can work in different ways through the various networks. I think that's going to be more effective because I don't think SEAC is really a powerful organization, per se. Its power is really in the network, which is informal, and sometimes unseen.

MV Mr. Wong, what feedback did you get from members of government that you've reached out to?



WC Most of them are agreeable. In particular, for Malaysian lawmakers, and also Indonesian lawmakers, where Islam is the main religion, what they've seen in the Rohingya crisis is a very big issue for them. Most of them will privately or even officially state their position about the shortcomings of ASEAN. They do want changes. Whether they are under the umbrella of SEAC or not, that remains to be seen because most people are posturing. As you know, politicians do that.

We did manage to get some existing members of parliament, including my boss [Anwar Ibrahim], to join in the SEAC event. So I can say that there is a lot of ground support for this kind of thing in Malaysia and Indonesia, in particular, with regard to the Rohingya issue. From learning from my other colleagues in SEAC, even in Thailand, people are very keen. So we do get a sense that it is fully supported by a lot of legislators, whether they come out formally or not.



M V Madame Mu Sochua, let's turn our attention to the current flashpoint, Myanmar, although it was not the main trigger for SEAC. In what way is ASEAN deficient? How come it's turning out to be ineffective, and what can SEAC do to help push the process, to ease the crisis in Myanmar?



M S First of all, ASEAN has to definitely delete this non-interference policy, which is actually a very safe shelter for the junta, for the military, for the dictators. If it doesn't, it will lose its own legitimacy.

Since February, every single day, lives are being wasted in the most atrocious way. It's genocide. How can ASEAN be an association that promotes peace, harmony, and one community when members of its community are being slaughtered? And we wait and wait. This is totally not acceptable.

We have to respond by putting the lives of the people first in terms of how Myanmar is going to be represented in the UN. And then the spillover of refugees from Myanmar to Thailand again and again. I come from Cambodia. There was a spillover of refugees from Cambodia during the genocide years, from 1975 to 1979. I'm part of the refugee population. History repeats itself, where ASEAN continues to play around with that shield for the dictators to grab the power in the most illegitimate way. This has to stop.



M V How about you, Mr. Wong? I just want to know your thoughts as well on this great crisis in Myanmar facing ASEAN. How to pressure ASEAN into taking action?





wc It's very clear that ASEAN has taken way too long to try to resolve anything or make any headway at all. As you know, the coup happened in early February. And it took ASEAN three months just to convene a meeting to come up with a five-point charter. They took another three months to implement the five-point charter. That's six months gone down the drain. And after the meeting with the junta, the ASEAN envoy hasn't even met the opposition yet. This is just not the way to go.

The world is wrongly asking ASEAN to carry out the solution. The world, the United Nations, will have to do a parallel engagement. Even the European Union, which has a lot of trade and services in Myanmar, should also make those efforts, unilateral efforts. We have Malaysian companies there, we have Singaporean companies there. These countries need to make a unilateral effort to protect the investments. That goes for China, a major investor.

I don't think they want to see political instability to continue or, God forbid, a civil war to break out. Therefore, I think we have to appeal to everyone, not just to ASEAN, to solve this problem, because ASEAN is just not doing it. The moment the United Nations makes an effort of their own, countries who invested in Myanmar will also take unilateral efforts. Then you will start to see ASEAN getting a lot of pressure to finally move faster.



M V The final question for both of our guests. Madame Mu Sochua, why are you hopeful about SEAC?



M S I am hopeful because, as you can see, the people in Myanmar, the people in Thailand, the people even in Cambodia, we are fighting from exile. But we will never, we will not give up the values that we cherish so much, which are freedom, liberty, justice, the democratic principles. If we don't see people out in the streets, it does not mean that they have given up the fight for justice. COVID-19 has affected our movement. But the spirit to fight for freedom in the region, it is still there.



M V Mr. Wong, why are you hopeful about SEAC?



W C This is a vision at the moment. We don't really have a very strong organization. But that could change very quickly when we get more funding. It's a vision that is absolutely unstoppable. It may take 10 years, as Madame pointed out, it could take up to 20 years. It doesn't really matter. The next generation is going to take this on and continue the process of change within ASEAN, in the same way that the European Union started in 1950s and they saw its fruition in the 1990s. That took a 40-year journey for the Europeans.





Why I'm really hopeful is because SEAC is inevitable. Economics in this region will prosper because fundamentally of the ability of the people in Southeast Asia to conduct commerce, an ethic of hard work, and a real respect for education. They're all investing in economic betterment. With economic betterment comes prosperity; with prosperity, political awakening follows. So it's all purely a question of timing.

The region is quickly realizing that, amid the ongoing geopolitical quarrel between the U.S. and China, there's a real push amongst most lawmakers that to unite more as a region and to best work out a structure that is based on legal terms, no longer wishy-washy, non-interference stuff. We need binding stuff. Otherwise, ASEAN risks being divided into two or three camps: those who are pro-China, those who are pro-U.S., those who are stuck in between. So if we don't unite soon, and the lawmakers don't believe in this, then we're in trouble.



When it comes to this kind of geopolitical level, there is incentive to improve. And I see economic growth in the next 10 to 20 years. I'm absolutely sure if we have to put a bet on this, SEAC will happen. It's just a question of time. The faster the better, of course, for all of us.

MV One more final question for both of you. Would you have any words to share, a message for our listeners and viewers, to reach out to them?



MS As a woman from Southeast Asia, being with the women's movement in my country, in Cambodia, I've watched women from the rice fields working day in and day out to put their children, their girls to school, to give them the best education. That is the spirit of Southeast Asia that we want to promote, we want to cherish.

I will stress that the peoples of Southeast Asia have respect for the ethnic minorities, the indigenous communities, and also for the protection of our environment. We want to be a in a region that is not just prosperous, but also can lead the way in promoting human rights, freedoms, and liberties of our people.



MV Mr. Wong, some final words, a message from you?

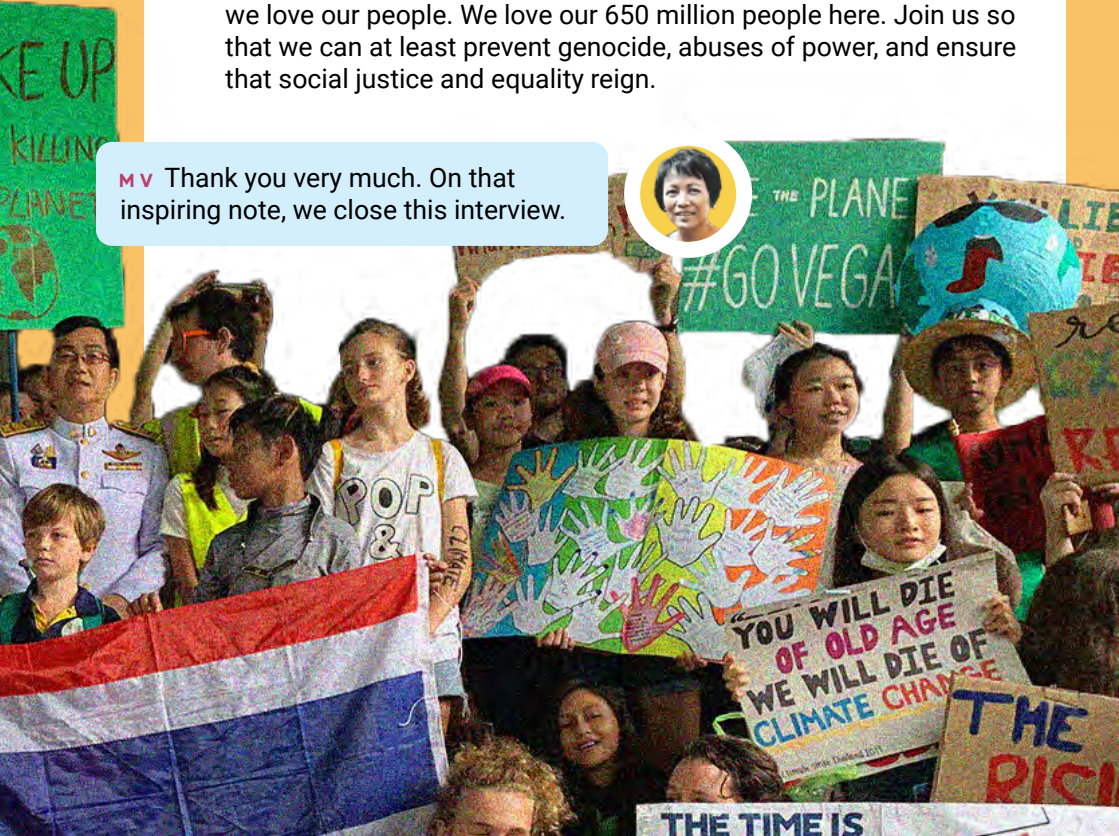


WC Normally, I would tell anyone listening to this, and especially the youth, to most importantly, educate yourself properly, to be extremely critical of everything, your government, the media, but more importantly, to fight for transparency and accountability among all lawmakers that you elect into office.

If you take that position, and you can encourage other people to take the same position, hopefully then the nature of politics in Southeast Asia will become more democratic over the period. And just carry out the reforms you want for your respective countries, but at the same time, engage your neighbors, travel, visit, exchange ideas on a regional basis, even on a global basis.

We're facing a world where we have artificial intelligence, climate change. This is the time for the "woke" generation. And we really need to believe that you can change and therefore your change has a ripple effect. We in SEAC try to do our best for our region because we love our people. We love our 650 million people here. Join us so that we can at least prevent genocide, abuses of power, and ensure that social justice and equality reign.

MV Thank you very much. On that inspiring note, we close this interview.





RAFENDI DJAMIN

“Understanding the lives of victims is a strong driver for my human rights activism”

OCTOBER 26, 2021

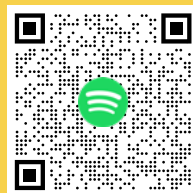
Today Indonesia enjoys the distinction of being the most stable democracy in Southeast Asia. This is happening amid the decline of democracy in the Philippines and Thailand, and a political crisis plaguing Malaysia's young democracy.

As the largest economy in the region, Indonesia has long been considered the first among equals in ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Can Indonesia push ASEAN toward a more democratic direction? We will talk about this big question and related issues in this episode of our podcast.

Our guest is Rafendi Djamin, former chairperson of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Currently, he's Senior Advisor for the Human Rights Working Group in Indonesia. Rafendi joins us from Jakarta. Welcome to The Great Asian Pushback, Rafendi!



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MARITES VITUG (MV)

Let's start with the big issue of Indonesia as the acknowledged most democratic country in ASEAN, having eclipsed the Philippines. Do you share this view, and what factors make Indonesia a stable democracy?



RAFENDI DJAMIN (RD)

We learned a lot from the Philippine democracy, which returned in 1986 [people power revolt]. That has inspired democratic elements of Indonesian society. Indonesia, learning lessons from the Philippines, toppled 30 years of the authoritarian regime of Soeharto, which was also triggered by the economic crisis at the time. That became a political opportunity for radical change.



Since then, we built the foundation of our democracy, first by amending our Constitution and adopting specific norms and values of human rights, building a legal framework based on human-rights norms. That was a very good starting point of our reforms. It was followed by the separation of the armed forces, the military, from the police forces and the building of independent institutions so that a system of checks and balance can develop and grow.

At the same time, electoral process is needed for democracy. We believe in a multi-party democracy. I wouldn't say that our democracy now is quite mature because corruption is still very rampant. It is also rooted in the political process. It is very expensive to run for a leadership post; you need a billion dollars for a campaign. Despite these challenges, democracy is still working after two decades of exercising and learning what democracy is.



M V How can Indonesia use its position in ASEAN to make ASEAN a stronger rights-based organization? Later, we can talk about what's happening in Myanmar and Cambodia. For now, let's look at the big picture.



R D That's an interesting question. It was only in 1996 when I became interested in ASEAN for my human-rights advocacy. I didn't care about the ASEAN before. I went straight to the UN system where there are special rapporteurs, conventions in monitoring the implementation of human rights. At the time, there was the Commission on Human Rights, which has now become the Human Rights Council.

ASEAN became interesting in 1996 because there were discussions on changes in norms when they were setting up the ASEAN Charter. Civil-society groups from almost all member-states began to advocate for democratic norms. I come from Indonesia, a big country, and our [present] population of 250 million is almost one-third of the whole ASEAN population. We were not a big brother, but Indonesia tried to lead by example, not telling you what to do, but showing how we do it. We played a big role in terms of building a rights-based regional bloc.



Our focus in ASEAN is building up political cooperation to mainstream the democratic norms, human rights, and values. That's why ASEAN has a Charter that legally binds member-states with strong articles on the commitment to good governance and fundamental rights. That's a starting point. And these will be translated into different institutions. That's why Article 14 created the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission of Human Rights or ICHR. Six months later, ASEAN had a second human-rights body, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children or ACWC. So it was quite a fast process after the Charter.

Now we are struggling with the institution within ASEAN. I became the representative of Indonesia to the ASEAN ICHR, what Philippine activists call a "crossover" strategy. That's part of my strategy as an activist, and I became a representative of my government, but at the same time, I'm acting as an independent commissioner.

We also introduced democratic values by advocating electoral democracy, independent parties or a multi-party system. It is going to be a very long process because ASEAN consists of some member-states that have a one-party system, even an absolute monarchy. By introducing the multi-party system, it is a way of sharing norms, which is actually a goal of ASEAN cooperation itself.



M V You talked about crossing over from being an activist to representing your government, and then you became chair of the AICHR. What were your experiences like? What were the most difficult moments as leader of AICHR?



R D The leadership of the ASEAN bodies is by rotation, always a one-year turn, and it is alphabetical. Now, it's Brunei, and the next one will be Cambodia, and after that Indonesia in 2023. Being a chair is not an elected post. But having this position presents some opportunity, which is more than what a member-state has. So when I was the chair, I was able to expedite linking up with other ASEAN bodies, first with our sister organization, the ACWC. There was a kind of competition between these two bodies so during my chairmanship in 2011, that was the beginning of the process where these two bodies sat together and talked about how to proceed and how we perceived our roles as human-rights bodies within ASEAN.

The second thing that I did during my chairmanship was to promote a vibrant relationship with civil society. The relationship between civil society and the state depends on the political system of the member-state. In an absolute monarchy, there is no culture of a vibrant civil society. At the same time, in an autocratic system, in a one-party system, the state says they represent the people, they build the party base from the people. So they do not accept civil society talking back to them.

I was able to build trust, engaged with states, and talked to them about how civil society works: Although they are part of your people, they are part of your party, you need independent feedback from these groups that will be good for your government. There were a lot of difficulties, but I think I was able to do it.

M V You were in a difficult position because we know that human-rights protection and authoritarian regimes do not mix here in the ASEAN. What then is the most effective way for countries to uphold human rights? You said before that "the settlement of human-rights cases lies at the national level."





R D I grew up in a very authoritarian regime as an activist. Even then, I was effective because international advocacy was one of my core activities at the time. International activities provide you the space to build up pressure to make change, because who is going to make change? It is the government. If they don't want to change, nothing's going to change in the society.

So in an undemocratic country, international pressure is the most important instrument the local groups can use. When there is democratic space, we engage more with government officials to build trust. The real change is actually at the national level because of the laws, regulations, and institutions, and also the culture of non-violence. At the international and regional level, when changes don't affect the national level, these won't be meaningful for the people on the ground.

M V Let's go to the hot topic in ASEAN these days, Myanmar. Recently they released some political prisoners, although there are still a number who are detained. Many have been killed. ASEAN, for the first time, did not invite a leader of a member country to its meeting. What do you think can be done about this problem called Myanmar?



R D We have experience dealing with the authoritarian military regime of Myanmar. During my time there [in AICHR], Myanmar was promising some political change at the national level. So they were given some space and opportunity as a leader in the ASEAN.

"In an undemocratic country, international pressure is the most important instrument the local groups can use."





Now, another coup has taken place. We will have to deal with this as a regional organization. There are articles in the Charter about how you are going to settle a dispute, but this mechanism hasn't been used. This is a norm but the mechanism has not been implemented.



ASEAN—by not inviting an official is already a kind of sanction that the regional bloc can do. We are not yet like the Organization of American States or the African Union where a serious breach of the charter can lead to robust sanctions, for example, like suspending the membership. These are the things that have to be built upon in the context of maintaining meaningful cooperation. At the same time, sharing and building up the values and norms of democracy, rule of law, good governance, and respect for fundamental rights.

M V You've been working on human-rights issues for a long time. What are your thoughts about Cambodia? It's been an authoritarian state for many years. Recently, Cambodia passed a law banning dual citizens from seeking higher posts. I think this is referring to the opposition leaders in exile, who will be practically excluded from the election.



R D It's not something new. It's a very common tool of authoritarian governments to suppress the opposition using laws and regulations. That happened as well in Myanmar when Au San Suu Kyi was not yet elected. The issue was that she had another nationality so she was not eligible to run for president.



"We are not yet like the Organization of American States or the African Union where a serious breach of the charter can lead to robust sanctions, for example, like suspending the membership."

This is also practiced by Singapore. They passed a new law, a non-interference law, which is basically trying to control their own civil society. [It allows the government to order social media sites and Internet providers to disclose user information or block content they deem hostile, according to the BBC.] So even a so-called liberal economic country like Singapore is also a repressive regime.

There was a time when Cambodia was more democratic, had a vibrant civil society. For such a small country, it had a lot of NGOs in Cambodia. It was amazing. But Hun Sen is becoming the longest-ruling authoritarian leader in our region, even longer than Soeharto's 30 years. Myanmar was ruled by the generals for almost 50 years [and then again starting February 2021].



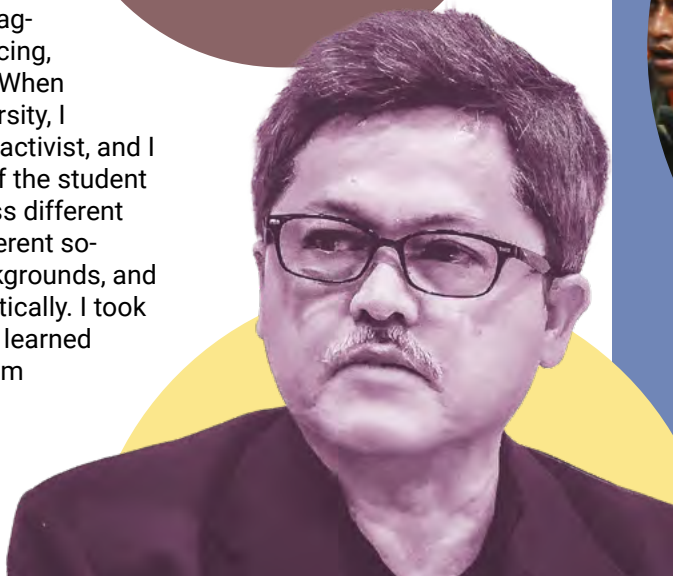
M V Let's turn to the personal context. How did you evolve into a human-rights defender? Talk a bit about yourself.



R D I'm 64 this year. I enjoy what I am doing and I feel blessed. I'm very glad that I can still maintain my commitment and activities I am passionate about.

"It's a very common tool of authoritarian governments to suppress the opposition using laws and regulations."

When I was a teenager, I got lost in dancing, drinking, partying. When I entered the university, I became a student activist, and I ran for president of the student body. I came across different students from different socio-economic backgrounds, and I began to think critically. I took up Sociology and I learned critical thinking from leftist literature that I read.



I advocated for academic freedom during my student years. I advocated for an independent student body. I got arrested, was detained without trial, and I got expelled from the university because of political activities. I said, "This should never happen to other people." So that was the beginning of my passion and I continued and maintained this passion.



While working on human rights, talking to the victims, becoming friends with the victims, and understanding the life of the victim became very strong drivers in my advocacy.

MV How were you raised, how were your growing-up years? Maybe parents who are listening would like to know how to raise their children to be committed activists like you.



RD My father was a Navy officer from an authoritarian regime. But he was also a political and international relations graduate. He learned about social values. He always taught me how to uphold norms and values. We always had a debate, so sometimes I locked myself up so that I did not see him for a couple of days. But he's still my father, trying to be open.

I come from a Muslim family with a liberal-minded thinking. When I see the development of conservatism, the radicalization, it is very sad that our society is becoming very divided. People lose their tolerance and are imposing what they believe on others, even by violence.



M V Would you have parting words for our viewers and listeners, especially the young people and those who are committed to fighting for human rights?



R D Something that you need to have is patience. Human-rights struggle is a long struggle. You need to build endurance to move forward. Sometimes you have to move backward one step in order to make another step forward.

You have to believe in the democratic norms and values and, at the same time, be smart to see any small changes that are results of your advocacy work. I see some human-rights advocates who are not able to see little changes taking place. They don't know what progress is. Some activists use the language of advocacy that was used 10 years ago, as if nothing has been happening.

Now we are living in a very open but difficult time. Social-media networks reinforce fanatics. They just want to see one source of information. They don't want to see any other sources although there are a lot of options. These are the challenges of the new generation of activists.



"Human-rights struggle is a long struggle. You need to build endurance to move forward."

M V Well said. Thank you so much, Rafendi.





P A R T I V

THE OPPOSITION'S CHALLENGE





NIK NAZMI BIN NIK AHMAD

**"Politics is a marathon...and it takes
energy and patience to survive"**

NOVEMBER 29, 2021

Malaysia is on the edge. For almost two years now, the country has been in political turmoil. The ineffective handling of the pandemic and economic downturn have brought poor Malaysians to their knees. The phenomenon of #Benderaputih or “white flag” took social media by storm. Households hung white flags on their windows, a distress signal, asking for help. On the political front, a “Black Flag” movement began, a show of protest against the government.

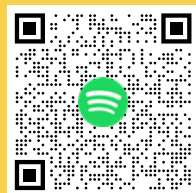
Amid these upheavals, Malaysia had two prime ministers in a period of two years. What’s happening?

Our guest for this episode is Nik Nazmi bin Nik Ahmad, member of Parliament and of the opposition People’s Justice Party. Nik Nazmi is 39 years old, a youth leader and a reformist politician in Malaysia. He joins us from Kuala Lumpur.

Nik Nazmi, welcome to The Great Asian Pushback!



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MARITES VITUG (MV)

In 2018, Malaysia held a lot of hope and promise when the opposition got together and dislodged UMNO [United Malays National Organisation]. Years later, what led to this failed promise?

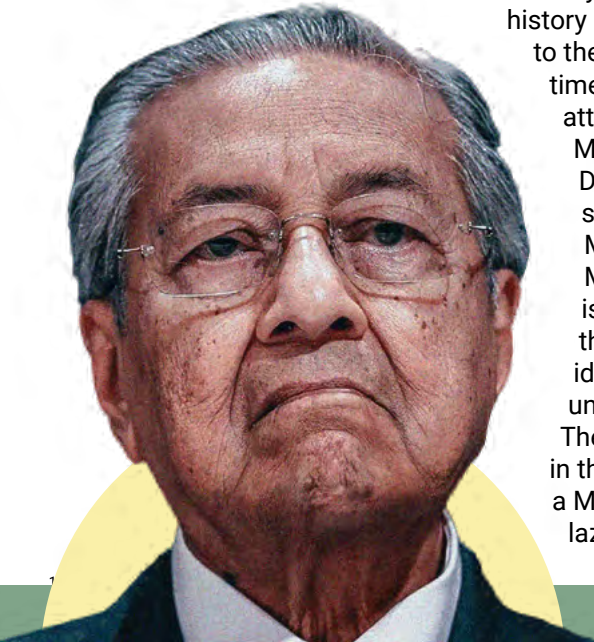


NIK NAZMI (NN)

Definitely, 2018 was a time of great hope. This was the time when Donald Trump was in power in the U.S. There was a lot of cynicism across the world. But people saw Malaysia as a beacon of hope. A group of multiracial parties and the alliance between two great nemeses, Mahathir [Mohamad] and Anwar [Ibrahim], brought down the Barisan Nasional Coalition, which, in various forms, had been in power since independence in 1957.



Unfortunately, the coalition was very brittle. In the history of Malaysia, much of the damage to the institutions was done during the time of Mahathir. Scandals that people attribute to Najib Razak, the Prime Minister then, like 1MDB [Malaysia Development Berhad] and other scandals, happened because of Mahathir. As much as we hoped that Mahathir had a change of heart—he is now in his 90s—it turned out that this was not the case. He pushed this idea that we have to focus again on unity among the Malay community. The stereotype we are all familiar with in the region, which was popularized by a Malaysian sociologist, the myth of the lazy native, was perpetuated.



Our first two finance ministers were non-Malays, from 1957 to 1974. Pakatan Harapan brought in the first non-Malay finance minister since then, from 2018 to 2020. We had a non-Malay attorney general, non-Malay chief justice in the system. That created fears and insecurity in the Malay community.

Added to that was when the government pushed through the Rome Statute ratification, which I believe is merited, but the timing was perhaps not right. There were concerns over ratifying the Rome Statute with regards to the position of the King. It was not true, but those opposing it claimed that the King as the Chief Commanding Officer would be held responsible if our armed forces were punished under the Statute. We put that at the forefront of our agenda without proper consultation.

At the same time, the new government was cutting budgets, subsidies to the poor, [who are] predominantly Malays, so that just fueled the insecurity. Ultimately, it was Mahathir's determination not to hand over power to Anwar Ibrahim, as promised. That was the undoing of our coalition.



M V It has been reported that Malaysian politics is really based on race. How does Malaysia get out of this box of race-based politics?

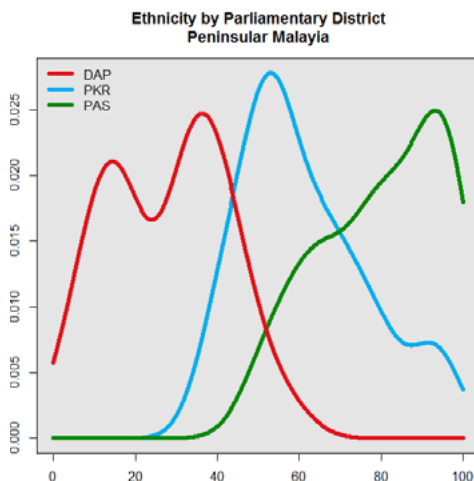


N N There needs to be long-term work to undo this. There are multiracial parties, the DAP [Democratic Action Party], which has been around for quite some time, but it's predominantly non-Malay. Then we have my party, the Justice Party or PKR [Parti Keadilan Rakyat], which is more mixed but it's led by Malays, Anwar Ibrahim's party.

We have other new parties coming up that are multiracial in nature. That's the first step. If you're in another country, in the West, for example, you know that if you're a Democrat, then you will tap the left during your party primaries to get the support of your party members, and then you move to the center in a general election to get the vote of the general public, similarly in the U.K. In Malaysia, when you have race-based parties, a lot of party leaders will play the race card in order to appeal to the party members. But in multiracial parties, you can't do that because PKR [Parti Keadilan Rakyat], for example, is 50 percent Malay, 25 percent Indian, 15 percent Chinese, and the remainder are the Borneo natives.



I can't play the race card in my party. As much as my party went through an acrimonious split during the fall of the [Pakatan] Harapan government, the factions were aligned, they were relatively multiracial. It shows that the party has really advanced in terms of multiracialism. Multiracial parties are the way forward.



But there needs to be an ability to reach out to the Malay belt and to the Malay grassroots, not to give up on them. It frequently happens that liberals or those in the cities tend to give up on those in the compounds and think that they are beyond "salvation." That is a recipe for disaster. When I look at the lessons in the U.S., when the Democrats gave up on the white Americans in the Midwest, it was a recipe for disaster.



"Multiracial parties are the way forward."

There's the problem of a lot of liberals and middle class who speak in English and people in the compounds speak in Malay. In reaching out to them, not just for them to understand our agenda, but so that we the leaders can understand what their needs and aspirations are, we need to speak in Malay.



M V Let's talk about the pandemic. It continues to have an impact on Malaysian politics. The former government's handling of the pandemic was characterized as inefficient, slow. How would you compare that to today, under Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob?



N N To be fair, I think our government was doing quite well with the pandemic, but it was still very much in the early stage. At the time, most of the countries around the world had not even banned tourists from China. But after the government fell, there was a vacuum there. But to the government's credit, and I think more to the civil-service credit, they managed to handle the COVID crisis quite well. We were cited as one of the models in the first few months. But then we had a state election in Borneo and in Sabah. And because of the political crisis, that sparked a wave, and the effects were long-lasting.

The other part was vaccination, which was also problematic although, to be fair, eventually we did catch up. I think we have done reasonably well. It was that part of the handling of COVID during Muhyiddin Yassin's premiership when we had the #KerajaanGagal or "failed government" trending across the cyberspace. That's when people noticed how bad things were.



It's a two-pronged thing. The most deplorable were the deaths, but it's also about the economic effects of COVID. The fact that we had multiple lockdowns, people were fatigued. When the government was so unstable because the majority was wafer-thin, then they decided to declare an emergency, supposedly to fight COVID. But we saw that the cases just rose and rose during the emergency from January to July this year [2021]. That was when people were really angry.





Trends for you

Trending in Malaysia

#KerajaanGagal

129K Tweets

Trending in Malaysia

UMNO

6,030 Tweets

Trending in Malaysia

#TheKingEternalMonarch

10.2K Tweets

The new prime minister, in a way, has benefited because the vaccination process eventually went on quite well. The effects of the pump-priming, although I would say still limited, were felt by the people. They had money in their hands to spend. So the handling has improved.

But the concern going forward is that we have new variants. There are places in the south of the peninsula, in Johor, where a lot of people depend on Singapore, whether for work or school. The borders are just starting to open and if they close down again, it's going to be difficult.

What I think is fundamental is that there is a need for the government to spend more to restructure the economy. If you look at other countries—I certainly see it in Singapore and in Indonesia—they use the opportunity of the crisis as a way to restructure the economy. We can't accept uncritically the old model of the market-driven economy of the '90s. We missed that opportunity in COVID, to really restructure the economy. That would have made lasting change in our society.



MV Let's step back a bit. You're one of the leading reformist politicians in Malaysia. What are the reforms that should be achieved in the short term as well as in the long term?



N N I will focus on a few key things. When you talk about health, in Malaysia, everyone who got straight As in school will become doctors. We were very generous, we allowed many private universities to open and offer medicine. We also recognized more and more overseas universities that offered medicine. As a result, we have a lot of graduates coming in, and the government can no longer afford to hire them. And they are only given short-term contracts. That has been a major sore point in the country because they are at the frontlines dealing with COVID. They are uncertain about their future, unlike the senior doctors who are given permanent government jobs with pensions. There has to be a better solution, maybe longer-term contracts.

Secondly, the disruption in education is real. People who can afford a tablet for every kid and good Internet connection would definitely study differently compared to someone who has to share it with the siblings. We had a case in Malaysian Borneo where one of the university students had to climb a tree to connect to the Internet. The education inequality is real and we see education as the great equalizer. That's how Malaysia succeeded in the past, by investing a lot in education. That's where we really need to focus on.



The third is restructuring of the economy, to address jobs and wages. Malaysia was among the beneficiaries of COVID in the sense that we have a lot of rubber-glove factories. Those companies' directors became billionaires in terms of Malaysian ringgit because of the rise in demand for rubber gloves. But then there was a COVID outbreak among the workers, mostly foreign workers, because they were put in very bad housing, with crowded rooms. Malaysia can't be relying on foreign workers forever. And we need to give better wages, provide better conditions, if we are to attract our workers and really invest in them. I believe in a more reformist approach by nudging the market or government policies before it's too late, before people really get angry.



M V I was struck by your anecdote of a student who climbed a tree to get an Internet connection. That is happening here in the Philippines as well. Anyway, about the migrant workers in Malaysia, are these primarily Filipinos who work in the rubber factories?



N N No, I will presume that a lot of them are Indonesians and Bangladeshis. Maybe Nepalis. Filipinos are in the domestic and health sector, maybe restaurants, some in the hospitality industry.



Malaysia is very reliant on foreign labor. We are a country of 35 million. I think the numbers for foreign legal workers are only about two million. But you have probably another four or five million who are not registered. The moment you are not registered, there are various ways that the employers or the agents become predators and exploit them.

Malaysia started off very well, similar to Philippines, in a sense. In the '60s, we were at par with Singapore, Korea, Taiwan. And

the way we competed at that time was on low wages. Taiwan, Singapore, and the rest moved up the value chain. They invested in technology. But in Malaysia, we managed to get away without moving up the value chain, but instead imported more and more foreign workers. Very few Malaysians want to work in factories. They don't find it worth the wages. They work in the gig economy to deliver food, they want to do some office work, even if it's very menial. They get to wear a nice shirt and work in an airconditioned office. Or in the service sector.

Palm-oil plantations were really big in Malaysia. And I think that's where we missed out. Instead of competing in terms of technology, in the capital-intensive sector, we are still competing in terms of low wages. We can't do that for long because Indonesia, Vietnam easily outbid us in terms of wages. Maybe our advantage was English, but you don't need English to plant palm trees.



M V Let's talk about the opposition. Are you ready to take over and how do you plan to take out your country from its current predicament?



N N The opposition was in a state of hangover after we lost power. This was our first time to be in federal power. The federal government has a disproportionate amount of power compared to the state. We've made a few mistakes. To be fair, we did a few good reforms as well. But you know, ultimately it collapsed. For a few months, we were still finding our way. The opposition is based on a coalition because that's been the governing model in Malaysia for a long time. We've relied on pre-election coalitions, meaning, you go to an election and you already divide the seats, you avoid three-cornered fights. And in a way it worked well, in the past.

We need to really connect with the voters. What they want to hear is how do we solve the bread-and-butter issues?

But the model is coming under strain, both in the government side and also on our side. We've been together for a long time, going back to the *Reformasi* years. That was more than 20 years ago. Moving forward, do we need a real solid coalition

with a formal structure with one logo, like we did in 2018? Or we can go back to the previous model where the coalition is a bit looser, and maybe one day, do even post-election coalitions. So that is something to think about.

There are a lot of challenges for the opposition to take over the government. I don't think it is politics as usual. It's going to be a bit more fluid. And in that sense, that is an opportunity for us. Ibrahim is leading us in the election. The good thing for the Justice Party is that we have a lot of young leaders, those who can be on the forefront. We need to really connect with the voters. If we just talk about losing power, about being betrayed, I don't believe it connects with the voters. What they want to hear is how do we solve the bread-and-butter issues? That will be the basic demand from the voters.



M V You've partially answered my next question about mistakes to be avoided. But is there any one big lesson that you've learned from your experience with the pre-election coalition?



N N Whichever party we talk to, whether it's the Justice Party, or our friends in the coalition, and even other parties, the way forward is to always look outside your core voters. Obviously, you need to take care of them because if they don't go out to vote, then you lose that chunk of voters.

But beyond that, you need to think about what the floating voters or the swing voters are thinking, because they decide the elections. If there's too much navel-gazing, just looking inward, then there is the danger of missing that point. That's why I spoke in the beginning about the opposition base, which is very urban. Our louder supporters tend to be the English-speaking middle class. I get a lot of support from them and I'm thankful for that. But we really need to go out there and roll our sleeves and work on the ground with the people who are in the so-called Malay belt. People in Borneo.



"The way forward is to always look outside your core voters... you need to think about what the floating voters or the swing voters are thinking, because they decide the elections."

If there is that condescending view that people in Kuala Lumpur know better because we are more educated and all that, I think we are going to be taught a very harsh lesson. This is democracy and it's ultimately a game of numbers. We cannot underestimate the wisdom of the people. But the problem is we've never had the courage to really be frank with them. That's crucial. That's a mistake to avoid when we talk to these voters. We have to involve them, listen to them. And I think we will be able to get a better result in the elections.



M V These are lessons that can be learned here in the Philippines as well. Anyway, there seems to be cooperation or bipartisan effort between the opposition and PM Yaakob. Can you briefly talk to us about this cooperation agreement?



N N After the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government in February 2020, the opposition was still finding its feet, but eventually, we did try to take over the government by getting other MPs to come over. But it did not work out. The government tried to declare an emergency but finally, the government did collapse. It fell to another UMNO leader, Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

The government's mandate was going to expire on the second half of 2023. The problem was that it was not going to be stable. So we decided that rather than continue to destabilize the government at a time of health and economic disaster, we decided to sign a memorandum of understanding where we give them support in terms of confidence in passing the budget. But in return, they have to implement key reforms. It was not popular. Many of our co-workers saw that as a betrayal.



"We cannot underestimate the wisdom of the people."

But a few key things have happened. For the first time, all MPs who are party to the agreement are given equal allocation. At the same time, we are pushing through the lowering of voting age from 21 to 18. This was our policy. We amended the Constitution when we were in power but the government, under the new leadership, dragged it. It should be implemented next year.



The status of the Borneo states—they have a special position under the Constitution—is also going to be amended soon. We are also pushing for parliamentary reform. Select committees did not exist before we came to government or were very limited. When we came to government, we introduced them, but these were controlled by the executive. Today it's much more balanced between the opposition and the government.

There's a steering committee that monitors the progress of the reforms. There's a clear timeline on when to deliver these reforms. Overall, that is positive, and hopefully, it reduces tribalism in politics that has been very deep in Malaysia, especially since the Anwar-Mahathir crisis in the '90s.

If you don't have this winner-take-all system, then I think democracy will win. And funnily enough, I was a backbencher when we were in power. I was quite critical. At times, I said, "We forget about reforms when we become the government." We think that since we are in government, we don't need to give equal allocation to the opposition. And when we are out of government, we make a lot of noise. Hopefully, because both government and opposition MPs have tasted power and being in the opposition, there's a greater appreciation about not having a winner-take-all approach.



M V You've been a youth leader for some time. What, to your mind, are the aspirations of the young people of Malaysia today?



N N Technically, I'm no longer a youth leader. In our party's youth wing, the age limit is 35. But I was a youth leader of the party for three years, and also of the coalition. The youth are very critical. They are very demanding. And you can imagine that those who are 17 and above, after what they've gone through, have a very pessimistic outlook about jobs. This is the COVID generation. Before, they took for granted that if they did well in school, they got to go to university, or they got a certain job that pays them a certain amount of money. That does not hold true anymore because of COVID. So that makes them very pessimistic.

But...they're also not tribal in politics. There are places in Malaysia where if you're from a certain family or from a certain compound, you are going to vote a certain way, from cradle to grave. But you don't see that anymore. You see less of that in the younger generation. They tend to be more critical.



We can't take them for granted. It's good for politics because it means that it keeps us on our feet. They don't buy political rhetoric. But they want to see their issues being championed, a lot of bread-and-butter issues, jobs and all that. It's also about reaching out to them. I have trouble, sometimes. I'm 39 and I find that the 18-year-olds have a whole different world. They're on TikTok. I am on TikTok, but I struggle to make sense of it or enjoy it. It's a challenge for politicians across the world.



We need to be relevant. We see the attention span is shorter, but, well, the world has changed. We can't ask them to change to our world. But we have to understand where they are coming from.

MV How about you, Nik? What made you join politics?



NN My family has always been politically conscious. I've had family members who joined politics. We are from the east coast of Malaysia, from a very religious family of Muslim scholars. My great-grandfather, grandfather, and my father were senior civil servants. There was always that sort of background when I was raised.



But what really struck my mind was when I read the autobiography of Malcolm X, a black civil-rights leader. At first, his was a sort of black-supremacy approach to champion the cause of the blacks. But when he converted to Islam and he performed the Hajj, he saw the universality of Islam and justice. I wondered to myself: "Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country, we are also a very multiracial country. When they talk about Islam, it is more about us against them, as opposed to the justice element or mercy element of Islam."

When *Reformasi* happened in 1998, I was still in school. After being kicked out from UMNO, some leaders decided to form a multiracial party, the Parti Keadilan Nasional (PKN) or the National Justice Party. It is now known as Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) or the People's Justice Party.

When Anwar did that, I felt that this was something that was of interest to me and I started helping out. It was a very small group of people, very idealistic. In 2008, we'd gone through two bad elections. So not many people wanted to stand. I was 26 years old. To be honest, I did have plans to run in the elections, but not at that age. But because of the lack of candidates, I was pushed into elections. From one parliamentary seat, we ended up with 31 parliamentary seats. That was how I came into politics. Being in it long enough, you realize that it's a marathon. It's not a short sprint. There's a lot of energy and patience needed in order to survive.



M V Any parting words for our listeners and viewers? How do you inspire the youth in Malaysia to be engaged in politics?



N N When we're talking about liberals and democrats, most of us are reformists by nature. When we talk about reform, it is going to be a long battle. Martin Luther King once said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That gives us comfort. If you look at the short term, there'll be highs and lows, like a rollercoaster ride. The more hopeful you are, the more disappointed you'll get when things don't work out. And that is often the case in politics.



Politicians will often have to sell hope in order to get voters to support them. After a while, people get disenchanted. I understand that. But ultimately, if they see it from the long-term perspective, then they'll understand. It takes a lot of patience. It takes a lot of grit to go through this process.

Democratic reforms are not alien to our traditions, whether it's in Southeast Asia, in Asia, in our religions, and our faiths. Don't let extremists occupy that ground. That's one of the lessons to learn. Because if you give up, then you don't challenge that notion. You allow that to continue. It's not just in Malaysia. I see the same thing in America, for example; when the liberals give up on that argument, they allow the extremists to occupy their ground. That is very relevant here. We have to persevere.



M V Thank you so much. Good luck on your marathon. I am more hopeful after talking to people like you who have the long view.





FRANCIS 'KIKO' PANGILINAN

**"This is the final epic battle
to make things right"**

JANUARY 11, 2022

The Philippines will hold elections in May and Filipinos will vote for a new president and vice president, along with senators and thousands of local officials.

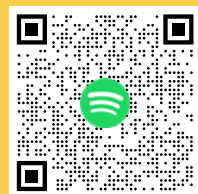
The past five and a half years have seen the erosion of democracy under President Rodrigo Duterte. His war on drugs has led to thousands of extrajudicial killings. He has sent a critic, Senator Leila De Lima, to prison, and, through his allies in Congress, shut down a leading broadcast network in the country.

The stakes are very high. Will the country choose to sink further into authoritarianism or will they select pro-democracy leaders? In this episode, opposition Senator Francis 'Kiko' Pangilinan, chairman of the Council of Asian liberals and Democrats, will talk to us about the 2022 elections, what this means for the Philippines, and how the campaign is shaping up.

Senator Pangilinan is running for vice president alongside Leni Robredo, who is running for president. Welcome, Senator Kiko to The Great Asian Pushback. Thank you for making time for this interview.



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FRANCIS 'KIKO' PANGILINAN (FP)

Thank you, Marites, and to our viewers everywhere. Thank you for this opportunity.

MARITES VITUG (MV)

Senator Kiko, you mentioned in a webinar that the 2022 election is the final epic battle of your generation. Why is this so?



FP Well, I'm 58. So in two years' time, I will be 60. In seven years' time, under Philippine law, you're retirable if you're a government worker. In other words, this is it. After this, time is up for me, and those in my generation will pass on the torch to the next generation of leaders.

I have been actively involved in pushing for social and political reforms in the country since my college days, since the early '80s, when Ninoy Aquino was shot dead in 1983. That led to my politicization and I became very active in the student movement and in the mass protest movement. And ever since, it has been movement after movement to push for reforms and change, and really addressing the root causes of the problems of the country.



Therefore, seven years shy of my 65th year, going into this May 2022 elections, I believe precisely that, at least as far as my generation is concerned, this is the final epic battle to make things right. And you correctly pointed out that the last five and a half years have seen the slide of not just the country, but the region and many parts of the world

into authoritarianism, into anti-democracy initiatives. Really, it's heartbreaking to see these as I face retirement age pretty soon. Therefore, while I still can, and I have the energy and the zeal and the passion to do it, then we will fight with all our might.

MV So how different is the upcoming elections from the past? You've been winning in most the elections you participated in. What, to you, is at stake?



FP My first time to run in an election was in 1988, for a local position, city councilor of Quezon City. I ran again in 1992 in Congress, but I didn't make it then. And then I went back in 2001, so I've been a candidate five times, since 1988. And this is my sixth time to be a candidate. And I've been a campaign manager three times. I've never seen this kind of outpouring of support for our efforts, the volunteerism. Our campaign is turning out to be a people's movement.

We have not paid for a single billboard, but we have billboards donated in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. I've never had a billboard in any of the elections I previously joined as a candidate because it's too expensive. But today I have billboards left and right and those came from donations from ordinary citizens, from businessmen who are concerned about what's happening in the country. So the outpouring of support for me and for Vice President Leni—this is the first time we're experiencing this. So unprecedented.

This is actually a cause for —how do you call it—optimism. Guarded optimism, of course, because it is an uphill battle. But we can see that people are beginning to rise up, people are beginning to stand up. And more and more. As we go into the campaign, I believe we will be able to influence a lot more to be able to see that this is a struggle in a campaign and a movement worth supporting.



MV It's fascinating to hear about how unprecedented this wave of volunteerism is for the 2022 elections. So how do you respond to this? I mean, it can be also a double-edged thing, because you get led by the volunteers, or you have to lead them.



FP Well, the beauty of all of this is that Vice President Leni and I—in terms of our track records from day one, spanning many decades—we have always engaged with our citizens, we've always believed since we started our advocacies, even as young lawyers, that active citizenship and people empowerment are critical if we are to have sustainable economic, social, and political reforms in the country. People have to be stakeholders, they have to be mobilized, they have to participate, they have to have a say in how things are run, so that they have a stake in it. So that they buy into it.

That's the beauty precisely of this outpouring of support. This is something we welcome. This is something that we actually have always subscribed to, that the only way we can move the country forward in terms of effective political, socio-economic reforms is when the citizens themselves are mobilized together with leaders who are committed precisely to reforms.

That's why it's exciting for me. In my first campaign for national office, my slogan was in Filipino, "*Kumilos kasama si Kiko*," which is really "Move with Kiko," mobilize with your leaders. One of the hallmarks of my governance program was active citizenship: Get citizens to participate in the shaping of our communities, and you will have more reforms, quicker reforms, and sustainable reforms.



That's the same with Vice President Leni. So this is an exciting campaign, people are coming out. We have to mobilize them, and of course, in the end a clear message of reform and change that will galvanize various sectors behind our candidacies will be the key to victory.

M V How do you move forward because of the pandemic? I think it's a really a big limiting factor. How have you adjusted to this great tragedy caused by the pandemic?



F P It's been very disruptive. Just today, I found out that my initial test [for COVID], which was positive, was false. So you can imagine how this has affected our own efforts, pushing for the campaign. We had to put things on hold. So yes, it's a challenging time.

I think digital technology will play a critical role. It has to be a combination.

You know, political leadership, regardless of where it is, is about the human connection. It's about passion and emotion, and being physically present is critical in terms of being able to connect with the voters. So we will have to find a way to marry digital technologies, Zoom meetings, livestreaming of our events—we have to balance these with actually going to the different parts of the country and reaching out to our voters. And so it's a challenge, but I think we should be able to make things work. We ought to. If we don't do this, then we don't deserve to lead the nation. We have to find the solutions to be able to win this and deserve that burden—if you can call it that—of leading this country out of this COVID mess and out of the economic mess that we're also facing today.

"A clear message of reform and change that will galvanize various sectors behind our candidacies will be the key to victory."



M V Senator Kiko, you talked about how a lot of emphasis is given to people's participation. How different is your leadership from the kind of leadership that your opponents offer?



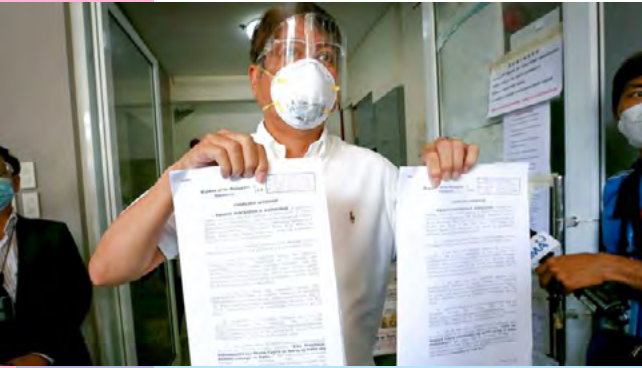
F P Well, first, track record. Very clearly, Vice President Leni and I have been committed to people empowerment since our younger days. Number two, we have not been associated with any anomaly. You know, our track records are unblemished. I'd like to think we just don't talk the talk, we also walk the walk, and our track records will speak for themselves, provided that these are able to shine amidst all the disinformation. And that's another major issue altogether.

Our track records are clean, are there for everyone to see. However, because of disinformation, lies have been spread. Statements, insults have been repeatedly thrown at us. And unfortunately, this has also influenced many of our voters to believe in the lies. And so that's the challenge: How do we present the truth as persuasively as possible so that we are able to combat the lies with the truth?



"In the face of the truth, the disinformation and the lies will fall flat, and the truth will resonate. But that's the whole challenge."

M V How do you fight the disinformation and the lies that are repeated against you and Vice President Leni Robredo? I know that you've sued a number of social-media platforms, which was a great move. How do you do it during the campaign?



F P Well, that was precisely one of the reasons why they finally took down about 82 accounts in YouTube that were spreading disinformation about my person and that of my family. We really have to stand up and fight for our rights. I remember that as a college activist, “rights aren’t rights unless you fight for them.” So that’s what we’re doing.

I still believe that, in the face of the truth, the disinformation and the lies will fall flat, and the truth will resonate. But that’s the whole challenge: How do we bring the truth out? Because any human being by his or her very nature, will not be happy if he/she is lied to. How can there be trust if there is no transparency, no truthfulness? How will you trust anyone who is untruthful? And so I believe deep down inside, that when the citizens are faced with the truth, and the lies, they will always choose the truth. And that’s the challenge for us in the next 90 plus days: How do we bring out the truth?

And that’s why our volunteers, all those who have a stake in this, who believe that precisely this is our epic battle, the final battle, we have to have the same discipline in terms of bringing out the truth everywhere and anywhere we go so that the truth eventually will resonate and defeat these lies. And so it’s really a matter of you ensuring that the machinery we build to disseminate information, that the ads that we articulate, that we place on radio, TV, and the material that we distribute online, should always pound on the truth of our track records, of our unblemished records and our interventions—what we have done.





Unfortunately, many people still believe that in our many years in government, we have not done anything, which is farthest from the truth. If you look at our own accomplishments and the laws that we have passed, and the interventions and programs we have pushed for... So really, the truth must resonate, and the machinery and the message discipline should be there so that our supporters, our campaigners, will have to bring that out with all our might and defeat disinformation and the lies.

We're also holding and conducting public hearings in the Senate Committee on Constitutional Amendments and Revision of Codes. We're looking at the Cybercrime Law. In the last two hearings, we have found out that many of the businesses that are putting out digital ads, paying billions of pesos to bring out digital ads, are unaware that their ads appear in fake news sites. They are unaware that their ads are appearing in sites that produce material that are defamatory, that are malicious, and therefore they have committed to redirect the digital ads away from these sites.

So that's a big step because no one wants to fund disinformation. Who wants to fund lies and defamatory remarks and garbage? None of them wants to. So we're making headway. The business sector, government, the social-media platforms, and private citizens—we all must come together to address the challenges of disinformation.



M V So you're leading a national conversation on how to fight disinformation. Do you see social media as gaining a more substantial role in the campaign? A survey showed that TV is still the main source of information on politics, but apparently, even TV gets some of its news from social media. What's your take on this? How much more substantial will social media be in the 2022 campaign?



F P Well, it will be substantial. It's no longer an either-or thing. We really have to make sure our presence is felt in all these platforms. And that's why the Volunteer Core, the social-media warriors, the keyboard warriors must be mobilized. I still believe, difficult though it has been in the last five and a half years, that there is no political power on earth more convincing and more persuasive than the power of citizens in their vast numbers, mobilized and organized toward a common objective. *Walang puwersang hihigit pa.* I remember the Spanish saying, "*El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido*," the people united can never be defeated. And, that's what we have to fight for. That's what we're hoping we can achieve this May 2022 elections.



M V Vice President Leni Robredo and you have talked about radical love as an anchor or as a guiding theme in your campaign. But as you know, in social media, it's anger that drives emotions, it's fear. So how do you translate radical love into a persuasive messaging campaign?



F P Precisely in social media, you cannot fight fire with more fire, and personally, I've seen this, too. Love conquers all. You cannot conquer anger with more anger. And therefore, in social

"There is no political power on earth more convincing and more persuasive than the power of citizens in their vast numbers, mobilized and organized toward a common objective."





media, it's really respect and dispassionate conversations that are needed. Dialogue is needed. So instead of doing a tit for tat, and create a vicious downward spiral into toxicity and anger and bitterness and resentment, we have to reframe the issue. And if there are lies, respectfully, and in a very civil manner, let us present the truth instead of countering it with more lies, or worse, with anger, resentment, and bitterness. In the end, it has to be a reframing of the entire narrative. It's a challenge.

"In social media, you cannot fight fire with more fire. You cannot conquer anger with more anger."



I believe we are making successes in this regard. And we should continue to engage the voters, our citizens with respect, with compassion, with understanding, and with a clear sense of what we want to do, and move away from the toxicity and the anger. And I think, because we're doing this, many more are actually coming to our side, are less defensive, for a lack of a better term, are more open to listen, precisely because we have brought down the level of toxicity and animosity and brought up the level of positive engagement in the discourse, conversation, and dialogue.

MV I noticed, Senator Kiko, during some of the video clips I've watched of your earlier campaign before Omicron disrupted everything, was that you didn't attack your opponents. You really focused on just talking about your achievements and what you offer. Is that correct?



FP Yes, and really people have been so tuned out in terms of the attack, counter attack, the insults. They just want to survive. In fact, their interest is, how do we get out of this mess we're in? And that's why we have to offer the solutions based on what we've actually



done. In other words, proof of concept should be there. And we are confident that what we've done in the last 20 years in terms of our interventions, when explained in my case, our more than 10 years advocacy in food security to address hunger. I think it speaks for itself, but we have to articulate it and offer it as something that they will expect from a Robredo-Pangilinan administration. We will address hunger squarely, we will address poverty squarely as we have been doing in the last 10 years. We will continue to do these, but this time on a higher platform, on a broader platform.



Can you imagine Vice President Leni, she single-handedly brought many interventions for COVID, assisting hundreds of thousands of our *kababayans*? Can you imagine if she does that on the national level, with the Office of the President? It will be a game changer for all of us. And that's why we must bring this forth, convince our citizens precisely that if they want a way out of the mess we're in, a way out of hunger, a way out of poverty, look at the track record.

I have said this when a young leader asked me in one of the press conferences: "What's the way to choose? What's the correct way to choose your leaders?" I said, "You know, it's no different from choosing your lifetime partner. Does your prospective lifetime partner walk the walk and talk the talk? If you want a family life that is endearing and nurturing, is his or her family life endearing and nurturing?"

There is a research expert who says that the best indicator of future action is previous past action. And it's the same with our leaders: Look at their track record. Don't believe in fake news. Do your own research, ask others, confirm, validate. You just Google and then you can really see. Especially among the young people, they are so savvy in terms of information technology, they can tell fake from not fake as long as they're vigilant.



M V A final question for you, Senator Kiko: Can you address our listeners, they may come from different parts of the region, and also have a separate message for the Filipino voters before we close the interview?



F P Thank you for this platform, this vehicle to “push back.” That’s precisely what we’re doing. If you want democracy, transparency, accountability to flourish, you must practice it. You must live and breathe it. And that’s what we’re doing here. Our decision to run for vice president was not in our plans. Actually, our original plan was to run for reelection. But when Vice President Leni asked us to support her—and I believe then and I believe now that she’s the most qualified—then we have to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. And so I decided to set aside my own plans and run for vice president because this is now a golden opportunity for us to strengthen democracy, to inspire young people and old people alike.

This is the final epic battle of my generation. We are facing the worst health and economic crisis in living memory. In the face of all these one day, our children and our grandchildren will ask us, what did we do when our country was reeling from such an unprecedented crisis? Did we make a stand? Did we do our share? Did we stick our necks out? Were we willing to risk to make things right?

Of course, I’d like to think all of us will answer: “Yes, we did.” And that precisely will be the reason why the country and the world will be a better place because of our own convictions and our willingness to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.



MV On that inspiring note, Senator Kiko, we end the interview. Thank you so much for joining us and we look forward to watching you in the campaign maybe in person or online. Thank you so much to our listeners and viewers for joining us. And our message is: Always keep pushing back against autocracy and keep fighting for democracy.



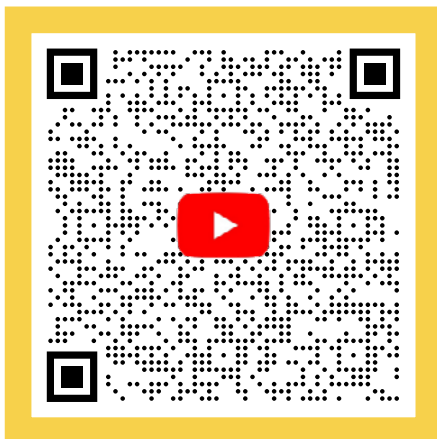
FP Thank you. Stay safe everyone.

**"If you want democracy,
transparency, accountability to
flourish, you must practice it.
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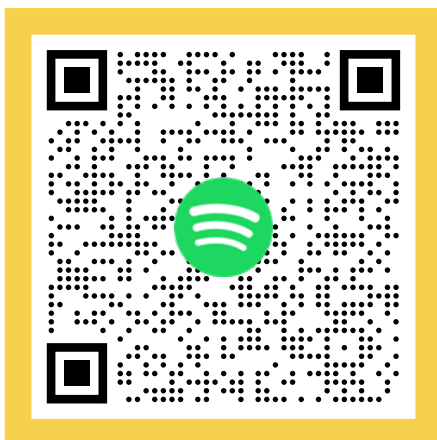


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