



Den norske Forfatterforening

Newly established cyber security laws and firewall infrastructures reinforce digital dictatorship

interview with Ma Thida

recipient of The Norwegian Authors' Union's Freedom of Expression Prize 2010

When did you receive the message that you were awarded the price, and how did you react?

I remember the news message came to me when the political situation inside my country had started changing a bit. We, the people of Myanmar, were hoping to have more positive change coming. I was quite surprised to know that I was awarded the price, and of course, happy. But at the same time, I had concerns about the reaction from the military regime. If this news was widely known via the media, the regime might give me hardship. So, I can say that my early reaction towards receiving the price was mixed; happy and worried. Therefore, I decided not to attend the award ceremony. It was not a very easy decision.

Has the price influenced your work or situation, and in that case, how?

To be frank, the price did not influence my work or situation that much, as I still remained in my country where the military regime was still functioning well in terms of censorship and propaganda. Only around two years after the price, the media landscape and literature field in Myanmar started changing. By that time, my new works, especially the prison memoir, had been getting more attention. The price was one of the achievements, but not the only driving force for my future works, though I really appreciate being rewarded it.

How has the situation for writers in your country developed since the time you received the price?

The censorship stopped in 2012, and my works got more attention after my prison memoir was published in late 2012. Since then, I got a wider audience and success.

And after establishing the freedom of organization law, I could form PEN Myanmar and start running it as a key civil society organization for advocacy on freedom of expression, right to information and free speech.

There were some more writers' groups who organized, and we all enjoy doing respective activities; many of them focus more on literature, but PEN Myanmar does both advocacy and literature. Though the new media law had some problems, improved postal distribution system and the digital marketing situation made writers and publishers pretty well off.

Though self-censorship still remained as a difficult issue among writers and publishers, many uncensored works got published and the readers could enjoy varieties of free works. As the printing and publication law had some amendments, many new publishing houses, literature magazines and news journals has been established. The old tradition of public literary talks was reintroduced, and many writers got a chance to reach out to readers in both urban and rural areas all over the country – including remote ethnic places. This played an important role in education on democracy and literature, and also in encouraging the general public to believe they can play a role in changing the country's present and future.

However, after the military coup attempt in 2021, the situation has changed a lot. I myself needed to leave my country and now my passport was denied renewal. Many writers and journalists were arrested, and some were killed by military soldiers during the protest or the investigation or while they were hiding. Many still remain in prison. Many went in exile. Many media outlets were stripped off their practicing licenses. The digital news media landscape has also changed since the coup attempt. Political and commercial motivations became the key driving forces for both the old and new media groups. The media landscape is more polarized. Many new law enforcements and orders has been introduced by the military regime. Newly established cyber security laws and firewall infrastructures reinforce digital dictatorship

Would you like to share some of what you are currently working on?

I finished a new book early this year. Indeed, this book is kind of a follow-up book of my early book *The Roadmap* which was recognized by the prize from your organization. My new book is tentatively entitled as *A-Maze*. This book highlights that the decade-long, quasi-civilian administration period (2011-2020) didn't bring Myanmar to reach its way toward democracy, instead Myanmar has been lost in a tortuous maze crafted by the military leaders.

This book consists of four different categorized titles: *The Walls*, *The Corners*, and *The Passages of the amazing Maze (A-maze)*. This book explains how the 2008 Constitution, some significant past political incidents and maneuvers, and deeply rooted social and structural obstacles were like walls of the complex maze which made Myanmar people lost. It also explains why they couldn't reach anywhere near the destination of

democracy though they have been walking miles after miles, hill after hill, and pits after pits.

This book also explains how the 2021 Myanmar Spring Revolution was moving fast forward with its strenuous efforts, how it was trying to tear down those walls of the maze, and why some old and new complicated corners still exist and have appeared. In short, this book (in sixty sections of average four pages long) tries to answer these questions: How did the Spring Revolution gain its aimful momentum, and maintained positivity so far? What are those hard-to-get-rid-of walls? Who created those corners? How are the majority of people of/from Myanmar trying to march on current passages to reach back on the road to democracy?

I finished this book in Burmese, and am now working on the English translation. I am also looking for a publisher for it, not just in English. I am now living in Berlin under the Writer-in-exile program run by PEN Germany. But, I still do not have a passport from Myanmar. For a long time, I have had no solution for this.