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HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Fighting for Freedom and Democracy



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PREFACE BY GERHART BAUM

WE BOW TO YOUR COURAGE

How much courage does it take to go to a demonstration early in the morning, not knowing if the evening will end in prison? How much inner strength and conviction is required to rebel against repressive regimes and those in power? How unbreakable must one's sense of justice be to fight against the oppression of an entire people and thereby become the target of ruthless dictators?

"We are born free to be free," says Hannah Arendt. Oftentimes, the moment people seek to make use of their freedom, they lose it.

Maria Kalesnikava, one of the faces of the Belarusian opposition, tore up her passport to prevent her deportation from Belarus. She has been in detention since September 2020. It is the goal of the regime to wear her down and humiliate her. Her fighting spirit remains – even in detention – despite the attempts to break and destroy her – similarly to the case of Alexey Nawalny.

"All over the world, we are witnessing large-scale pro-democracy demonstrations – and they are bringing change.

One pertinent example is Sudan where the long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir was chased out of office and faces charges before the International Criminal Court. As the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Sudan, this fills me with a certain degree of satisfaction – after all, I had held him responsible for serious human rights violations in my reports.

We are also seeing spontaneous demonstrations against the dire living conditions in Cuba. Unfortunately, both in Cuba and many other places like the in Hong Kong, in Myanmar, in Belarus, in Russia, the demonstrations are met with large-scale repression by the regimes. But some people refuse to be deterred by this.

There are no differences according to culture or religion, as some people in power would have us believe. During my many travels, I have met people all around the world who want nothing more than to live as freely as we do. And the pro-

"The will to live freely is innate in every human being.

motion of human rights always also has to mean interference. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, they are all built on the idea that every single person needs and deserves protection – even against their own state. The human being is the object of protection.

Individual perpetrators are held personally responsible – increasingly so by criminal courts and international criminal law. The German Federal Court of Justice has just ruled that the punishment of war crimes and other serious offences by subordinate sovereigns in this country cannot be excluded by reference to immunity. Therefore, the perpetrator cannot hide behind his state. The principle of the Responsibility to Protect also promotes the responsibility of the international community to protect individuals against repression by their respective state.

Let us look at those who resist. On the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the

"UN General Assembly dedicated a strong resolution to the tireless commitment of these courageous people: the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Unanimously adopted by the international community, this declaration provides human rights defenders with certain rights to protect them against oppressive regimes. It is a self-committment by states to pay special respect to and protect the committment of human rights defenders. Oppressive regimes perceive the Declaration as an inadmissible interference – but this is deliberate. Over the decades, the awareness has grown that the protection of human rights depends on individuals resisting arbitrariness, exploitation, poverty and disregard for civil rights. These individuals are guided by the



deep conviction in human dignity. It is human dignity that serves as the moral leitmotif of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and which has inspired the German Constitution.

“ Human dignity is a combative force that is freedom-loving, unbound and future-oriented. Human dignity is expressed in the will to live in a self-determined way and to have a say over one’s life.

Article 1 of the German Constitution obliges all state authorities to respect this principle not only in Germany, but in all their international activities. Thus, for example, protesting against the oppression of the Uyghurs is a Constitution obligation. It is for this reason that we need brave individuals who put their lives on the line and stand up for democracy, freedom and human rights. As individuals, they give a face and a name to the discontent and lack of freedom of many and campaign for change with their names, their lives and their freedom. Often-times, they are active within non-governmental organisations. The indispensable role of NGOs in the implementation of human rights was reaffirmed in the final declaration of the 1993 Human Rights Conference in Vienna.

Who are the individuals fighting for freedom? We can see them all across the world. They are young and old, women and men. They work in small villages for better health and food situations and for the education of their children. Their activities in the large refugee camps, for example in the Middle East, are admirable. They strive to ensure that elections and meetings can take place in remote places, that people are informed about the risks of pandemics or that nature is protected from overexploitation and environmental disasters. The activities of human rights defenders are diverse and depend on the specific situation on the ground and of those who require support

“ The commitment of these human rights defenders contributes to a better world and a better coexistence.

Anyone can become a human rights defender. No school degree is required, no specific profession necessary. What is needed is courage, the will to be free and integrity. Human rights defenders set themselves apart through their actions and their will to promote freedom and human dignity. Their bravery and work stands in clear contrast to the inability of

those with political responsibility to act. It is only through their commitment that human rights are repeatedly put on the political agenda, even where governments are actively undermining or disregarding them.

Frequently, the physical integrity and well-being of human rights defenders is at risk. While criminal offenders often enjoy certain standards and safeguards that are regulated globally under international human rights treaties, human rights defenders, on the other hand, are frequently discriminated against, persecuted or even locked away, tortured in prisons and murdered.

The UN Declaration sets out standards for human rights defenders. It does not lose its importance just because dictatorships do not adhere to it, even though they had given their consent in the UN General Assembly. The same applies to many agreements under international law. The absolute prohibition of torture will never lose its importance, even when it is not observed. However, such an obligation on the part of the international community puts pressure on those in power. If they cannot deny non-observance, they try to justify it by allegedly overriding goals, for example by declaring human rights defenders as “terrorists”. This has just happened with the movement of Alexey Nawalny in Russia – it is a terrorist and “extremist” organisation in the eyes of the Putin state. Anyone who stands up for the movement is labelled a terrorist. In these cases criminal law becomes a farce and is politically instrumentalised.

Even in exile, human rights defenders like Masih Alinejad from Iran and Mu Sochua from Cambodia continue to be persecuted and showered with hatred. However, this does not stop them from continuing to stand up for other victims, to raise their voices and to give a voice to others who are persecuted.

“My commitment to defending human rights, the disadvantaged and the marginalised has not diminished just because I am now a victim myself,” says Filipino liberal opposition politician and human rights defender, Leila de Lima, who has been imprisoned for four years.

Many have no choice. Either they leave the country, if they still can, or they stay to resist.

There is a special motivation for us Germans to fight for human rights. The first reason is our past. Our country is responsible for crimes that, as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, “have outraged the conscience of mankind”. But it is also the present. We have not liberated ourselves. We have built a democracy, we have been helped to do so. We have reconciled ourselves with the world. We built trust worldwide, which eventually led to reunification and the liberation of Eastern Europe. We live in a united Europe. Who should be more motivated than us to be allies to those around the world who do not have this good fortune.

“To serve the peace of the world in a united Europe”. We have to fulfil this mandate of our Constitution. It is the guiding principle of our policy, even if this is sometimes not done consistently enough.

THE UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

AN EXCERPT

Article 1

Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.

Article 2

Each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms [...].

Article 7

Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to develop and discuss new human rights ideas and principles and to advocate their acceptance.

Article 8

Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to have effective access, on a non-discriminatory basis, to participation in the government of his or her country and in the conduct of public affairs.

Article 12

Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Article 18

1. Everyone has duties towards and within the community, in which alone the free and full development of his or her personality is possible.

2. Individuals, groups, institutions and non-governmental organizations have an important role to play and a responsibility in safeguarding democracy, promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms and contributing to the promotion and advancement of democratic societies, institutions and processes.



A MILESTONE IN PROTECTING THE COURAGEOUS

by Gerhardt Baum

The international human rights politics of the 1990s were defined by the collapse of the Soviet Empire. States formerly subjugated by Moscow became independent. Eastern European countries and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) became free states after decades of oppression. In Russia itself, Perestroika and Glasnost paved the way towards new freedoms.

In November 1990, with the “Charter of Paris”, 29 European states, plus the Soviet Union, as well as the United States and Canada, decided on a new peaceful order for Europe based on democracy and human rights. Dictatorships also collapsed in other parts of the world; for example, South Africa’s apartheid regime was replaced by a democracy under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. In contrast, the political upheaval in parts of Europe led to new conflicts and grave human rights violations – especially in the Balkans of the former Yugoslavia.

From 1992 to 1998, I represented Germany in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. During that time – which was also the early phase of the Russian Federation – Russia partly voted together with democracies against the regimes violating human rights and even mustered the strength to criticise itself. The crises in Africa, Asia and Latin America became the new focal points of human rights work.

In 1993, the second World Conference on Human Rights took place in Vienna. For weeks, delegates struggled to agree on substantial results. Many of the delegations had the ongoing atrocities in mind, which accompanied the disintegration and fall of Yugoslavia, and sought to show a united front based on solidarity. At the end of a difficult negotiation process, the result was an overall strengthening of human rights: They were confirmed as universal, inalienable and indivisible.

However, Vienna did not mark the beginning of the Golden Age of Human Rights. The hope of many that a kind of European enlightenment would prevail on a global scale after the end of the East-West conflict was not fulfilled. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the devastating human rights violations in Darfur in South Sudan at the end of the century, but also the eruption of more recent conflicts in Colombia, Iran, Myanmar or Turkey, to name just a few, underline the fragility of the Vienna Consensus.

Our German team developed a new strategy in the Commission on Human Rights. Instead of sweeping, annually repeated resolutions of condemnation, which most often did not bring about any progress in the actual human rights situation, we focused on tailor-made solutions for complex human rights situations. Depending on the individual case, they pursued very different objectives. We forged cross-group alliances to create new voting majorities. Our guiding principle was always to improve in practical terms the fate of those most directly affected by human rights violations. A good example was the adoption of a consensus resolution on Colombia, which for the first time created an office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bogota. We achieved the consent of the Colombian government, which had previously boycotted a resolution of condemnation for years.

Together with our allies, we developed concepts for several individual cases. One example was the Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in 1998. Despite the fact that the general political climate was favourable to such a project, we encountered resistance. We got a tripartite group consisting of South Africa, Poland and Germany to prepare the Declaration – all states that had been liberated from dictatorship, in whole or in part, as in the case of the GDR. We wanted to prevent hardliners like Cuba from taking control of the matter and watering it down. The most controversial issue was the funding of NGOs, especially those from abroad. The result was respectable, both in general and on this specific point. The resolution of the Commission on Human Rights reached the UN General Assembly:

50 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders was adopted unanimously by the General Assembly. I have doubts whether the results of the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights and also this Declaration would still find consensus today.

In many political decisions, states that have agreed to a treaty or declaration under international law, act contrary to and in violation of their obligations. This also applies to agreements such as the prohibition of torture. Yet they remain indispensable as support for those who often risk their personal freedom and lives for the human dignity of others: human rights defenders. Universal or regional human rights documents give them the framework to invoke this piece of international law. However, in order to make use of these resolutions or declarations, one needs to be aware of their existence. On some of my many trips, I found that occasionally not even the German Embassy was aware of it.

With this initiative, we seek to change that.

PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS

"It isn't difficult to win elections when one's opponents are not on the ballot."

Vladimir Kara-Murza, Russia

All around the world, we are witnessing a rise in authoritarianism and a backlash against civil and human rights. In the quest for freedom, democratic reform and free and fair elections, pro-democracy activists and opposition politicians often take extremely high individual risks, especially in countries where fundamental human rights are routinely violated.

Without the courage and commitment of brave individuals, these violations would often go unheard or the many recent pro-democracy movements would not raise awareness and challenge fraudulent election results. Oftentimes, the lines between being a human rights defender, a pro-democracy activist or an opposition politician blur, as the individual cases in this publication illustrate.

These people play an indispensable role in mobilizing others and revealing the fragility of autocratic regimes and thereby often become the target of long-time authoritarian rulers. Pro-democracy activists and their supporters are often persecuted and their human rights violated in order to spread fear and demobilize protests. The targeted individuals become defenders of their own human rights as well as the civil rights of their fellow citizens.





MARIA KALESNIKAVA

BELARUS

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Maria Kalesnikava is a Belarusian musician and a political activist. She co-founded Artemp, an international creative association, and served as the art director of the OK16 culture club in Minsk. During the 2020 presidential campaign, she joined the team of candidate Viktor Babaryka. After his and his son's arrest in June 2020, she became the leading figure of Babaryka's campaign. After he and another opposition candidate, Valery Tsapkala, were denied registration, the Babaryka and Tsapkala campaigns joined forces with the campaign of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, supporting her as the sole opposition candidate able to take on the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko. Thus, the famous opposition trio of women was born, and Maria Kalesnikava became one of the faces of the Belarusian democratic movement alongside Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsapkala. After the 2020 elections she participated in the peaceful protest in Belarus and became one of the leading members

of the Coordination Council, as well as one of the founders of the opposition party "Razam". On September 7th 2020, Maria Kalesnikava was kidnapped by masked men in Minsk, and later detained at a Belarus-Ukraine border crossing. According to her fellow opposition activists, the authorities tried to forcibly expel Maria to Ukraine, but she resisted, tearing up her passport, and was arrested. Since then she has been held in pre-trial detention on politically motivated charges. If found guilty, she may be sentenced to 12 years in prison.

The trial against Maria Kalesnikava and her lawyer and fellow member of the opposition Coordination Council, Maxim Znak began in August 2021. The two are charged with conspiring to seize power and threatening Belarus' national security. If convicted, Maria Kalesnikava could face up to 12 years in prison.

TATSIANA KHOMICH ABOUT HER SISTER MARIA KALESNIKAVA

In September 2020, Maria was first abducted, then they tried to expel her from the country forcibly, but she ripped up her passport to avoid expulsion. She is now in custody. Tatsiana, in your opinion, what role does Maria play for the Belarusian democratic movement today?

I think Masha [a pen name of Maria – editor's note] continues to play an essential role while being in the pre-trial detention center, even though no one has seen her for a long time, except for defence lawyers and investigators. She continues supporting and inspiring people so that they do not give up and do not stop. Despite the fact that Belarusian authorities prosecute anyone for any activity or attempt to express their opinion, her strong spirit, courage, and confidence continue to give us hope for change. Masha's determination to stay in Belarus also demonstrates her resilience, unbroken spirit, and principled position. I think her actions and statements, which we hear from her and read in her letters, continue fuelling people's confidence that change will come. We Belarusians should not give up, we are doing everything right, and we need to assert our rights peacefully and lawfully. While in detention Masha continues to defend the rights of other political prisoners and makes statements and demands on their behalf. She has become a synonym for a Belarusian who can make oneself heard.



Belarus 2020 by Anna Redko

Maria was into music and a musician herself, first in Belarus, then in Germany before she became a pro-democracy activist. Why did she decide to return to Belarus?

About five years ago, Masha started bringing her cultural projects to Belarus. Titled "Music for Adults", one of the projects included a series of lectures. It was important for her to see that this was taking place in Belarus, as modern arts are more developed in Germany. She started coming to Belarus more regularly. Masha is very sociable and knows how to unite people and develop new projects. This organically evolved into a job offer as art director at OK16.

She took office in August 2019, splitting her time between Germany and Belarus, after she had been working in Germany for several years. As the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, she decided to stay in Belarus.

The presidential election was scheduled for 2020, and she became Viktor Babaryka's campaign coordinator that year. How did that come about?

Masha met Viktor Babaryka in summer 2018 when she brought German musicians to Belarus as part of an OK16 project. After this meeting, they kept in touch from time to time. When it became clear that Viktor Babaryka would run for president, he immediately asked Maria to join the team. Masha has always held Viktor in high esteem and continues to respect his values and vision of Belarus' cultural development.

As far as I know, she made up her mind very quickly. This was also a large project involving plenty of people and communications. You needed to know who could be engaged and how to find resources. Despite living in Germany for a long time, Masha has successfully re-integrated into Belarusian society. Therefore, this transition was quite natural. Masha knew very well what was happening in Belarus. Probably, one of the reasons why she left was that she had not seen any prospects for development and self-fulfilment in Belarus. I think she joined Babaryka's team precisely because it was vital for her to make a change not only in arts, but also in Belarus in general.

Clearly, Masha was aware of the risks. She knew what the results of previous elections were and what could happen. I think she believed that something could be changed and the time to make a change had come – and we supported her.

“She continued to speak up about violence, urging authorities to stop it.

After the election, Veronika Tsapkala and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya were forced to leave the country. Most probably, Maria was aware of the threats as well, but she stayed. Why?

When Viktor and Eduard Babaryka were detained, Masha said that she would stay. It was her principled position. In early August 2020, the persecution and detentions of members of Viktor Babaryka's team continued. She could not leave. Masha said that she could not have a quiet life in Germany while her friends were held in prisons or pre-trial detention centers in Belarus. She realised that she, too, could be detained eventually, but she tried to do as much as she could. Yet, we all understood how it could turn out.

When Maria was widely engaged in protests after the presidential election, what were her beliefs? What did she hope for?

As three election campaign teams joined hands in mid-July, we all saw great public support. For two and a half weeks, the three of them travelled across Belarus, visiting different cities and towns. It was evident that this campaign struck a chord with people, who were definitely ready for change. After the election, the Golos platform published results. We saw that some precincts had no rigging; we saw real voting results. This independent vote count indicated people's sincere support. Then violence followed and the country faced a real political crisis, violence, and terror against totally peaceful protests simply because protesters expressed their opinion and took to the streets. Masha could not leave the country after that. I think she realized that Sviatlana, Veronika, and herself were the most outstanding figures at that time. Of them, only Masha stayed. Therefore, it was important for her to be involved in resolving this crisis. She joined the board of the Coordination Council. I think she was key to uniting people around it. Masha believed that it was important to negotiate and stop violence at that very moment, in those very brutal days after the election. She turned into a very bright leader, because she stayed, was not afraid to speak out, and openly took part in protests.

Which actions made Maria a human rights defender?

Her call for fair elections, Masha asked people not to be afraid, to express their opinions, to vote for whoever you want, and gather for peaceful assemblies. In fact, she plunged into activism at that time. As events moved rapidly, we did not even have time to realize this. She did the same after the election when she stayed in Belarus. She continued to speak up about violence, urging authorities to stop it. She made statements that people had the right to peaceful assemblies. This public advocacy started back then, although we did not yet understand it.

On July 6th 2021, Viktor Babaryka was sentenced to 14 years in a high security penal colony. The Supreme Court of Belarus found him guilty of "receiving bribes on an especially large scale, organized by a group" (Article 430(3) of the Criminal Code) and "money laundering" (Article 235(2)). He was also fined the equivalent of 57000 US Dollars and ordered to pay more than 18 million US Dollars as compensation for the damage he allegedly caused.





SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Siarhej Zikratski is a prominent Belarusian lawyer, specializing in legal aid to business, media and IT companies. In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections, he became involved in numerous politically motivated cases, defending unlawfully detained citizens in court. He is also well-known for defending independent Belarusian media and their journalists in politically motivated trials in 2020-2021. Mr. Zikratski was also very vocal about the politically motivated cases he worked on, always trying to keep the public informed about the law violations happening at these proceedings. In retaliation for his actions, in March 2021 his lawyer's license was revoked and he was expelled from the Belarusian National Bar Association. He has left the country for Lithuania where he joined the team of the former Belarusian presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as her representative on legal affairs.

SIARHEJ ZIKRATZKI

BELARUS



There was a chance to achieve change, which I always wanted.

Before the presidential elections in August 2020, you were already a well-known lawyer with your own business. What was your main activity?

I was a lawyer specializing in providing legal assistance to businesses. I was not involved in any human rights activism in the traditional sense. I only had a few individual clients, most were legal entities such as companies looking to start a new business, develop a new idea, draft a contract, get tax advice. I have been in this field for a long time. By early 2020, I had my own office and a good business clientele.

Initially, your work as a lawyer was not related to politics. In 2020, after Viktor Babaryka was nominated for president, you offered him legal assistance. That was prior to the election and the violent crackdown. What made you get involved and to affiliate yourself with a political candidate?

In 2020, it was not just me, there was a demand for change among the majority of the Belarusian population. Before the election was announced and the campaign started, we had talked about it with my family. I was talking to my wife and said, "If this or that person was running for president, I would be willing to spend three months working for his or her team for free." I viewed this support to a prospective presidential candidate as three months volunteering. When Babaryka came along and announced that he is running for president, I thought "This is it, this is my chance to do something good for Belarus. If I can do anything at all, I must do it". I texted Viktor Babaryka, "Viktar, I can offer you help if you want it." But he never read that message.

Why did you personally feel demand for change so strongly in 2020?

There were two reasons. One was the candidate [Viktar Babaryka], another was the realization that there was a chance to achieve change, which I always wanted. However, up until 2020 I never saw a figure that I thought had a chance to win. Every political figure was a political figure from my youth. So, when a totally new figure emerges, a businessman, not a politician, you realize that this is someone you are willing to follow. Secondly, I intuitively knew that the public wanted change, they were no longer lethargic. The reason was COVID-19. When the government ignored it, people self-organized and a huge amount of initiatives emerged. I realized that lethargy was no more and that there was a chance to achieve change.

You became actively involved in human rights efforts after the presidential election and the ensuing violence. What did you feel when you saw what was happening?

Shock. Unbridled shock because we were not prepared for it at all. We expected arrests and that is why we decided to self-organize. We put together a team of lawyers along with a number of volunteers. We had a plan. We had volunteers who were supposed to be on watch near district police departments and police stations and collect information about the detainees. Others were tasked with keeping watch on courthouses and monitoring hearings. According to our plan, the volunteers were supposed to relay any information from the district police departments to us and family members of the detainees while the lawyers would go places. A splendid plan. None of it worked because the Internet got shut down. For two days, we could not reach anyone anywhere. On the first day, I thought the internet shutdown was the problem, on the second day, I figured that this was not the case. The problem was that thousands of people disappeared and we did not know where they were. Then the first reports of violence emerged. People were calling, they were telling those stories and I could not wrap my head around them. I could not believe that.

What was different about handling politically motivated cases and arrests compared to your prior work?

It was a mess. People were grabbed from the streets and taken to random district police departments. We never knew their location. Without this information we were unable to meet the clients and provide legal assistance when the reports were issued. We held marches on Sundays. Monday mornings I sent notices to every district court in Minsk, trying to find out whether my client is in Minsk or not. If the client was detained in Minsk, then I sent notices to every court in Minsk or to every court of the Minsk region. Then I had to wait and see whether I am summoned to court or not. In a situation like that, there was no way I could plan anything.

The cases were brought to court by the bulk. The judges would schedule the hearings at, say, twenty minute intervals. You get a phone call at 10:00 a.m. and they ask you, "Are you so-and-so's lawyer?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Come down here, then. Your case will be heard at 12 p.m." You grab yourself, get in the car, and go to the courthouse. You request access to the case file and that is when you find out specifically what the charges pressed against your client are. It is only then that you find out

that the client was arrested at a certain location and is charged with certain actions. You get the case file and you have to review it but are not allowed to photocopy it. There is no way you can build the case. That was the kind of turmoil we were living in. You had to turn down all your business clients, forget about the money, the promises you had given them. I lost several clients during that period.

Were defense lawyers actually able to affect the outcome of such cases? Were there any instances where you managed to get people out of custody?

Yes. In the beginning, we did. The repressive apparatus was slow to get started. August was just wonderful. Then in September, the arrests began. We were finding inconsistencies in the case files and when we presented the evidence to the judges, they never had the nerve to dismiss the case. The cases might be sent back to the district police departments for review and the detainees might be released. Then it stopped working like that because there was pressure on the judges. The repressive apparatus was gaining momentum.

The judges were turning a blind eye to our arguments. That's when the eyewitnesses wearing balaclavas started to appear. They were police officers wearing balaclavas so that only their eyes were seen and they were giving testimony under false identities. We would say, "Folks, this is actually a violation of the law," but the testimony was admitted regardless. From that point on, there was virtually nothing we could do. Our goal then was to just give our support to the person behind bars. I could see three goals that lawyers were pursuing by taking part in the proceedings. The main goal was to give emotional support to the clients who, while behind bars, had no idea what was happening. I was also giving feedback to the families letting them know that the clients were okay, they were not beaten, and were safe and sound. That was a very important psychological moment. Secondly, I wanted to influence the court. By then, we understood that there were judges who would render unlawful judgments no matter what. My aim was to make the judge uncomfortable in rendering such judgments. My third goal was to document every violation so that when the tide changes, we can overturn those judgments and hold the perpetrators accountable.

When you started getting actively involved, did you expect that such a political pressure would be put on lawyers, which might affect you?

I knew there would be pressure and I was mentally prepared for that. I once posted on Facebook that I would be willing to provide advice on election-related issues and only charge one ruble – a token amount because I am not allowed to work for free. Other lawyers started sending me private messages, "Sergey you're the man. We'll do it, too. Let us know if you need us." That was back in June when everything was still quiet and peaceful. I would reply to them "You have no idea what you're signing up for. This will get you disbarred." And

they would reply, "Yes, we know that." And I knew that if we do not win the election, everyone involved would be persecuted later. That was clear to me but I had no other choice.

What made you decide to join Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team?

First of all, I was willing to leave the country. There were two reasons why I was willing to leave. One was my family's emotional well-being. They were very distressed over what I was doing. I kept saying that as long as I had my law license, I was going to defend people even though I knew that I could be put behind bars. When I was with my family, I pretended that this was never going to happen and kept telling everyone that everything I was doing was in compliance with the law. But deep inside I knew that I could end up behind bars. Another thing was that I wanted to continue working for the good of Belarus. I could go back and rebuild my business in Belarus, provide consulting services to businesses again, obtain a legal consultant license instead of a lawyer's license and work quietly as a consultant. I did in fact obtain that legal consultant license. But I wanted to do good for Belarus. And at that point, my willingness to leave and my desire to do good for Belarus coincided with the offer to join Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team. With that in mind, I had no other option but to say yes.



Belarus 2020 by Anna Redko

PAVEL LIBER

BELARUS



SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Pavel Liber is a Belarusian software engineer and a senior director at the IT firm EPAM Systems. During the 2020 presidential campaign, he co-founded the “Golos” (Voice) platform – an online tool created to evaluate the fairness of the elections and to provide an alternate counting of the votes. The platform was highly successful, reaching around 1 million voter registrations shortly before the 9th August 2020 elections. Through checking the photos of the ballots that the voters sent to the platform and comparing them to the official election results, “Voice” was able to prove that the elections have been rigged. After the elections, the platform continued to exist as a tool to count the number of partici-

pants at the peaceful protests in Belarus and started its co-operation with the Coordination Council in order to collect opinions on the Council’s decisions. Pavel Liber has never considered himself a politician or a human rights defender, viewing himself as an engineer trying to create digital tools to simplify people’s lives. Due to his activities with the “Voice” platform, he and other members of the “Voice” team had to leave Belarus. He currently continues to work on “Voice” and other digital products in order to support the Belarusian democratic movement and those harmed by the Lukashenko regime.

” These elections changed everything for all of us.

Pavel, let us imagine it is early 2020. You are working in the top position of a successful IT-company. You are well-paid. The presidential campaign has not started yet. Did you take any interest in politics back then?

I was never involved in politics before this presidential election. The IT industry has always been a pretty well-paying industry in Belarus. There were no issues for people from this sector to live in Belarus – no terror from the regime. Nothing similar to the things that are happening right now. It was still not good because the COVID-19 pandemic had started and the government of Belarus refused to acknowledge its existence. But, honestly, me and many other people in the IT industry were not deeply involved in politics. These elections changed everything for all of us.

I was a top manager in one of the biggest Belarusian IT-companies. We were organizing many volunteer projects with different governmental and non-governmental organizations. When we started developing “Golos” (The Voice) no one was thinking about it as a political project. Its main goal was to try to double check how our votes were counted, because in Belarus presidential elections are completely nontransparent. We created a platform where people could upload pictures of their polling sheets. We compared the results we collected with the official results presented by the government and found huge falsifications and differences. That project transformed my team and myself into citizens who continue developing tools and solutions to increase transparency and improve democratic processes. Now it is not just “Golos”, but a whole number of products and portals to help people in Belarus fight for their rights.

You said that these elections in 2020 changed everything. What exactly made them so different?

I think it is a combination of multiple factors. The first factor was COVID. People in Belarus were really angry because the government ignored the pandemic and did not help the doctors and people. But I think it was also a kind of technological evolution, because in the past five years digital channels appeared everywhere. More and more people were informed that potentially there would be many falsifications. All actions our government took to prevent alternative candidates or to punish people for their political views, all that became widely known for everyone through these digital channels. I believe that five years ago about 30 percent of people had wide ac-

cess to internet and interest in what is happening in the country. Now I would expect it to be 60 to 70 percent. It is a completely different situation today.

During the election campaign, how did you come to the idea that information technologies could be used to support the democratic process?

It is probably the only way we can act in Belarus, because the physical space is completely covered by military and police. Our government is convinced they can resolve all issues by arresting, imprisoning people, and pushing them out of the country. In the digital space, it is a completely different picture. Historically, the whole IT sector in Belarus is private. We have no strong specialists working in governmental companies. And our government is old-school when talking about modern IT technologies. That was a space where we had and still have some competitive advantage. We are able to act fast and to deliver our solutions to Belarusian people no matter where the development team is located.

Belarus 2020 by Anna Redko

Now retrospectively we see what impact the “Golos” platform had on the political process, what blow it dealt to the regime. Back then, when you were just creating it, what results were you hoping for?

Honestly, we had many concerns that we will get the same results on our platform as in the official results. And we did not expect so many people to participate. Eventually more than one million people in Belarus came to our platform and more than 500.000 people sent their pictures. And that was during the total internet blackout which we had for four days. When we got the attention from the government a couple of days before the elections, they called us terrorists. When people learned from our government that we are “terrorists” and that they should not trust us, even more started to register on the platform. That is how it works in Belarus – if the government tells you that something is bad you definitely should try it, because in fact it is good. When we got this attention we understood that it will be safer for us not to be in Belarus; and we also realized that there will definitely be a difference between our results and the official results.

Were all members of your team able to leave the country without problems?

I left Belarus on 23 or 24 of July 2020 when we had just launched the platform. I got a call from a friend who is connected to our police forces and who told me "man, you already got some attention and I highly recommend you leave the country immediately". I took my luggage and left to Istanbul. Our entire team did the same. We are sure that it was the right choice, because our report was used in the United States, in the EU, by the OSCE. With all this attention we will definitely be imprisoned if we return to Belarus. We are also still keeping our team anonymous. They are trying not to come to Belarus, because our police, KGB and other structures work on identifying those who are running such platforms.

After the elections, you went on and found new ways to support the protest movement. Why did you not stop? In which ways are you using the platform after the elections?

You cannot stop. There were huge falsifications, punishments, a lot of people beaten on the streets or killed. You cannot just stop. We are probably only in the middle of this process. The process still exists, mostly in the digital space, because it is hard to do it in physical space.

We started to use our platform for digital surveys. Having one million people registered, you can get pretty representative results of what people in Belarus think. We began to support people, because during all these marches and processes we allowed them to check on the platform how many people are involved right now. When they saw that there are 100.000 on the streets right now, it helped them to understand that there are still a lot of people like them. We also started to develop belarusdaily.org, where we document every day of the process, because we understand that we need to keep it as a future digital history for our kids to understand what happened during and after these presidential elections. We started developing another product called Digital Solidarity. It is a mobile app through which you can donate to people who were punished by the regime. It aggregates different foundations and civil society organizations to have everything in one place.

Everything that you have been doing with "Golos" and your other projects may fall under the definition of human rights protection. But I believe you do not consider yourself to be a human rights defender. How did you assess what you were doing?

I think it is not politics. Moreover, I am trying to have some distance from all political organizations. I think these are two different worlds – engineering and politics. We have a pretty simple target – to involve people in the digital space and to create digital tools simplifying their lives, helping the process and supporting people. Our audience is huge, more than one million people. We do not need to involve political organizations or paid advertisement to explain what we are doing and

why, because we already have the trust of the people. On the other hand, we actively work with the democratic forces which are abroad right now, like the offices of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya or Pavel Latushko. These are great people, doing great things to support Belarus. We try to collaborate and promote each other's activities.

The latest "Golos" campaign was a survey for the people of Belarus about peaceful negotiations with the government. Why did you decide to ask this question? Do you think it is still possible to negotiate with the regime?

From my perspective, it was an example of the great partnership we have with the office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. We came out of the winter with a completely depressive mood in Belarus, with police on the streets and people who were afraid to leave their homes. Through this survey we were trying to achieve a number of goals. One was to return Belarus back to international attention showing that there are still a lot of Belarusian people asking for changes. Another was to show people in Belarus that there are still a lot of people like them. Even if you do not see it on the streets, there are hundreds of thousands of people who are with you in the virtual space. And the third reason was to show to our government that we are still ready for negotiations. Before this survey, there was information that our government is ready to involve military forces to take action against protesters. That was the first time in the history of Belarus. We were trying to show that we do not need war, we just need peaceful negotiations and we are ready for that. Of course, no one believes that Lukashenko will be ready for peaceful negotiations. It was a message for the elite near Lukashenko, not for himself. We have reached almost 800.000 people which is still a lot keeping in mind that nine months have passed since the elections. We have received a large amount of attention around the world and that is great because it is very important to keep Belarus in the international media.

What would you like to do in a free and democratic Belarus? Would you stay involved in social projects or get back into the IT-sector in Belarus?

I definitely would like to get involved in different social projects because helping people through different digital products is interesting to me and many other engineers around me. I would like to stay away from politics in any form because I think that in the future we will probably not need any politicians at all. I would like to live in the country where I was born, I would like to help people in this country through creating different solutions and through explaining them the value of transparency and simplicity of different products. Why do we have this situation in Belarus? Because a lot of people just did not know that there can be an alternative. I think it is a very important mission for us right now, for our democratic forces, engineers, volunteers to show people that there can be a completely different Belarus.

A portrait of Emily Lau, a Hong Kong politician, standing in front of a wooden staircase. She is wearing a red jacket with a decorative brooch on the left lapel and a black skirt. Her hands are clasped in front of her, and she is wearing a black watch on her left wrist. The background is a wooden staircase with a dark wood finish.

EMILY LAU

HONG KONG

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Emily Lau is a well-known politician and former Member of Parliament for the Democratic Party in Hong Kong who has been a vocal and leading advocate for human rights and press freedom for decades. Having started her careers as a journalist, in 1991 she became the first woman to be elected to the Legislative Council of Hong Kong. She served as Legislative Councillor and chairperson of the Democratic Party throughout the 1990s and 2000s until she stepped down in 2016. Today, she continues to fight for a democratic and free Hong Kong, especially in the face of the ongoing attacks on press freedom, human rights and democracy since the passing of the so-called Security Law in 2020.

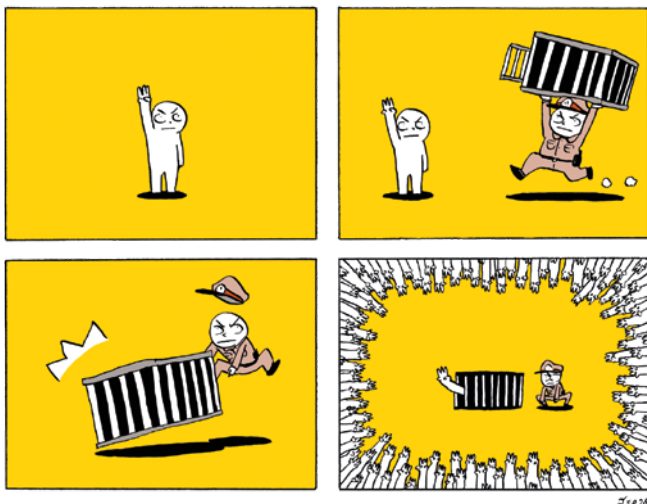
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I have been motivated by the desire to have a say over my destiny.

“If it will put this man in jail, China will stop at nothing” was the headline of a commentary in the Washington Post in March. It referred to Martin Lee, the founder of the largest pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, who is considered the “father of democracy” in his home country. Lee had to stand trial as a co-organizer of a peaceful 2019 protest march. The court found him guilty but suspended his sentence for 24 months. Still, the case horrified Hong Kong’s remaining liberal forces. Emily Lau, former Democratic Party MP, is one of them.

Why are these harsh sentences coming now, two years after the nationwide protests for more democracy?

I think this is a signal to Hong Kongers to stop coming to such protests. While Beijing may not have given direct orders, there is an assumption that the leadership in Beijing wants to see a crackdown on protesters by the courts in Hong Kong. As a result, sentences that are even more drastic may soon be handed down. If you talk to young Hong Kong people, they say that there is no independent judiciary here anymore and that the judges judge unfairly. I wouldn’t go that far, but of course many people here, not just the judges, are under immense pressure.



By Tanis Werasakwong for this year’s HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASEAN - The Cartoonists Perspective Exhibition

As a well-known politician, are you worried about your own safety?

Not really, but that does not mean I will not be arrested or charged. That can happen to anyone, there is no clear definition of what is allowed and what is not. The fear of crossing the “red line” is widespread. But there is a Chinese saying: “We all die someday, so why is it such a big deal?” Everyone wants to live a life worth living, and you fight for the things you believe in. But you may have to pay a very high price for it. We Hong Kong people are not alone in that, if you look around the world. People are dying as we speak.

Do you think there will be big protests in Hong Kong again sometime in the future?

I hope so, and I will continue to fight for it. However, there are people who are much more pessimistic about that. They say that the police will never again tolerate such protest marches in Hong Kong. Because they are afraid that thousands of people will join them again. And I think that would be the case. If we ever have the chance to go out on the streets again, I hope it will be peaceful.

Last year, the so-called Security Law was put in place in Hong Kong, which restricts many freedoms. What has changed for liberal forces since then?

People are afraid of being arrested and that they will be put in jail for many years. That is why many have already left the country, and quite a few more will follow them. Others are censoring themselves to avoid being caught in the crosshairs. Journalists are under particular pressure, as are universities, which are considered hotbeds of the protest movement. Politicians who now want to prove their “patriotism” are advocating, for example, video surveillance of seminars to ensure that the “right” content is taught.

Experts now consider the principle of “one country, two systems” to be dead in the water. What do you think?

I think it is going downhill very quickly, even if there are still clear differences between the mainland and Hong Kong. Do you know what I asked Margaret Thatcher back in 1984 when I was still a journalist? Thatcher had just signed the handover of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to China, with the leadership in Beijing committed to the principle of “one country, two systems” for 50 years. At a press conference on the

subject, I asked Thatcher: "You have signed an agreement under which more than five million people will be placed in the hands of a communist dictatorship. Is that morally justifiable, or is it rather true that in international politics the highest form of morality is that which serves national interests?" Of course, she was prepared for such a question. "What do you mean?" she replied, "Britain has done the best for you. Everyone in Hong Kong is very happy about that; you must be the only exception." Sole exception, meaning "a madwoman." That is what Margaret Thatcher thought of me at the time.

Why did you become a politician and pro-democracy human rights activist?

I became a politician and political activist because I wanted to represent the people of Hong Kong to fight for democratic government, so that people can have a say in important policies, which affect their lives. I believed people must be pro-active and try to influence the policy making process.

What motivates you personally to work for democratic change and for free and independent elections?

I have been motivated by the desire to have a say over my destiny and reluctance to allow big governments to walk all over me. Free and fair elections are a way for people to choose their representatives to serve in the law making body, hence I decided to stand for election.

What important changes are you striving for? For whom are you fighting for?

I am working hard to get the Chinese government to honour the promises they made in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, in which they pledged the Hong Kong people can continue to enjoy their free lifestyle, human rights and the rule of law, and that they can enjoy these freedoms for 50 years until 2047 under Beijing's policy of "One country, two systems." The Chinese government has not kept this promise, and the Hong Kong people are losing their freedom and personal safety and many people have been arrested and put into prison. I am fighting for the Hong Kong people to get the Chinese government to keep their promise.



Human rights defenders are not a distinct professional group, they are distinguished by their actions. What are your most important activities in defending human rights?

My important activities in defending human rights include my 25 years work in the Legislative Council, Hong Kong's lawmaking body, when I repeatedly pointed out the people's wishes and aspiration. I attended countless hearings of various United Nations human rights treaty bodies when they held hearings on Hong Kong as a member of Hong Kong non-government organisation delegations, reflecting our concerns and recommendations to the UN experts. I also gave interviews to international media to help them understand the concerns of the Hong Kong people.

Human rights defenders like you are considered to be the eyes and ears of the international community to the human rights situation in their society. To what extent does this description apply to you?

I play an active role in keeping the international community informed of what is happening in Hong Kong by giving interviews and taking part in forums and seminars and meeting with foreign visitors.

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Kara-Murza is one of Russia's most well-known opposition politicians, a human rights defender and a pro-democracy activist. He has become one of the most vocal critics of Vladimir Putin. He was a long-time colleague of then Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated in 2015 and chairs the Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom. Vladimir Kara-Murza has survived two poisonings by an unknown substance that left him in a coma. Investigations by Bellingcat later showed that he was trailed by the same FSB officers as Alexey Navalny prior to the suspected poisonings. Kara-Murza has played a key role in the passage of the Magnitsky Act that imposed targeted sanctions on Russian human rights violators in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, and several EU countries. He is a regular contributor to the Washington Post, hosts a weekly show on Echo of Moscow radio and has worked as a journalist for outlets such as BBC and Kommersant. He has received various awards for his (?) fight for human rights, including the Sakharov Prize for Journalism as an Act of Conscience, the Magnitsky Human Rights Award, and the Geneva Summit Courage Award.

A photograph of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a grey suit, a light blue shirt, and a red tie with a white geometric pattern. He is holding a black microphone in his right hand and gesturing with his left hand. The background is a bright pink wall.

VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA

RUSSIA



We want Russia to be a country free from fear, a country of freedom, a country of dignity.

You worked closely and were close friends with Boris Nemtsov, then leader of the opposition and pro-democracy activist, who was assassinated in 2015. What did you learn from Boris Nemtsov?

Working with Boris Nemtsov was the greatest honour of my life. **Everything I learned, everything I did, everything I continue to do in Russian politics I owe to him.** No less important than his political skills were his human qualities. There's this stereotype that a successful politician cannot be a decent human being – he proved that stereotype to be false. He always said what he believed, he never betrayed his principles or his friends. He always did what he knew to be right – not what was easy or convenient or profitable or safe. Boris Nemtsov was good about a lot of things and that made him so dangerous for the current regime in the Kremlin. He was an amazing communicator and was able to find a common language with a local market saleswoman in Yaroslavl as well as a US Senator in Washington.

He had successful government experience, which very few of us have because of the length of time that Vladimir Putin has been in power. He was a four-term member of the Russian parliament and a very successful regional governor in the 1990s in Nizhny Novgorod. Boris Nemtsov was of course a government minister and Deputy Prime Minister, he was a ready-made potential President, which in itself made him very dangerous for the Putin regime.

He was a key advocate for targeted western sanctions in the form of visa bans and asset freezes – what we call the Magnitsky Laws – against corrupt actors and human rights abusers, in Vladimir Putin's close circle.

One other thing that he was very successful at was organizing mass street demonstrations against Vladimir Putin's regime. I will never forget the last march of Boris Nemtsov's life – it was in September of 2014 – just a few months before he was killed. It was a march against Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine. The government tried to make us think that those of us who were against the war were just a small marginal group of nobodies. Then to see the tens of thousands of people – the unending sea of faces and flags and people all the way down Moscow's Boulevard ring – who came out to say “No,

not in my name” to reject Putin's aggression, to reject the war in Ukraine.

For all of these reasons, Boris Nemtsov was the most effective, the most prominent and frankly the most dangerous political opponent to the Putin regime. He could not just stand by and idly watch what was happening. He could not be bought, he could not be scared, he could not be compelled to leave the country and so he was silenced the only way he could be – by five bullets into his back on that bridge next to the Kremlin in February 2015.

This was the most brazen, the most high-profile political assassination in the modern history of Russia and to this day, the organizers and masterminds of this assassination continue to be fully shielded and fully protected from the highest levels of the Russian state for reasons that I think are obvious for everyone. One does not investigate oneself.

What remains of his legacy today?

After Boris himself was killed, the Russian authorities continued to fight him – even in death. They continued to fight his legacy – time after time they denied petitions to install even a small plaque at the site of the murder, they sent the police and municipal services to pillage the makeshift memorial that exists on that bridge near the Kremlin, where people continue every single day to this day to bring fresh flowers and light candles in memory of Boris Nemtsov. Time after time they have been letting us know that they will not allow us to commemorate a Russian statesman in Russia and so we went to free countries, to democratic countries to ask them to do what we for now are unable to do at home. I am proud that today Russian embassies in Washington, Vilnius, Kiev and Prague stand on squares that are named after Boris Nemtsov. Every time I speak at these unveiling ceremonies, I always say the same thing: To me as a Russian politician and a Russian citizen, there can be nothing more pro-Russian than to name a street in front of the Russian embassy after a Russian statesman. I have no doubt that one day Russia will be proud as a nation, as a country, as a state that our Embassies in these four cities – and hopefully many other world capitals are standing on streets and in squares that are named after Boris Nemtsov. These designations send a very powerful

message of solidarity and support to those of us in Russia who continue to stand up for the values and principle that Boris Nemtsov believed in, that he lived for and that he gave his life for. **But the best tribute of Boris Nemtsov will be when Russia finally becomes the country which he always wanted to see and always believed Russia could be: a free, modern and hopeful country, a European democratic country.** We continue to the best of our ability to carry on that vision and to continue this work. When that day finally comes this will be the best possible tribute to the legacy and the memory of Boris Nemtsov.

As a human rights defender and a liberal politician – what kind of Russia do you envision and fight for?

In one of his interviews shortly before he was poisoned with chemical weapons by Russian FSB officers in the summer of 2020, Alexey Navalny was asked by a journalist what program the opposition has and what kind of Russia it wants to see. I suppose the journalist was expecting a long detailed and drawn-out response about programs and policies. But Navalny responded with one simple phrase: “We want Russia to become a normal European country”. To anybody who knows Russian history and Russian culture and who follows Russian politics this short answer embodies so many things at once. **We want Russia to be a country where human rights and**

human dignity are respected, where people actually have a say in the running of their state, where the judiciary works independently and issues decisions in accordance with the law not in accordance with phone calls that they receive from higher-ups. We want Russia to be a country, where the media, including the national television channels, are free to speak the truth and are free to criticize the government, where people can exercise their basic civic and political rights including the right to freely demonstrate and to freely voice their grievances without fear of being beaten up or detained and arrested and losing their jobs or being expelled from universities.

In short, we want Russia to be a country free from fear, a country of freedom, a country of dignity, a country like most other countries on the continent of Europe. This goal may seem far-fetched and over-optimistic today but I’m a historian by education and I know that every time major political change came to Russia, it came suddenly and unexpectedly, including for the participants of this change. This is how it happened in 1905, in 1917 and in 1991, when one of the most horrific repressive regimes in the history of humanity collapsed in three days.

To many people, the Putin regime seems solid, it seems unshakable, it seems firmly in control. The truth is, this regime is weak and insecure. Everything it does comes from fear and



Vladimir Kara-Murza at the Boris-Nemtsov-Award ceremony 2019 with the daughter of the laureate Anastasia Shevchenko and Zhanna Nemtsova.

insecurity. The reason Putin has not allowed a single free and democratic election in the 20 years that he has been in power, is because he knows that the result would not be what he and his regime wants. This is why the only method that they still have to keep their power is through coercion and repression – this is why opponents of the regime are being murdered or poisoned, why we have hundreds of political prisoners, why opposition parties and opposition politicians are in most cases not allowed to even participate in the elections. But even when real opponents are removed from the ballot, very often pro-Putin, pro-regime candidates still lose to no names and technical spoilers because so many Russians are looking for ways to send a message that they have had enough.

The restlessness and the public fatigue with Vladimir Putin are undeniable, especially among the young generation. We saw this in the mass nationwide demonstrations in support of Alexey Navalny this year. This growing public fatigue is manifested even in the opinion polls – however difficult it is to speak about opinion polls in an unfree authoritarian society when many people lack access to objective information and many more fear giving an open and honest response about their attitude. Despite all these caveats, we see in the recent polls both by the independent Levada Center but also by government polling agencies, that Putin's United Russia Party is polling in the 20s – just a few weeks ahead of the parliamentary election scheduled for September. We know that there are millions of people in Russia who believe in our vision of a free modern and democratic country, who fundamentally reject Putin, Putinism and everything they represent – both in the domestic repression, the external aggressiveness and the unthinkable levels of nepotism and corruption.

What does it mean to be a human rights defender in Russia today, with the repressive laws that are being passed daily?

It is not easy to be in opposition in Russia today. We know what can happen to those who publicly oppose Vladimir Putin, we know that Boris Nemtsov was murdered in plain sight of the Kremlin, we know that Alexey Navalny was poisoned with chemical weapons by officers of the FSB, Russia's federal security service. I myself have twice been the target of such assassination attempts, by the same FSB squad as investigative journalists at Bellingcat have found out and published. They identified not only the specific unit but also the specific officers who are responsible for the poisonings. This is also the reality of Vladimir Putin's Russia: that in a European country in the 21st century there is a professional squad of assassins in the employment of the state whose job it is to physically liquidate political opponents of the government. This is the reality we are living in and we know that there are nearly 400 political prisoners in Russia today, according to the Memorial Human Rights Center. **We know it is not easy or convenient or safe to be in opposition, but we know it is the right thing to do**

and so we will continue. I spent 15 years working alongside Boris Nemtsov and one of the main principles by which he lived and which he tried to teach and pass on to us is this old principle from French literature: "Do what you must and come what may" – in other words you must always do what is right – regardless of the benefits and also of the dangers. This is what we try to do to the best of our ability. We care about our country, we love our country and it deserves so much better.

You survived two assassination attempts on your life and continue to spend a lot of time in Russia. Why is it important for you to continue your fight from within the country?

Many people have asked me why I'm still in Russia after two assassination attempts by poisoning. Why did Alexey Navalny return to Russia after he was poisoned? The answer is very simple: because Russia is our country and because we are Russian politicians – and Russian politicians have to be in Russia. The biggest gift we could give to Putin would be to give up and run away. I returned home to Russia after the poisoning as soon as I was physically able to stand up and walk. Ever since the Soviet times, the authorities came to a very clear conclusion that the most effective way to neutralize political opponents was to exile them because once a political opponent is outside of the country he or she very quickly loses not only the sense of reality, but also the moral right and moral credibility to continue. You cannot sit somewhere in a faraway safe place and call on people to do something.

So although they want us to leave and to run away, this is not going to happen. Because Russia is our country, because we care about it, because we care about its future and because we know that Russia deserves better. For the sake of the future of our country, we have to continue. I have absolutely no doubt that the day will come when Russia becomes a normal, modern, democratic European country - that respects the rights of its own people and that behaves as a responsible citizen on the international stage. Everything we do in the Russian democratic opposition today aims to bring that day just a little closer.

MU SOCHUA

CAMBODIA



SHORT BIOGRAPHY

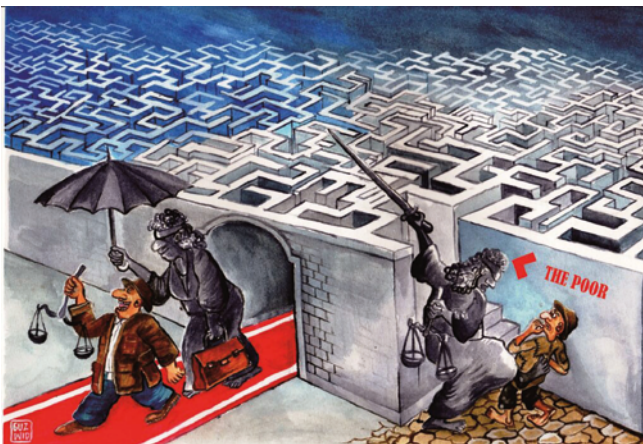
Mu Sochua is a Cambodian politician and human rights activist. Asked whether she would define herself more as a human rights defender or as a politician she responds: "It is neither nor, it is both. And with the qualified adjectives liberal and democrat". She went into exile in 1972 and returned in 1989 – after the Cambodian genocide – to rebuild her home country and work towards a democratic future. She founded a women's rights NGO, served as Minister for Women and Veteran's Affairs between 1998 and 2005 and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. She has dedicated her political career to the defense and promotion of hu-

man rights, freedom and reconciliation. In 2017, Mu Sochua was forced to go into exile to the United States once again after the Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen dissolved her party CNRP. She has recently been sentenced to 20 years in prison in absentia. Asked what she is fighting for, she says: "A bowl of rice is not enough. It is the mind that you need to feed, that mind will always be hungry, the hunger for freedom, for rights and for justice. It is rice and rights together, to make the person whole and dignified". She continues to promote these goals from afar.

“You try until the very end, and if there is no very end, you continue.

How would you describe the living conditions in Cambodia today?

Especially since Covid-19, the situation has become very difficult. Hun Sen [Prime Minister of Cambodia since 1985, editor's note] totally locked the whole city [of Phnom Penh] down without giving people food. Hundreds of people, who went onto social media to complain and to protest, were either arrested or reeducated for spreading “fake news”. But actually they were hungry, scared, having to pay electricity bill, having to pay the debt, not knowing what to feed their children the next day and this is 2021! Their stomachs are still empty. They are struggling hard, and their rights are violated.



By Guzwid for this year's HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASEAN - The Cartoonists Perspective Exhibition

What was it like being a liberal politician in Cambodia and has it become easier over time to call yourself liberal?

When I was minister and a Member of Parliament, to declare yourself a liberal in Cambodia, you constantly have to defend your position. I was often asked “Do you support LGBT? Why?”. I was fighting against gender based violence, domestic violence, even addressed taboo topics like marital rape. That is very liberal but you have to say, it is about human rights. Think of it as if this person is your wife, your child, your own daughter, living under the same roof. She is your family and you defend her rights. It is a duty, a responsibility and it is in the law. Today,

I still have to explain why I defend some causes. For example, just recently, there was the case of a woman, who nearly got raped in a car but could escape. She is a TV presenter in Cam-

bodia. It became a really big story because the guy involved is a tycoon from the ruling party. I talked about it on Facebook. But then I saw comments such as: “She is just trash. Everybody who is in the entertainment sector is trash.” How can they say that? She is not just worth defending. She is your responsibility, our responsibility to defend.

How important is freedom of speech for the promotion of freedom and democracy?

Once you have access to information, your mind starts working - you start to think critically and you want people to be thinking critically for their own lives and for the lives of humanity. For me, it is very important to have the right information and information from different sources, as well as information to generate critical thinking. It is true that when you liberate your mind, you take away the shackles that keeps you as a prisoner. To me, that full range of freedom is so important.

What role does it play in your work and human rights activism that you are a woman?

It is a big part of it. As women, we share the struggles that we have to overcome. Sometimes it is morally challenging, for example when defending a sex worker. But who is going to defend her, if it's not you as a woman sharing the same flesh? When stepping up for other women, I have learned to balance out the emotion with reality and with the tool that you can use in order to achieve what you want: the law. Being outraged is not going to help win cases. It is through the law but even with the law, you can still lose. It is through strategy, advocacy, networking, finding allies.

What are the personal consequences of your activism?

I am in exile as a consequence of being outspoken, of defending, believing in freedom, in justice, in human rights and in dignity. Another consequence is that you are labelled. You cannot describe this label in one word - it makes people judge you for what you are doing, not for who you are. They can judge you by respecting you or they can judge you by saying that she is a trouble maker.

Just recently, there has been a verdict against you in Cambodia. What happened?

They sentenced me to 20 years in prison. I never had the right



to return home to defend myself in court, although I have tried. They took away my passport. The Cambodian embassy in Washington, DC did not even let us apply for a visa. They put out a statement justifying themselves by declaring us as “terrorists”. If we are terrorists, they should have taken us home to Cambodia and put us on trial. They could have even asked the US authority to arrest this “terrorist” - and I would have been happy to be arrested. At least I could go home, to defend our rights. That is the point about defending human rights and the burden of being a human rights defender. You cannot afford to say to yourself: “I give up”. You try until the very end, and if there is no very end, you continue.

You receive a lot of online hate on Social Media. Which of your statements are causing hate speech and what kind of hate speech do you have to endure?

I go live on Facebook nearly every day and sometimes I have as many as half a million viewer. There are three types of comments. Those who are in favor, of course. Not just members of my party but those who are pro-democracy. Then there are those who are in the middle and thirdly those who support the ruling Cambodia’s People Party (CPP). One of the worst comments I got was someone saying they want to put something inside of me and let it explode - inside, meaning your vagina! I get sexualized comments all the time on Facebook. How can you take comments like this? My daughter always says: “Ma, just don’t read it!” But it is just there.

What does it do to you?

In the beginning of the day, when I open everything, I do not look at comments because sometimes, one little thing triggers a lot of feelings. Often, I knit when I have a conversation or debate democracy with our team in Cambodia and with Sam Rainsy [former leader of the opposition in Cambodia, now also in exile, editor’s note], who also receives a lot of violent hate speech and threats. I knit big sweaters for all my family members but none of them are perfect. The last one I knitted for granddaughter, the stitches were totally wrong but I don’t undo them because it is a part of history, for fighting for rights and democracy. I say to them: “See, this is when we were fighting for this and this is when I was watching and listening to a fighting woman who was crying the heart out for the pain that she suffers”.

As a human rights defender outside of Cambodia, you are the eyes and ears for the international community to tell them about what is happening in your home country. Is that how you perceive yourself?

I try to not only focus on Cambodia and to be more open to other human rights issues and democracy in other parts of the world. Human rights issues are global issues that you have to put in context. But I also work in other fields. Right now, I live in the US and we have a Cambodian community here as well. Just recently, they released the census which shows that only 16 percent of Cambodians in the US finished college. And we have the highest number of welfare recipients. So I am talking to my community now and say, this is not right. We are in America. This is the system. We are part of the system. We pay taxes. We have to be engaged. We have to run for offices.

A portrait of María Corina Machado, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black button-down shirt and pearl earrings. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred wall with red and white abstract patterns.

MARÍA CORINA MACHADO

VENEZUELA

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

María Corina Machado is the national coordinator of the liberal opposition party VENTE Venezuela as well as a well-known human rights activist. She served as a Member of Parliament between 2010 and 2015, being elected with the highest number of votes of all the candidates. She is one of the main opposition figures in Venezuela and played a central role in organizing the large-scale protests against President Nicolas Maduro in 2014. Before entering politics, she founded the grass-roots volunteer organization Súmate. After she appeared as an alternate envoy at the request of Panama at the Organization of American States (OAS) to address the situation in Venezuela, she was arbitrarily expelled from the National Assembly and banned from leaving the country. She has received many awards for her commitment and continues to promote democracy and freedom in Venezuela, often raising awareness for the human-rights violations on the international stage, such as at the UN Human Rights Council.



In the struggle for freedom, the defence of human rights is intrinsic.

What motivates you to fight for democratic change in Venezuela? Where do you draw your strength and energy from?

My deep love for my country and for freedom motivates me to work for the transformation of Venezuela into a democracy. Additionally, I am driven by the awareness that the Venezuelan people are facing a tragic situation that needs to change. The regime has abolished all freedoms: it has abolished any guarantees of human security and has taken away our ability to decide on our own way of life, both on a political level, and on a personal level.

What are the most serious human rights issues that urgently need to be addressed in Venezuela?

Every day, the rights to life, liberty and property are violated in Venezuela. The right to well-being is denied: food, housing, medical care, clothing and other basic social services; the rights to education and free development are routinely violated. The same applies to labour rights and civil and political rights, which continue to be repressed. There is a scheme of institutional violence, systematic persecution and repression aimed at controlling and silencing all citizens.

This can be seen in the sad number of more than 300 political prisoners and the almost 500 extrajudicial executions carried out by the police, military and criminal organs of the incumbent President Maduro in the first three months of 2021 alone. Furthermore, there are 189 documented violations of freedom of expression and 384 persecutions registered between January and May.

How do you defend human rights on the ground? What do you consider most important in order to improve the situation?

We have built networks of citizens in Venezuela to make visible and denounce these abuses and tyranny. Together with VENTE - our liberal political opposition party - we have founded a human rights committee. It documents and follows up on all reports of human rights violations, with special attention paid to violations of civil and political rights and crimes against humanity. This is done through constant monitoring of the situation, documentation, and dissemination of information about these abuses. In addition, we have established relationships with human rights organizations inside and outside of Venezuela, which accompany victims and also bring cases before international institutions. Our goal is to put pres-

sure on the regime – which has completely abolished the rule of law – and thereby make impunity impossible for those who commit these acts.



By Agoes Jumianto for this year's HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASEAN – The Cartoonists Perspective Exhibition

You and your family have been directly attacked as a result of your struggle for democratic change in Venezuela. Which situations or decisions had the greatest personal consequences?

From day one, I have dealt with the regime that gradually violated laws, dismantled democratic institutions, began to divide society and stigmatize and attack those who denounced these abuses. Right from the start, I was threatened, and confronted with direct attacks in the media against me and my family as well as against organizations and companies associated with some of my relatives.

However, the greatest and gravest consequence were the threats against my children, who were exposed in the media and whose lives were put in danger. This is why I eventually had to send them away and out of the country. For months there was a danger that security forces of the regime would arrest me or storm our house.

Later, the Venezuelan regime banned me from leaving the country and imposed a travel ban on me - first between 2004-2007 and again since 2014. They also try to restrict my freedom of movement within the country by banning commercial airlines in Venezuela from selling me tickets. Finally, no



media in Venezuela would interview or report on me due to the potential consequences they have to fear and the massive censorship.

What indirect or direct threats or attempts at intimidation are you experiencing today?

Everyone who resolutely opposes the regime, refuses to cooperate and thus does not give in to the pressure and threats, faces direct and indirect attacks. For example, the spokespersons of the regime use our first and last names and call for us to be attacked, arrested or harmed. When I travel around the country, I am constantly followed and my team has repeatedly been physically attacked by the political police, the military police, the irregular groups of the armed collectives, and criminal gangs financed by the regime.

The Human Rights Committee of our organisation has sent reports to international organizations listing some of the threats and aggressions. Thus, until 2019, more than 25 direct attacks and about 50 acts have been registered against members of our organisation, ranging from violations of freedom of movement, dismissals for political reasons, harassment, to cases of violent attacks, arbitrary arrests and even torture against a member.

Women also face public hostility for being women. To what extent have you experienced this dual hostility as a politician and as a woman?

The regime has sought increasingly sophisticated ways to attack women. For example, women who are fanatical sup-

porters of the regime are hired to carry out attacks. It is dramatic and outrageous to see how the regime instrumentalizes women, who are often in dire and desperate economic situations, to carry out these reprehensible acts.

What forms of hate speech and verbal hostility are you exposed to online? And how do you defend yourself against them?

The regime has built surveillance mechanisms to destroy people's reputations. Private communications are infiltrated, for example, phone calls between my mother and me were published and taken out of context, or emails were altered and manipulated. All this information is spread through public media and social networks. Of course, this also has a personal impact, because my children or people close to them also see these messages, suffer from them and are scared. Additionally, our party's website is constantly attacked by hackers and hate speech and verbal hostility also extends to any members or supporters of our organisation.

Human rights defenders are not a separate professional group, they are distinguished by their actions. What activities make you a human rights defender?

In the struggle for freedom, the defence of human rights is intrinsic and is required every single day. In a country like Venezuela, where human rights are not respected, there are no small or large actions in defence of human rights. Anything that contributes to ending the systematic human rights violations and is aimed at ending the impunity of those responsible, achieving justice, making reparations to the victims, is an

important achievement to restore the rule of law. We must listen to those who have been victims of human rights violations and provide them a space to denounce the horrors they face.

But if I had to highlight one thing as the greatest achievement, I would cite the creation and coordination of an organization like VENTE Venezuela, which works to build a country where the fundamental rights of all citizens are secured. Through our work, a complaint file has been developed for “human rights violations against our members,” which has been included in the report of the Panel of Independent Experts of the Organisation for American States (OAS) and contributes to the evidence base for Venezuela’s case before the International Criminal Court.

For whom are you particularly advocating? For whom do you speak?

I have had the opportunity to speak before various international organisations and bodies, such as the Organisation of American States, the United Nations, or the European Parliament. Precisely because I did this so intensively for many years, the regime banned me from leaving the country.

I speak in the name of every Venezuelan whose rights are being violated. In the name of mothers and fathers who have no way to feed their children and whose savings have been taken away. In the name of producers whose property has been expropriated, journalists who have been silenced, workers whose dignity and freedom of work have been extinguished, and every Venezuelan who loves freedom and who is willing to continue fighting until we build a nation with very solid republican, ethical and liberal pillars.

Venezuela is currently experiencing a serious human rights crisis. How can the Venezuelan people support the struggle to improve this situation?

The most important thing that all Venezuelans must be clear about is that it is about their rights: the right to life, the right to security, the right to property, the right to expression, and the right to choose the Venezuela and the nation in which we want to live.

Today, we Venezuelans are aware – despite all the repression and suffering – that the future of our country, of millions of Venezuelans not yet born, depends on us, on what we do or what we no longer do in these hours.



FÉLIX MARADIAGA

NICARAGUA



SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Félix Maradiaga is one of Nicaragua's most high-profile liberals and human rights activists. He has been the target of threats by President Daniel Ortega's government since a political crisis began in April 2018. Félix was the victim of a violent assault ordered by the regime that caused him several broken bones, before he was labeled a terrorist and forced to leave Nicaragua in May 2019 to the United States. In September 2019, Félix Maradiaga returned to Nicaragua, and in February 2020, he became the candidate of the opposition movement Coalición Nacional. Since the beginning of June 2021, the government of President Ortega has been arresting opposition candidates, anti-government leaders, and journalists, accusing them of being linked to international organizations which are violating the sovereignty of the country.

“This movement stands for inclusivity and is committed to democracy and justice.

What motivates you personally to work for democratic change and free and independent elections in Nicaragua?

I am primarily motivated because I am tired of the abuses against the poor and the most disadvantaged sectors of society. April 18, 2018, marked a turning point in Nicaragua's recent history because citizens – especially young people – made clear their commitment to democracy and gave voice to their desire to live in a country that is different to the one we have today, a country where the rights of all are respected. Despite state violence, for the first time in the country's history, a national civic movement emerged. This movement stands for inclusivity and is committed to democracy and justice.

The goal is a democracy with broad citizen participation, in which everyone's right to think differently is respected and in which the state guarantees the rights of groups that have historically been excluded.

Which of your statements produced the strongest push-back by the regime?

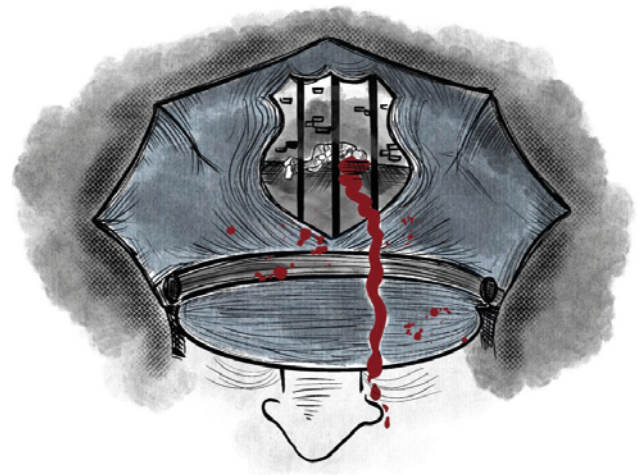
Especially in these days, we are fighting in Nicaragua for fundamental rights to be respected. In 2018, people were killed, tortured, imprisoned, and forced into exile because they demanded justice in their statements, uttered the word freedom, and waved the national flag in public. Today, the regime has opposition politicians arrested because President Ortega would lose against these candidates in free and fair elections.

What attacks have you and your family faced in the past during the political struggle for a democratic Nicaragua?

My father was a political prisoner during the Somoza regime. The Somoza clan ruled Nicaragua between 1934 and 1979. In 1979, after several years of civil war, the Sandinistas overthrew the regime. In the 1980s, the Sandinista regime confiscated my mother's family's small business. Thirty years later, my wife and daughter are living in exile.

In 2018, the government withdrew the registration of the think-tank I co-founded and directed, Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (Institute of Strategic Studies and Public Policies). Since December 2020, I am not allowed to leave the capital and was only allowed to leave my house

with the permission of the police. In addition, the government froze my bank accounts and accused me of numerous crimes that I did not commit.



By Shazeera for this year's HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASEAN - The Cartoonists Perspective Exhibition

What legal accusations or charges have you experienced?

In 2018, I was accused of terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking for supporting the young people who took to the streets to protest. As in hundreds of other cases of wrongfully imprisoned people, in my case, the government fabricated evidence and used the state justice system to criminalize social protest.

What forms of hate speech and verbal hostility are you exposed to on the Internet? And how do you defend yourself against them?

On social media, government supporters repeat the hate speech of Vice President Rosario Murillo and make all sorts of false accusations against dissenters. Every month, I receive death threats and violent messages from people who identify with the regime. I ignore these attacks and focus on denouncing the abuses of the incumbent power groups and highlighting the problems of the population, which every day has more and more difficulty putting its daily bread on the table.

Human rights defenders like you are considered to be the eyes and ears of the international community on the human rights situation in their society. To what extent does this description apply to you?

My job is to listen to victims, to point out and denounce government abuses, but also to promote a culture of peace based on democratic values such as tolerance, social justice, and freedom.

Human rights defenders are not a separate professional group; their actions distinguish them. What are your most essential activities in defense of human rights?

Every week, I meet with people who have been victims of human rights violations to learn about their reality and listen to their demands. The main demand of the mothers of young people who have been killed or imprisoned is justice. Without justice and fair trials, there can be no democratic transition in Nicaragua. We must not forget that. We must demand justice and a functioning judiciary.

How could the international community better support pro-democracy movements and activists in countries around the world? Are there any useful examples?

The international community's support has been instrumental in documenting and denouncing the regime's abuses. The Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts), which documented acts of violence and human rights violations between April and May 2018, published a hard-hitting report indicating that the regime in Nicaragua has committed crimes against humanity. The work of the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights is significant but insufficient. The international community has often acted too slowly in the past, giving President Ortega many opportunities to act arbitrarily. We need a more active international community to fight more effectively against the existing conditions. We are currently living under a regime of terror in Nicaragua, where state security forces can act with total impunity. We are defenseless as citizens and civil society, because there are neither counterbalances nor independent institutions in Nicaragua. President Daniel Ortega and first lady and Vice President Rosario Murillo rule Nicaragua autocratically with repressive methods - this is unacceptable in the 21st century.

What steps are necessary to ensure lasting peace in Nicaragua?

The first step would be free and transparent elections on November 7, 2021. With this, the new government can take on disarming the paramilitary gangs organized by the Nicaraguan state. Simultaneously, reforming the police and the army; repealing the repressive laws passed by the National Assem-

bly controlled by Ortega, and promoting a reformation of the state with the participation of all sectors of the population. To enhance lasting peace in Nicaragua, there has to be an investigation in the crimes committed since the 1980s. In this process, justice must go hand in hand with truth telling and a culture of not forgetting, so that the foundations for a transition to a participatory democracy with strong institutions and free and transparent elections are possible.

As a liberal politician, what essential changes are you seeking in Nicaragua?

My policy focus points to five priorities: First: prosperity for all; second: peace in freedom; third: a future with a living culture of remembrance; fourth: a new civil society; and fifth: implementing sustainable development concepts in harmony with the environment. These priorities aim to consolidate a state that provides the framework conditions for the emergence of greater prosperity and respects the social, political, and economic rights of Nicaraguans. We also need a decentralized government that allows citizen participation and within which debate and critical thinking are encouraged.

What would you say to young people who are disillusioned with politics and who are looking for change in their country?

The processes of change in Nicaragua may be longer and more difficult than we would like it to be, but that shouldn't discourage us. In the context in which we live, we must engage in changing society. Politics is not only government action, but also the personal choices that each individual makes from day to day. Let us be good citizens, let us lead by example, and let us use our individual and collective power to effect positive change.

Shortly after this interview was conducted, Félix Maradiaga has been arrested on June 8, 2021. He became one of the 140 political prisoners of the regime of President Daniel Ortega. To date, neither the lawyer nor family members have been able to see Félix. There is no information about his general condition or his state of health, which is especially worrying since he was hit in the face during his arrest.

BOCHRA BELHAJ HMIDA

TUNESIA



SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Bochra Belhaj Hmida is a Tunisian lawyer, politician and prominent women's rights activist. In 1989 she co-founded the Democrat Tunisian Women Association (Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates – ATFD) and served as its president between 1994 to 1998. She was elected to parliament in 2014 and chaired the commission on Individual Freedom and Equality, which was charged with integrating into law the values of freedom and equality, which charac-

terised the 2011 uprising in Tunisia. Bochra Belhaj Hmida is a member of the G7 Advisory Council on Gender Equality and has received various prizes for her fight for women's rights and a democratic Tunisia. Amongst them are the Anna Lindh Civil Society Award 2015 and the Fatima al-Fihriya Prize in recognition of her commitment for individual freedoms and equality in Tunisia.

“Women are the new face of the reformist energies in Tunisia.”

Why did you become a political activist in Tunisia?

It started during my childhood, I grew up in the middle of the political upheaval against the regime of Ben Ali. Furthermore, cinema and reading books gave me the energy to fight for my mother's dream, that I become a strong independent women, a lawyer and a voice for freedom.

Why did you found the Democrat Tunisian Women Association (Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates – ATFD), in 1989 which seeks to promote women's rights and gender equality?

The ATFD was the result of our debate about the situation of Tunisian women at the time. It was our goal to establish a platform for women to express themselves freely. The ATFD is a network of women who believed in empowerment through education. That is why we launched a review dedicated for women to talk about the meaning of democracy. Women are the new face of the reformist energies in Tunisia.



Bochra Belhaj Hmida at the office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom in Tunis.

What is your personal motivation to work for democratic improvement?

I am motivated by the dream of free political speech. I fight every day to create an environment where everyone can express their opinion freely and safely, without limitations. This is needed in Tunisia after the revolution in order to practice democracy, and to strengthen and to improve civic engagement and the role of politics.

Have you experienced any personal consequences in the past due to your political visibility and activism?

Before the revolution, personal pressure was part of our daily life: the police were eavesdropping on our calls and were following us to normal meetings with our friends. Physical abuse regularly happened during protests, while we experienced verbal abuse each time we had a discussion with a police agent.

Even my sister suffered personal consequences due to my political engagement. I was dreaming of inviting someone to my house without being followed. And each week you will find an article about us in the press talking badly about the association that I founded. After the revolution, the situation has changed and many of the threats have moved to the on-line sphere and social media, where I now receive direct death threats. That is why I have been under personal protection since 2013. When we published a report calling for equality in inheritance law I was exposed to a huge amount of hate speech. There were campaigns about my physical appearance and disinformation was spread about the report everywhere. I received direct threats on messenger services saying that they will be killing me soon.

What form of hate speech and verbal hostility are you exposed to on the internet?

On top of the example I have just described, there were campaigns insulting me that were launched each time I was talking about LGBTI rights and the heritage law. I still remember the time when my Facebook channel was linked with awful photos mocking me for three successive days.

How do you defend yourself against these campaigns?

I do not get involved in those campaigns. If you do so, you will lose your cause. But my mother was a source of concern for me because seeing the online campaigns against me makes her very upset and sad. I do correct false information that is disseminated about me because disinformation campaigns can destroy the cause I am working for. Or sometimes I do select some messages where I respond to the accusing aspect of the sender and I am trying my best to open a debate with him. I engage in these occasional debates because I want to make those people who are vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation understand that I am defending their rights and their safety too.

CECILLIA CHIMBIRI

ZIMBABWE

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Cecillia Chimbiri is a human rights activist and Zimbabwean youth campaigner for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) – Zimbabwe’s main opposition party. She is the first female National Youth Vice Chairperson of the MDC and is the Deputy Secretary for the Women’s Academy For Africa (WAFA) Southern Region where she represents Zimbabwe. In May 2020, Chimbiri and two other women were arrested at a peaceful protest against food shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic and were later abducted from police custody by suspected state security agents. The three women were found badly injured and traumatized 60 miles away from the capital Harare two days later and report having been tortured and sexually assaulted. The three women were later re-arrested for “an alleged fake abduction report” and for ostensibly violating the country’s lockdown regulations. Their trial has been repeatedly postponed. In this interview, she speaks about the crime and the violence she experienced for the first time.



“We can be agents of change and development.

Why did you become a pro-democracy activist and politician?

I have a genuine desire to see positive change not only in my country Zimbabwe, but also in the whole of Africa. I realized that tyranny, corruption, economic and gender inequality were ills plaguing our country. Political activism gave me the platform to fight these ills and contribute towards the building of a better Zimbabwe. More importantly, as a young woman, I have always been passionate about youth and women empowerment.

I want to inspire women and the youth, to show them that we too can be agents of change and development. As women, we have the potential to be great leaders and create change wherever we are.

Our government has a long history of using fear and intimidation tactics to cower its citizens into submission. Succumbing to these tactics should not be an option. I believe that it is my duty, our duty, to fight for this country and stir it back to prosperity. Nelson Mandela once said: There is no passion to be found in playing small – in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living. These words have been an inspiration in my political journey.

What motivates you personally to work for democratic change and for free and independent elections in Zimbabwe?

I am driven by an unshakeable belief in the equality of all people. I love my country and I strongly believe that we can return Zimbabwe to democracy and turn our economy around.

Free and independent elections give citizens the power to choose their leaders. A government chosen by the people is accountable to the people and bends to the will of the people. Zimbabwe has not experienced free and fair elections in a long time. We need to fight to give power back to the citizens of Zimbabwe.



Rose by Daria Sazanovich

Due to your work and pro-democratic political visibility, you experienced something terrible last year. Would you like to share with us what has happened?

2020 was a difficult and heart-breaking year for me. The Covid-19 global pandemic came at a time when the health sector in Zimbabwe was already on its knees. As a political activist, I joined other opposition leaders in taking to the streets of Harare to protest the government's failure to provide for the poor during the lockdown. We wanted to bring to the government's attention the plight of the youth, women and the elderly who had been hard hit by the lockdown.

Carrying placards, we went to Warren Park to stage a flash demonstration. We arrived at the venue to find it already swarming with people, most of whom, we believed, were infiltrators, as well as heavily armed riot police and soldiers. We assumed that the police and soldiers were there to ensure that protesters did not violate Covid-19 protocols and that they would soon leave.



I am driven by an unshakeable belief in the equality of all people. I love my country and I strongly believe that we can return Zimbabwe to democracy and turn our economy around.

After about 10 minutes, teargas was thrown into the crowd. I remember running to hide in a nearby house I knew belonged to MDC supporters. After about 30 minutes, things seemed to have calmed down so I left and started looking for the people I had come with.

We discussed our exit strategy from what still appeared to be a dangerous zone for us. We agreed to return the way we had come, assuming that the police would expect us to evade capture by going the opposite direction. We were so wrong. Just after passing a Covid-19 checkpoint near the National Sports Stadium, we noticed a van that was tailing us. We were stopped at another checkpoint and asked to present letters authorizing us to be on the move during a lockdown. We gave them our letters. Before we could drive off, a car drove up behind us and flashed its lights. Two police officers disembarked, came to our car and told us that we had been identified from photos of the protests in Warren Park and that we were under arrest.

We drove towards Harare Central police station. I was laughing on the way, a coping mechanism I had adopted in the past whenever I got arrested. My mother called me just as we were about to get to the station, having received the news of my arrest. Not wanting to stress her, I told her that everything was under control and she need not to worry.

When we got to the station, the police told us to park outside and get into their van, which had been driving behind us. We asked to wait for our lawyers but they said the lawyers would be told to follow us. The van had no seats at the back and had darkened windows, so we could not see outside. Once we were inside, I noticed 3 more men already inside the van. They made us lie down as we drove away, supposedly back to Warren Park police station.

After a while I realized that we had been driving for too long to be going to Warren Park. I realized that we were likely being abducted as the van increased speed. I was so scared I could not speak or move and at this point one of the men pinned my head to the floor with his big foot. When we got out of the van, all I could see was an old half-finished building and long grass everywhere. We walked through the building to a deep dark hole. Using torches for light, the men forced us down the hole. I was so scared at this point I wished they would kill me quickly. The men started beating us with a rope, telling us to re-enact what we were doing at the protest.

We were cold and shivering, with no idea when this torture would end. (...) I was so tired I lost track of time. I could no longer tell what time or day it was. I do not remember falling asleep, but I might have fallen asleep in between beatings. (...) At one time I woke up to find one of the men tearing my clothes off my body. I still remember his evil filled face sneering at me. (...) I was so scared because I thought they were going to kill us. We were forced back into the van and made to lie on the floor as before. We drove for what felt like two hours, with no idea where we were headed. I was tired and kept dozing off. The car came to screeching halt. The door was opened and Netsai, who was sitting by the door, was thrown out of the car. I screamed, thinking they were going to run over her with the car. Instead, they started the car and drove off, leaving her in the middle of the road. As the car sped off, they threw Joanna out and I heard her body hit the road. The car slowed down a bit then I was also thrown out, then it sped off and disappeared. (...) It was cold and dark outside so I could not see clearly. I could hear cries in the distance. I tried to stand but that proved difficult. I dragged myself until I was standing. Seeing as I was now able to walk, I thought it best to go and seek help. I looked around and there was not a single house in site. I started walking down the road until I came across

a cabin. I went and knocked on the door and it was a while before the occupants responded. They were reluctant to open the door for me as it was in the middle of the night and I could have been a thief. They asked me a lot of questions before finally opening the door. God bless them! (...) We had no choice but to spend the night. Because the cabin was too small to accommodate all of us, the owners made room for us in their chicken coup and we went to sleep. We woke up to find help had arrived. MDC Alliance leaders arrived with the police and our lawyers. They quickly took us to the hospital.

I was abducted and detained against my will. I was beaten and sexually abused. I am so lucky to be alive today thanks in part to social media efforts that kept our disappearance in the limelight such that our abductors, feeling public pressure, let us go. I am not the first person to be kidnapped but I do not wish this to anyone. The government has denied any involvement in our disappearance. We reported our ordeal to the police but our case was never investigated. Instead, we were accused of faking our abduction and faced further harassment. [...]

I believe that a day is coming when the truth will come out and we will be free. (...) I have not narrated my ordeal to anyone since May 2020. I have been going for counselling to help me heal emotionally. I still break down when I recall the cruelty I suffered that day. It is still hard for me to give the full details of what happened to us. I appreciate the opportunity to share some of what happened to us.

Can the crimes be described as a breaking point in your life?

No. My ordeal has not deterred my resolve to fight for change in Zimbabwe. In fact, it has left me stronger and more determined. I am here today because of the immeasurable support from the media, from fellow Zimbabweans and the international community. I have also received a lot of support from my psychologist. This tragedy did not break me but has turned into a defining moment in my life.

Yes, I was angry. I was sad. I was disappointed. But I have taken all these emotions and turned them into positive energy that has kept me all the more focused on the fight ahead of us. I now see this as a mere hurdle in my fight for justice against human rights abuses obtaining in our country.

When I was in the hospital, I seized the opportunity to share my story. I believed that the world needed to hear what happened to us. I was under the illusion that telling my story would expose the cruelty of the Mnangagwa regime. I thought that for the first time, the police would launch a thorough investigation into our abduction and torture and the perpetrators

would be brought to book. I naively believed that exposing our ordeal at the hands of state agents would ensure that this never happened to anyone again. How wrong I was. Things only got worse for us. We were accused of faking our abduction and publishing falsehoods prejudicial to the state, the same state which was responsible for our suffering. State orchestrated abductions are continuing with impunity. The motive behind these abductions is clearly to scare off government critics, to prevent people from protesting against the Mnangagwa government. I will not give in to fear. I will not give up. I will not break. This is only the beginning for me. We need to continue fighting wherever we are and whenever we can.

Human rights defenders are not a distinct professional group, they are distinguished by their actions. What are your most important activities in defending human rights?

Protests are mainly what I use to speak for the people. Political activism is also a tool I use to register human rights violations. I also use social media to fight against human rights abuses. I have active Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. I use these platforms to keep the spotlight on human rights abuses and to fight for positive change. I believe in the power of numbers. I continue to share my story as the government continues persecuting me. I have garnered a lot of support through social media.

Human rights defenders like you are considered to be the eyes and ears of the international community to the human rights situation in their society. To what extent does this description apply to you?

I use my platform as a political activist to raise awareness on human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. In the past year, following my abduction and torture at the hands of state agents, I have used social media to bring to light human rights abuses that continue unabated in Zimbabwe. I have spoken strongly against human rights abuses that include torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, evictions, and lack of access to proper health facilities among others. I gather information on human rights abuses around Zimbabwe and share them on my social media platforms. I want the world to know what is happening in Zimbabwe.

LEILA M. DE LIMA

PHILIPPINES



SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Leila M. de Lima is a politician and human rights activist currently serving as a Senator of the Philippines. Before being appointed as the head of the National Human Rights Commission of the Philippines in 2008, she was a practicing lawyer. In this role, she opened an inquiry into now-President Rodrigo Duterte's involvement in extrajudicial executions during his time as Mayor of Davao City. Between 2010 and 2015 she served as the Secretary of Justice. In

the 2016 general elections, de Lima was elected to the Senate. She has been one of the staunchest and most vocal critics of President Duterte's "war on drugs" and the related and wide-spread human rights violations. She was arrested in 2017 on politically motivated charges and has been held in pre-trial detention since then. Amnesty International has recognized Leila de Lima as a prisoner of conscience.

“I remain unconquered.

I am now into my fifth year in detention for trumped-up and politically motivated charges. I remain without access to the Internet or any gadgets for work or personal use. Even joining Senate deliberations via teleconferencing is denied to me. All digital platforms where I can personally appear and fulfil my mandate are also denied. **I am allowed only paper and pen.** During the first months of the pandemic, I was by all indications subjected to incommunicado detention, a situation in which I was denied access to the outside world. I am constantly under watchful eyes and monitoring beyond what is necessary. Up to this day, visitors have been rare and limited, due to strict regulations related to the pandemic. The overall plan is (and has always been) to thrust me into oblivion, with blemished name and handicapped by restrictions, and silence my voice after daring to call out President Duterte's crimes against humanity in his deadly drug war, and now the red-tagging of civilians.



By Zunar for this year's HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASEAN - The Cartoonists Perspective Exhibition

Anybody who has personal convictions and voices out his/her dissent is not safe under a dictatorial regime. But regardless of circumstances, dissent in the face of dictatorship and calling out the abuses committed by it have always been the right and just thing to do. I know my causes well and I will use all my tools to survive this persecution. If the pen is the only thing I am allowed, my pen shall never dry out for this struggle.

I shall never toe the line of compromise on human rights. The legal cases against me, fabricated and founded on lies,

are proceeding at a snail's pace. To protect myself from this unforgiving circumstance, I learned to hope for the best but prepare for the worst and just set my mind and strength to my daily work, focused in large part on fulfilling my mandate as a Senator. By doing this, not only can I prevent myself from ruminating on the dark terrains of doubts and fears about my situation but also show to my persecutors that I remain unconquered.

I keep a daily routine. I rise at 4:30 in the morning and begin my day reading the Scriptures and praying the Holy Rosary. This "me time" gives me a surer footing on where I stand and boosts my spiritual and mental energy to face the day. After this, I face other forms of innocent life, my loyal companions inside detention – my plants and adopted stray cats – the only ones not subjected to visit restrictions and affected by the pandemic. They give me simple joys. Before breakfast, I feed my cats, water my plants and clean my quarters, also as a form of exercise and wellness.

By nine in the morning, the grind of Senate work begins. My staff brings me all the daily briefing reports, newspapers, correspondence, Senate bills and resolutions I must read, and, information on pressing national issues, office activities and events that require my instructions and approval. In return, I issue memos and instructions, make precise notes on the reviewed documents and compose ideas on bills, resolutions and policy directions I want to explore and later craft that require research. I also issue written dispatches on issues that matter to me and affect the public. Some of these dispatches (especially on human rights, corruption and Mr. Duterte's downright servility to China) earn the ire of the regime and, in retaliation, the latter hits me with another round of lies and brickbats. I also find so much joy in writing birthday greetings, congratulatory messages and if necessary, letters of sympathy to my friends, staff, supporters and loved ones. They are my human, affectionate, and loving connections and sources of my deepest motivation.

On some days of the week, I meet with my lawyers to set our course around my trumped-up cases. In between, I read books, both fiction and non-fiction. They are a source of my creative force. Late afternoon, I meditate and write on my journal. These are my daily and weekly rituals and activities which, taken together, developed further my discipline and patience in detention. I go to bed between ten or eleven in the evening.

Before February 24, 2017, the day I was arrested, I was fighting for the human rights of thousands of poor victims, inclu-

ding innocent children, of Duterte's drug war. Since the day of my arrest on fabricated charges, I have continued that fight on top of my personal battle to assert and defend my own human rights that today, remain disrespected and outrightly violated. **My passion for defending the human rights of the disadvantaged and marginalized Filipinos has not wavered just because I am now myself a victim.** I have risen above my persecution. My continuing unjust incarceration has further deepened my understanding of the need to respect, protect and fight for the rights of others.

I now speak from the urgency of my own experience. **I have been described as a political prisoner and a prisoner of conscience.** A widely accepted definition of a political prisoner is one who is imprisoned for his/her political beliefs or actions, contrary to those of his/her government. Being described as one is not only an honour and privilege but **a moral encouragement to continue with the fight for justice, respect for human rights and the rule of law.** No fabricated charges, demonization and blatant lies about my person can prevent me from fulfilling this avowed responsibility. Come hell or high waters, I will be true to who I am and my convictions.

Political prisoners all over the world are doubly disadvantaged and marginalized. Often, they are held on trumped-up charges, effectively denying them the basic principle in Article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which states that: "everyone has the right to recognition as a person before the law." Other times, they are treated like common criminals, subjected to far worse conditions in detention than the latter. They are discriminated against, particularly by jail authorities and some are tortured and/or subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. They are most vulnerable to violations of their physical integrity and human dignity as persons. If common criminals who are imprisoned for crimes they commit against society enjoy universally accepted standards and treatment as enunciated in the UDHR, the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and other international treaties, can we not consider political prisoners as a vulnerable group entitled to additional protection by the international human rights system? Perhaps, it is high time that we give this some thought.

Accountability for abuses and violations committed by duty-holders, whether individually or collectively, is the cornerstone of human rights protection and promotion. Victims of human rights violations and their families are entitled to the rights to truth, to justice, to an effective remedy against grievances and abuses and to reparation. The right to an effective remedy carries with it the imposition of sanctions against those who are responsible. **Individual sanctions, be they in the form of travel restrictions, denial of visa or freezing of assets, must be effectively implemented and enforced to be considered a**

successful foreign policy tool. Without effective implementation, enforcement and monitoring, individual sanctions as a foreign policy tool might not work. If it does though, it can be an effective tool in showing the Filipino people that the international community cares and is watching. It can also be a deterrent for and a warning to high-ranking Philippine government officials in avoiding wrongdoings and abuses while in office. Further, if it is effective, it is a useful tool to promote respect for human rights at all levels of government.

Given an opportunity to speak before the international human rights community, the UN Human Rights Council in particular, I will espouse not only for the effective implementation and enforcement of the individual sanctions as a foreign policy tool but also for the creation of an independent and impartial fact-finding investigation by the Council of the human rights situation in the Philippines under the Duterte administration. I share the recommendation of the 14 UN Special Rapporteurs that there really is a need for this investigation. The extrajudicial killings have not stopped and continue unabated, not even during this pandemic. In fact, there is a finding that there was a 50% increase in the number of EJKs for the period April to June 2020, compared with the preceding months of that year. There is also a need for an on-the-ground investigation on how far Duterte and his minions have implemented the latest resolution of the UN Human Rights Council to improve its human rights record.

With or without the pandemic, the time to act and investigate is NOW. We cannot afford to lose more lives. We cannot afford to just watch and wait for the Philippine government to fulfil its obligations. **We need the international community to help us pressure this government to do its mandated duty of respecting, promoting and fulfilling the rights and freedoms of its people.** Let the perpetrators and their masterminds be made accountable and let the rights of the victims and their families to truth and justice be protected and fulfilled. As members of the human rights community, let our collective voices against abuses and atrocities be heard.

I am Leila M. de Lima, Senator of the Republic of the Philippines and a political prisoner, and I remain unconquered!

1 June 2021 Manila, Philippines

LESEN SIE DIE GESAMTE PUBLIKATION AUCH ONLINE



