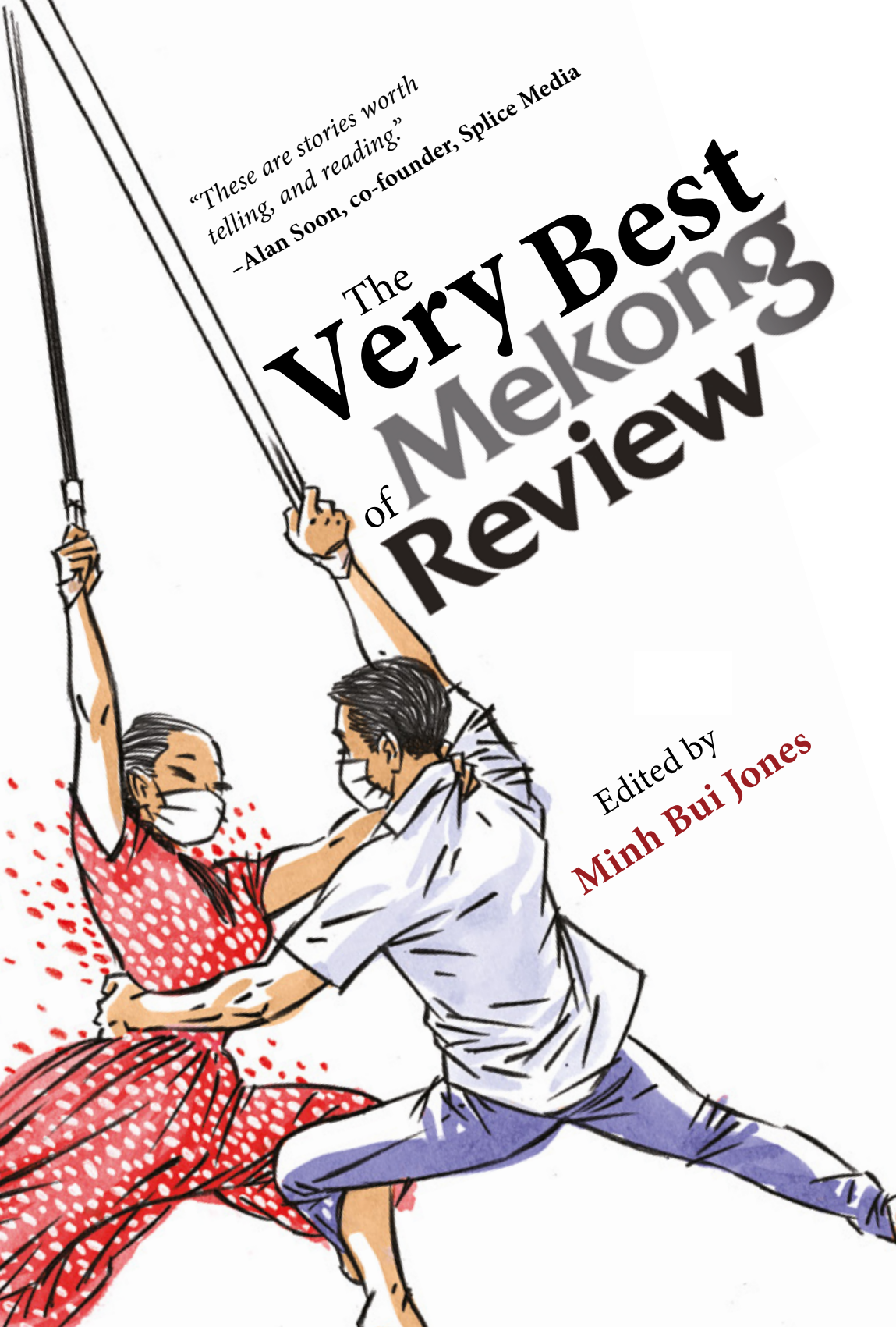


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The Very Best of Mekong Review

Edited by
Minh Bui Jones



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The Very Best of Mekong Review

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Edited by
Minh Bui Jones


EPIGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I caught a ferry from Phnom Penh to Chau Doc, a riverside town over the border in Vietnam. The ferry left the capital of Cambodia at noon and arrived in the Mekong delta at nightfall. I disembarked and found myself resting at a bend in the street running away from the Bassac River, tired and anxious. Most of my fellow passengers were picked up by someone they knew; the rest had disappeared into the night. It was my first time in Chau Doc and I had neither a map nor a room booked for the night. I had been on the road for weeks, crisscrossing countries with a suitcase stuffed full of copies of *Mekong Review*—a magazine with hundreds of loyal readers spread across Southeast Asia. For a host of reasons—chiefly lack of money—it was easier and cheaper to take the magazines straight to the cafes and bars that stocked *Mekong Review* in those early days. So, four times a year (being a quarterly publication) I would set off on a “distribution run” after an issue had gone to press; and two or three weeks later, I would come home, utterly exhausted, ready to start all over again. On this particular trip, as I recall, I had started in George Town, Malaysia, where the magazine was printed at the time, catching a train to Singapore, where freshly

printed copies would be dropped to a handful of shops. Next stop was Bangkok, then Yangon, Chiang Mai, Battambang and Phnom Penh. That last leg, a 290-kilometre bone-rattling bus ride, was still raw as I docked in Chau Doc. In another time, when I lived in Phnom Penh, I often came across ads for weekend stays at the luxury Victoria Hotel in Chau Doc. How wonderful it would be to get a good night's rest before tomorrow's five-hour bus ride to Ho Chi Minh City, I thought. Spurred on by that possibility, I marched along the empty dark street, guided by distant lights. The street got brighter until I found myself in a market area filled with people, hotels and restaurants. I found a room (not at the Victoria), then I went in search of food.

I found a streetside eatery serving everyday dishes. The person sitting at the other table was an Englishman, roughly my age. We started talking. He was on his annual pilgrimage from the northern winter, stocking up on sunlight and spice. He asked me what I was doing in Chau Doc. I dodged the question; he persisted. Finally, I mentioned the magazine. He stared at me. "You wouldn't have heard of it," I quickly added. "I know the *Mekong Review*," he replied, all serious. "I love it."

To say I was shocked by his familiarity with the magazine would be an understatement. How is it possible that a stranger you meet in the middle of the night in a remote town in the middle of nowhere could have come across a little magazine with a tiny readership that you happen to edit? Even today, after seven years at it, I'm still surprised when I stumble across people who have heard of it, even read it. A month ago, I shook hands with a renowned scholar on China from Oxford University. I was introducing myself when he stopped me, "I know; *Mekong Review*."

How did we get to this?

Perhaps the answer lies in the collection you're about to read. There are thirty-two pieces here—eight from each of the four

volumes published between 2019 and 2022—chosen from more than four hundred articles. Each has been picked because it is either well written, original, topical, resonated with our readers, or reflected what we're about. One of the compliments readers have often paid to the magazine is its variety. Variety in the broadest sense of the word: in styles, in subject matters, in opinions and in contributors— young and old, local and foreign, amateur and professional. This was always a deliberate editorial ploy: to give readers a slice of the region in all its variety. I hope we have achieved that goal in this collection.

17 November 2022

Minh Bui Jones

VOLUME
IV



AcHu Zul

BACK TO POWER

Eddin Khoo

On 9 May, labyrinthine queues formed at voting centres all around Malaysia. In a wait that lasted some three hours, I struck up a conversation with a first-time voter, who admitted to being “politically apathetic” until this year. She told me she had to make sure Bapa (“Father”)—that is, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad—returned to power. The ruling coalition, she said, “have not only left this country to rot but at every opportunity have found a way to piss me off”.

Irony and paradox have shaped the course of Malaysia’s political history. The chequered landscape of Malaysian politics is replete with alliances forged then gone bad, but few could have anticipated that twenty years after Mahathir sacked his then deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, catalysing the reformasi (“reformation”) movement, a renewed alliance between the pair would overthrow the seemingly invincible Barisan Nasional (National Front) government from a seat of power it had increasingly come to claim as a throne.

The fractious, if eventually peaceful, transition of power was celebrated around the world as an example of the triumph of democracy in depressed times, but the challenges confronting the

renewed nation remain daunting. Rising debt levels and untenable contracts with powerful neighbours for large-scale projects pose the primary challenge. As I walked into one of several offices of the returning prime minister, my attention was immediately drawn to the mounds of files and papers that spilled across several tables. The resolve of the Malaysian electorate to see the return of the ninety-two-year-old became obvious—faith in a steady and experienced hand and a master of statecraft.

Not all the world was enthused about the re-election of Mahathir. The *Guardian* declared in one of its headlines, “Mahathir Mohamad is back. Malaysians’ smiles may be brief”. Perhaps. But for now, the figure sitting before me, who appears as though he has stepped out of history itself, remains resolute, determined and committed “to rebuilding the nation”. Contrary to what some of the world may be saying, Malaysia’s optimism need only be its own.

For decades your political style was described as combative, tenacious and disciplined. Now even former detractors find you affable, avuncular, even funny. What kind of adaptations to your personality have you needed to make this time round?

In politics it is necessary to demonise the person you want to get rid of. When I was in power my opponents labelled me a dictator. But I was not a dictator. I had been challenged many times in my political life, and in the end I resigned of my own accord; dictators do not resign. The opposition demonised me then; but I don’t think they really believed in what they were saying, since they accepted me when I began criticising [former prime minister] Najib [Razak], to the point of appointing me as one of their leaders.

They have now found that when I lead it is not as a dictator. I listen to everyone. I work on principle, not on a party basis. I am loyal to a party for as long as it is doing the right thing. If it fails to do the right thing, I see no difficulty in moving over to people who

are doing what I consider to be the right thing. I have not changed, but the perception of me has changed very much.

Did you expect that working with your former adversaries would prove so easy?

It was never easy. The first time I worked with them was when I started a People’s Declaration [calling for the removal of Najib]. I didn’t ask them, but they supported it. I talked to them and they had the same objective I had—to get rid of Najib. We came from different backgrounds, but we were willing to forget the past. They did not insist I apologise; I did not insist on them saying they were wrong. We were focussed on achieving the same objective and that enabled me to work with them and them to work with me.

How did you perceive a change among the public in terms of what they wanted in governance?

The public often feel unhappy with people in power, because those in power are the ones doing things, and when you are the one doing things you are exposing yourself to criticism. There will be supporters, and there will be people who are against you.

When I stepped down [in 2003], the public thought a better person would take over, but then they found things were not as good as they expected so they got rid of Abdullah [Badawi, my successor]. But then they got Najib.

When the public compared the period when I was prime minister I think it became obvious that Najib was not doing what the people wanted him to do, and they began to reflect on my past performance and wanted me to come back. That is why I regained support.

Malaysia’s peaceful transition of government after 9 May was hailed throughout the world as an exception in an age of populism. It would seem that democracy is still vibrant—it just is not producing the desired results; namely, consensual politics.

What do you think is the crisis confronting democracy today?

Democracy is not perfect. It is very difficult to make democracy work. You need a certain mindset before democracy can succeed. When a country suddenly becomes democratic, it cannot really handle the kind of freedom that comes with democracy. And because of that it tends to slip back into its old ways.

Malaysia succeeded because, though we tried to bring down the government by other means, we didn't become violent, we didn't take to the streets, we didn't sabotage things, we didn't assassinate people. We were forced to wait until there was an election.

In this election, we expected to lose because the government was so powerful and were doing all kinds of improper things—bribery, threats. I thought that if they lost they would not accept the result, but they lost by such a big margin they were caught off guard and did not know what to do. Great numbers had supported the opposition, and there were also people who advised the government to accept the result.

So the transition was smooth from the outside, but it was not very smooth from the inside. We had lots of difficulties, including attempts from within to reject our success, but in the end better sense prevailed.

What were these difficulties within? Was there lots of trading within your coalition?

It had to do with racial and religious politics. There was a fear that our coalition was not going to respect the position of Islam as much as the previous government had, so there was an idea that if the Muslims all came together—the new opposition were largely Muslim, with UMNO [United Malays Nationalist Organisation, the former nationalist ruling party,] and PAS [Malaysian Islamic Party]—they could drag other Muslims [from our coalition], have the majority and form a Malay-Muslim government, but they were advised against that.

There was an attempt to persuade people in your coalition? Malay-Muslim representatives?

Yes, the Malay-Muslims. If they could be persuaded to cross over to the side of UMNO and PAS, these people would have the majority to form the government. This was what caused the delay in announcing our election victory. We knew we had won by 8.30pm, but we didn't get the official announcement until about 2am, because during that short period of time there was a lot of manoeuvring, which was not visible to the people. We knew, and later we learnt even more about it.

You would not be willing to name these people?

No, I will not name them.

You stated repeatedly before the election that if former prime minister Najib Razak were returned to power “this country would go to the dogs”. Since then we have witnessed a system gone almost completely to rot. How does a country even begin to rehabilitate a governance culture that has gone that way in the past sixty years?

No, not for sixty years but for the time Najib was there. Yes, there was corruption during my time, and during the time of previous prime ministers, but the degree was not so damaging to the country.

Under Najib there was total destruction of the government. First, there were huge borrowings, which we now find great difficulty paying back. Second, the entire government machinery was subverted—senior officers were won over by money to become loyal to the [former] prime minister, even to the point of campaigning for the ruling party during the last election.

We have inherited a country carrying a huge debt, and government machinery that is not working. We promised we would not seek revenge, but we find there is no way out—we have to get rid of the people who remain loyal to the previous government. They could sabotage whatever it is we want to do in order to rehabilitate the country.

But if we get rid of these senior people, who will replace them? If junior people are not affected and are skilled enough we can just promote them, but we find that not only number one but numbers two, three and four—all of them, down the line—are corrupt. We can't simply promote the person at the fifth level to the first level, so we are faced with a real problem there.

We need people to implement new policies, new approaches and new beliefs, but we find that the people who are in place cannot be trusted to carry out our ideas.

What is the resolution, then?

It will take time. We will have to seek people from the outside, who are not committed to politics.

There are some people from the previous administration who were punished—demoted or put in cold storage. We can bring some of them back, but we need to find people from outside of the government. They may not be willing to work for the government, however, because it doesn't pay the kind of salaries the private sector pays. We can compensate them if they do well with bonuses, but it is nothing in comparison. As prime minister, I am paid RM 22,000—a [monthly] salary that a third-rung person gets in the private sector.

We need people who not only have the knowledge but are also willing to make sacrifices, to give up their lifestyles—because there are many restrictions when you serve in the government.

Malaysia's political landscape is highly complex—different races, different religions, contending ideologies. The country appears to reflect trends through the world, which appears to be tugged in three different directions: a progressive, liberal one; a nationalist, right-wing one; and one of religious revivalism. They all expressed themselves forcefully in our last election. How, post-election, do you attempt to reconcile these contending approaches?

It is very tricky, but in the Pakatan Harapan [Coalition of Hope], whatever the ideology the parties believe in, they need to realise that we have to agree with one another; we have to correct the wrongs of the past, and the only way to do that is by us agreeing. If we start bickering, nothing will get done. It was difficult enough getting four parties into one cabinet. We have parties that are stronger than the rest but we have to treat everyone as if they were equal. But in the end, they understood; there are things we can do and there are things we cannot. Many of them are socialistic—they believe in giving money to the people, but we don't have the money and we have to accept that.

Race and religion—we have managed and danced with them through most of our independent political life. They are now at the forefront of cultural and identity politics the world over. How do we keep a check on our sanity as far as race and religion are concerned?

When you are faced with religious argument and you say, "Well, this was a thousand and four hundred years ago and not relevant now," that is not acceptable.

In Islam, you will find the Quran teaches Muslims to be friendly and reasonable and to uphold justice. So what we tell them [the religious parties] is that we are upholding religion more than they are. They are following interpretations that are contrary to the teachings of Islam. They cannot argue against that. For example, they want to implement Hudud laws and we tell them the Hudud laws they want to implement are not the Hudud of Islam but *their* Hudud laws.

Islam is tolerant, just and very concerned about the well-being of people. They, however, see Islam as a very harsh religion—wanting to punish anyone who deviates even slightly.

A Muslim is someone who believes in the One God and the Prophet [Muhammad] as His Messenger. That is a Muslim. But all these other things are secondary, and, yes, if you commit

sins you will be punished in the afterlife, but that does not make you a non-Muslim.

So, you have to counter this way of thinking. It happens in all religions, not just in Islam. Religion is interpreted in different ways by different people, and the result is that religions break into different sects. Islam is applicable to this day, and we have been able to deal with extremists. PAS never did well in the past—and now it is not about Islam; it is about race.

The real, original teachings in Islam have a big role to play in enabling Muslims to be successful in life and be prepared for the afterlife. There is nothing to prevent Muslims from learning all the new sciences, provided they remember that everything is created by God. Nothing wrong will happen if you follow the right teachings of Islam.

How do you think Malaysia's experience on 9 May resonates in an increasingly unstable Southeast Asia? Is a common regional agenda in Southeast Asia still viable, or even desirable?

The idea is still very good, but when you want to implement an idea you need people to drive it. When ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] was formed there was no democracy in many countries, and, in Malaysia, we didn't change the government at all. So when the leaders met, they met with people they knew—Suharto, Lee Kuan Yew, [Thailand's General] Prem Tinsulanonda.

We developed a good understanding of each other and were able to operate as major leaders in ASEAN. But today, because we want democracy, we want change, we want one-term presidents, every time you meet you see different people and it takes time to develop an understanding of each other.

ASEAN is not as cohesive as before but the idea remains good. We have a market of 600 million people. Even if it is poor the needs of that population are very big. We should talk about how we can maximise the return on that market. We are not looking at that very much, and we need to open up more between us—we

have the ASEAN Free Trade Area, but we need to study how we can help each other lower our costs by trading within. We can also benefit from the large market that is ASEAN. It is important for there to be a working closeness, and we need to solve our problems through discussion not confrontation. Confrontation never wins you anything. We need to understand that certain basic principles are required for people to work together.

Your relationship with China extends a long way, back to the time of Deng Xiaoping. The nature of the region's geopolitics has transformed considerably since then, with the rise of China. How do you perceive China's increasing influence in the region, and how has it changed since your first period as prime minister?

When China was poor and weak, people feared China; now that China is rich and strong, people still fear China. It is due to the size of the country, and the cohesiveness of its government. They have a single government for a population of 1.4 billion—that, in itself, is an achievement.

We have had a relationship with China for close to two thousand years: we used to collect forest products to trade with them. They had their ceramics and things like that. They have a huge fifth column in Malaysia—twenty-five per cent of the Malaysian population is Chinese. Yet they never conquered us when they could have done so.

On the other hand, the Portuguese came in 1509 and two years later they conquered us. So who are we to be afraid of? The Chinese lay claim on the South China Sea by virtue of its name. What is important is not the claim but whether ships can pass through the South China Sea. At the moment they are not stopping ships, but of course if they were to start checking every ship it would be a serious problem. But at the moment, ships can pass through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. It is the openness of the sea that is important to the Chinese. The sea is the main communication line, so China wants to make sure the sea is free for its own trade to

carry on. I don't think they want to stop other ships from passing through, and I think Malaysia can live with that.

What about the purchase of land, as has been our experience?

This is something that is not to be promoted. The Chinese have so much money they could literally buy up the whole of Malaysia. If they did that we would become a province of China. If they bought a part of Malaysia that part would become Chinese. We don't want that to happen. We think we have the right to preserve our territorial integrity. We want to be an independent nation. We struggled against colonisation, we became independent and we don't want to be a colony again, whether it is a virtual or real colony. It was Sukarno who coined the term neocolonialism, which refers not to the occupation of the land but the control of it. We want to remain in control of our country.

What does the rise of China further mean in a landscape where the United States appears intent on pulling back from Southeast Asia?

The United States is pulling back, but it is important to identify what kind of pulling back. If the United States wants to station its Seventh Fleet here, that's not anything we would welcome. But if the United States stopped bringing goods and services through Southeast Asia that would be something to be regretted. Trade wars can have that kind of result.

You have two years to do what you set out to do before passing the reins to Anwar Ibrahim. What markers, for you, would signal a smooth transition?

I know I can't last forever. In two years I will be ninety-five, and I already hold the record as the oldest elected PM in the world. I have no wish to be a hundred-year-old PM. I want to do the most I can in these two years. It is tough. I have this table—several tables—

covered in papers, and I get lots of visitors, but I think considerable progress has been made.

I want the debt problem settled and I want to rebuild the government. When I came in as prime minister in 1981, the whole government machinery was there. I just needed to put people in a few positions and everything worked fine. But now I don't even know if my decisions and the decisions of the government will be carried out in the ways they should.

FACING ANWAR

Bernice Chauly

For many of my generation, the name Anwar Ibrahim will forever be connected to these images: the black eye, the Federal Reserve Unit tank, a tear-gas cylinder, that wave of victory after 9 May 2018. For twenty years the Malaysian story hinged upon a man who was feared and revered, a man who created the Islamist dakwah movement in Malaysia, a man who spoke of a new Malaysian dawn, and believed in the possibilities of freedom.

But who is Anwar? This is a man who reads Kafka and Camus and memorises Shakespeare's sonnets and who frequents the theatre, who speaks Arabic like a scholar, who reads poetry and who is one of the most powerful orators I've ever heard.

I have probably met Anwar on about six different occasions over two decades. He was there congratulating us, the cast of the 1995 play *Scorpion Orchid*; at the opening of a bookstore in Bangsar; and, before his arrest on 20 September 1998, at his Damansara house with his supporters shouting, "Allahu Akhbar! Allahu Akhbar!"

Anwar became my hero, as he did to many of my friends. We campaigned for him, we took to the streets, we got tear-gassed, some of us got arrested, because we believed in a man who had been



Charis Loke

wronged and vilified in public. All because he had tried to upend the tyranny of Mahathir Mohamad.

In 2018, in my final year as the director of the George Town Literary Festival, I invited Anwar to participate in a panel, which I would moderate. When he accepted the invitation, I was thrilled yet nervous at the prospect of the interview.

The room upstairs, aptly named “Heaven”, was packed. There were more than 350 people in the room, many standing, waiting patiently. His flight from Bangkok was delayed due to technical problems. There was a loud cheer when he finally walked in. People stood up, many were moved, though some weren’t. Anwar was in our midst.

A journalist friend had alluded to a Malay peribahasa, a saying, that Anwar is “seperti belut dikasi minyak” or “an eel covered in oil”. I planned to pace the interview, so I asked him questions about his parents, his childhood, and then I went for the jugular.

“In September, you said something, which I think alarmed all of us: ‘Beware the “superliberals”!’ There are a lot of ‘superliberals’ in this room, myself included. In the past few months there have been concerted attacks against the LGBTQI+ community in Malaysia. We supported you during Reformasi. We were tear-gassed, we were beaten, we were arrested, we believed in you. We are all Malaysians of every race, colour, religion, shape and size. Are you going to let us down?”

A large gasp engulfed the room. A concerted pause.

Anwar: “I did anticipate this question. This is good, this is a reasoned cause and a friendly exchange...I have called publicly for the remission of the laws because I consider them archaic and to be used against innocent people. To the extent that you are a political leader in Malaysia, I have gone to the very maximum that I could do. Now, why then have these sorts of exchanges, which are unfortunate to my mind. I never questioned the fact that I owe it to so many Malaysians, as I said in the beginning, no political parties or civil

society [organisations], individuals, activists who have shown a lot of support and concern to my personal plight...

“So, for the case of LGBT, don’t expect me to go beyond that. I think many others, like PM Mahathir, reject it outright. But mine was more nuanced because I understand that it is not your right to question a person’s sexual orientation. Period. And the laws are unjust. And not only to me, but many others can be victims. But there is a limit to what I can say, what I cannot. You want me to succeed in my political career, but at the same time you expect me to do things that would destroy my political career. So, I then have to think about a position in order to be fair to those who have their own views.”

Indeed, like an eel in oil, the consummate politician, letting you hear what he wants you to hear, but what does he really mean?

“What do you mean by ‘fair’?”

Anwar: “Meaning that I don’t think they should be condemned. And of course there is one case where I took a very strong position—against a person, transgender, being assaulted. And I don’t think in society one should [be insulted] purely because of one’s sexual orientation and I think as a relatively conservative society you don’t expect, you cannot expect, something more than that. Otherwise, I would be a civil society leader, not a national leader. So there are limits. You should know the line, what can be said, and what can be done at a particular period.

“Can you imagine that in this country I took a strong position to suggest that the laws be amended? And for that, I would have to go again to trial, because the UMNO [United Malays National Organisation] youth leader condemned me as being a person who supports this and wants it to be accepted as a norm in this country.”

Then the final question.

“We lived in a prolonged darkness for so long. We got used to it, we were embittered without even knowing it. Are we now in the light?”

Anwar: “Yes, surely...I mean, you, Malaysians. And this is not

the Malay agenda or the Chinese or the Indian or Sabahans or Sarawakians. Malaysians share this unique historical experience. Racism is on the rise in Europe, in the United States: strong sentiments against migrants. Here is a beautiful story of a multiracial endeavour committed to reform and committed to change. And I think, in my mind, no one should underestimate the wisdom of the masses and this to me is a remarkable feat of Malaysians...Yes, you say nobody expected it, but I did. I was one of the sole voices that seemed to be optimistic about the possibility of winning.”

The interview lasted an hour, and it was candid, frank and honest. I wanted straight answers from him, which I sometimes didn't get, as he dodged and circumvented issues with a practised mastery. He was mobbed while trying to leave the room, and he took his time—posing with many, signing books, speaking briefly with some. Nobody wanted him to leave. The air was thick with excitement, expectation and hope.

—

It's been a year since Malaysia Baru, the new political dispensation. The coalition is showing cracks. Ministers are saying idiotic things. Najib Razak's corruption trial has just commenced. There is still no minimum wage, the Sedition Act still exists, and religious authorities are blaming abnormal weather patterns on the LGBTQI+ community. My daughter tells me that many young Malay social media influencers are posting anti-LGBT comments, and getting away with it.

Malaysia is fractured, still, and the problems within the Malay community continue to grow. There is growing anger, festering among the young and old, newspapers are no longer flying off the shelves like they did, the air is stale again and a familiar lethargy has set in. We are tired of waiting. Tired of the same rhetoric. Tired of waiting for Mahathir, and for Anwar to become prime minister.

I was recently in Cairo for a literary festival, and read from the opening pages of my novel, *Once We Were There*. A young Egyptian man came up to me after and said, “Anwar Ibrahim, he is a hero, you are lucky to have a leader like him.”

Back in Malaysia, I asked a Grab driver in Penang whether he thought Anwar would become prime minister and he replied in Malay, “He has to, even if it's just for a while, he has to. This is the promise that was given to us. We voted for change and we want change.”

Will Anwar give us that change? And what if we are denied it? What if there are limits to it—as Anwar alluded to? Malaysians deserve a better Malaysia, and while there are visionary policies happening, there is a sense that terrible things are brewing. Malay supremacy is at a high, and racially we are more fractured than ever. The struggles are the same, and this is not the Malaysia Baru we voted for. I want to believe in Anwar, in what he still stands for, in this man who has stood unwavering for two decades, who has not lost faith. I don't intend to lose faith. I need to see how this story ends.

A WRITER'S GIFT

Anjan Sundaram

V.S. Naipaul lacked love. He denied himself: he exposed his vicious personality to the public and damaged people who loved him. So it seemed half a plea for forgiveness when he yearned that his writing still be cherished.

Years after achieving literary success, Naipaul regretted that his early masterpiece, *A House for Mr Biswas*, had received only modest acclaim, and that the New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf had taken so long to notice his talent. After he was awarded the Nobel Prize, in 2001, he remarked that the prize was of little use, having come so late.

As he made these complaints, Naipaul displayed to the world his cruelty and bitterness. It meant that any admiration for his writing had to have a purity—to be for the writing alone, separate from the man. He gave interviews about seeing prostitutes throughout his married life. He justified an affair with Margaret Gooding—whom he beat and bruised—as providing him with a carnal pleasure absent in his marriage. He depended on his wife, Patricia Hale, to nourish his self-belief even as he humiliated her, publicising his infidelities while she battled cancer. He dismissed writing by women as sentimental.



Charis Loke

He derided former colonies like Trinidad (his childhood home) and India (his ancestral homeland) as stunted and wounded cultures.

Just as Naipaul exposed the societies he wrote about, he did not hide his own flaws. He opened his archives and letters to his biographer, Patrick French, revealing a pattern of physical violence and abuse targeting those closest to him. It is this unsavoury Naipaul that has dominated obituaries after his passing this August. His writing seems drowned out by his persona as a ruthless artist who laid waste to people on his path to greatness.

And yet, as Naipaul desired, his true legacy to us may lie in his writing. Naipaul's work offers us a picture of what it means to live with one's flaws and darkneses and of the possibility of finding oneself amidst this intimate struggle. Reading his prose, one cannot but sense a man entirely committed to his writing, who is unafraid to speak about his need to be published and to be loved. Few literary figures have lived out the writer's persona in such totality.

Naipaul was moved by stories such as that of Edgar Mittelholzer, a Guyanese writer of slave plantation potboilers who committed suicide. In *A Writer's People*, Naipaul writes that years after Mittelholzer stopped publishing he received news that the author had immolated himself "like a Buddhist monk in Vietnam". No reason was given for his suicide. But Naipaul was prompted to connect the author's death with his work. "A writer lives principally for his writing," he wrote. "Edgar, whatever might be said about his work, was a dedicated writer. And I wonder whether an idea at the back of his mind during those last days of pain and resolve wasn't that he had got as far as he could with his writing."

Many authors bury such darkness: some disappear from the world and only reluctantly give interviews; others construct slick personas, appearing to be above it all. Naipaul, on the contrary, grappled with it all and publicly. He played with his failings by offering them to his biographer to publish. And his writing stands in almost stark contrast to the confused torment that he unleashed upon others—

for Naipaul's prose is free of obligation and attachment. It is precise, beautiful and honest.

—

Naipaul lives on in our literature. One finds his comic Caribbean voice, for example, in Rahul Bhattacharya's *The Sly Company of People Who Care*, his style of incisive commentary in Rana Dasgupta's *Capital*, and his standpoint as an authoritative social chronicler in books by Aatish Taseer.

I first heard of Naipaul when I arrived in the United States for university in 2001 and a student told me that a racist author had won that year's Nobel Prize in Literature. Four years later I start to read him: a friend handed me Naipaul's classic novel of Congo, *A Bend in the River*, while I was working in that country as a stringer for the Associated Press. From there I became gradually consumed by Naipaul's work and curious about how this author came to craft such emotionally and intellectually charged prose. Both in moments of difficulty and elation in my writing I have instinctively turned to Naipaul for his lucid reflections, particularly in interviews, on the act of creation. Some of his descriptions of what it feels like to write I felt spoke directly to me and spurred me on—such as this one, which I read a decade ago in the *Guardian*: "It's just a statement that one's work has been snatched out of the darkness, grabbing it while you could do it. You've got to do it. You can't just sit and wait for the beautiful idea to form and to be complete in your mind before writing. You've got to go out and meet it."

I was writing in Rwanda in 2010 and struggling to place myself in *Stringer*, a book about my journey in Congo, when two paragraphs in Naipaul's essay, "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", showed me a way. They made me conscious of the banality of truth and how much narrative one could hang on a personal premise. The paragraphs came after a description of ritual feeding of crocodiles

in the Ivory Coast. Naipaul wrote about why he had travelled to that country:

I went for simpler reasons. The world is too various; it can exist only in compartments in our minds. I wanted to be in West Africa, where I had never been; I wanted to be in a former French territory in Africa; and I wanted to be in an African country which, in the mess of black Africa, was generally held to be a political and economic success. African success, France in Africa—those were the glamorous ideas that took me out.

France in Africa was a private fantasy. It was based on my own love of the French language, a special schoolboy love, given me at Queen's Royal College in colonial Trinidad by teachers, many of them black or partly black, who were themselves in love with the French language and an idea (hinted at, never stated) of an accepting, assimilating France. France in Africa: I imagined the language in the mouths of elegant Africans; I thought of tall, turbaned women, like those of Mali and the Congo; I thought of wine and tropical boulevards.

There was nothing remarkable about Naipaul's reasons for travel. He had laid bare his prejudices about Africa, the notions that sparked his journey. I felt he was making the journey for himself. Reading those paragraphs, I remember thinking that this was how I had to write. Here was a man who had followed his instincts and turned his life and curiosity—his desire to live—into literature.

As I wrote *Stringer*, it was Naipaul's travel writing that felt most important. During the four years that I spent working on *Stringer* I read some twenty books by Naipaul. He remains one of the only authors whose body of work—not merely a few books—has held my attention.

His writing seemed certain of its truth. It cut through the anxieties

of being accepted and loved—Naipaul's anxieties, but ones that I shared. His words seemed to come from a profound place within himself, a place which, as Naipaul wrote of the "African Africa" he saw in Yamoussoukro, "has always been in its own eyes complete, achieved, bursting with its own powers".

As I wrote, I felt myself become whole. In such a state one is no longer concerned with the world—the world owes one nothing. One writes for its own sake in a kind of bliss, aware that in one's personal truth others will find their own. This was what Naipaul had done for me. And I felt I owed him nothing—not my sympathy or admiration or gratitude. It was for me the beauty in his prose.

In his books and essays that I read during those years, Naipaul relentlessly roamed the world, analysing it and peering through cultural masks, holding up a mirror to his subjects—a mirror few wished for or liked. Perhaps his only choice then was also to bare himself; another approach might have compromised his art. Despair, shame and anguish lay everywhere on Naipaul's pages. And one felt in his characters—violent people, people who felt inferior and powerful, who felt anger and shame—that he knew those feelings himself. One sensed that he wrote his best characters from this love: he knew them, and he was not afraid to show that he did, for he had, momentarily at least, forgiven them.

—

Most people I speak to have never heard of Naipaul, and of those few who have, most have not read him. Naipaul had himself surely sensed that his persona could one day eclipse his writing. In a 1974 essay about Joseph Conrad, he wrote: "More and more today, writers' myths are about the writers themselves; the work has become less obtrusive."

He desired fame though he knew the capricious ways in which fame comes to writers. "Writers' myths can depend on accidents," he wrote, referring to Conrad's surge in popularity after Max

Beerbohm parodied his story “The Lagoon”. He told the *New York Times* that of the writers admired by the influential critic Georg Brandes at the start of the twentieth century, “not one is remembered today. The deaths of writers are never announced. Something happens. They just go away”. Naipaul seemed to hope he might secure his own fame through film. He repeatedly referred to how his stories might become movies. He told Farrukh Dhondy in an interview that “if one adapted *A House for Mr Biswas* for the screen for instance, the dialogue is all virtually there”. Naipaul’s narrator in *A Way in the World* repeatedly toys with the idea of writing a screenplay from his stories he tells us about El Dorado.

Naipaul’s obscurity relative to his literary achievements is perhaps a reflection of our society’s obsession with myths of perfection and morality. Art comes about in the process of confronting and understanding imperfections—to separate the art from the artist and to seek only beauty is to lose half the richness in the work. But we prefer to transact in simple images. Naipaul wrote that the modern novelist “no longer recognises his interpretive function... so the world we inhabit, which is always new, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmeditated on; and there is no one to awaken the sense of true wonder. That is perhaps a fair definition of the novelist’s purpose, in all ages”.

If Naipaul is remembered for the ugliness of his persona, rather than his writing, it will be because the camera has become sufficient for us—and because we have become reluctant to interpret our flaws to reach a more complicated notion of our own beauty. This was Naipaul’s gift to us. And to the extent that this gift goes ignored, the love evident in Naipaul’s writing remains unrequited.

SUBMISSION

Sean Gleeson

One night in the weeks before his arrest, Kyaw Soe Oo and his wife watched what became, in retrospect, an ominous portent of his future. The film chronicles a taxi driver who shepherds a foreign reporter through the city of Gwangju, South Korea, during civil unrest, ultimately quelled by the massacre of more than a hundred student demonstrators; the protagonist’s reluctant political awakening, and the solidarity of his peers, allows the journalist to expose the greatest abomination of the country’s military era. Sitting on a bench outside the courtroom hosting her husband’s trial earlier this year, Chit Su Win told the *New Yorker* he had been spellbound by the film. She had begged him to consider a career change.

Kyaw Soe Oo had by then been thrust into the international spotlight after an outwardly similar act of state violence in his own country. In February, his employer published a report of the systematic and premeditated execution of ten Rohingya villagers in the first days of the military offensive last year, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Rohingya civilians and precipitated the exodus of three-quarters of a million refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh. He and his Reuters colleague Wa Lone were sentenced

in September to seven years' imprisonment. Their trial, held in a kangaroo court, was clearly intended to deter further investigation of military atrocities

A *Taxi Driver*, the film Kyaw Soe Oo watched with his wife, invites a doleful comparison with the pair's explosive reporting of the Inn Din massacre, the unjust accusations of treachery levelled against them, and the many more crimes of greater magnitude whose perpetrators will likely never be prosecuted. It is possible to see the film as an indictment of Myanmar's own alleged political transition, inaugurated eight years ago with national polls that gave a military proxy party custodianship of a new parliamentary political structure and the release of current civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from her third and final spell of house arrest.

In other countries, film has long been at the vanguard of the mission to hold the depredations of an authoritarian past to account. Yet the idea of a similar film by a Myanmar director gracing screens in Yangon is unthinkable. The nearest candidate is a government-backed hagiography of General Aung San—the independence icon of the country's ethnic Bamar majority and father of its current leader—which has been stalled for the last seven years by funding shortfalls, waning interest and the cumbersome committee nature of its production.

The military has meanwhile thrown considerable resources into its own campaign of public rehabilitation through film, in September rescreening a documentary justifying its coup and bloody crackdown following the upheaval of 1988's mass democracy protests and the attendant collapse of public order that included functionaries of the old socialist regime being lynched in the streets of Yangon. Last year's *Pyidaungsu Thitsar* ("Loyalty of the Union") glorified the bravery of its soldiers, eliding the shameful truth that the country has since independence only ever waged war on itself—a newspaper's feeble satire of the battlefield epic resulted in its author and the publication's editor being thrown in jail.

The country's film board is still stacked with ancient regime stalwarts of the domestic industry; despite a partial dismantling of Naypyidaw's generations-old censorship apparatus in 2012, it has acted as a conduit for the Information Ministry in ordering the withdrawal of politically sensitive films. A tepid screwball genre predominates, reflecting the most base prejudices of the custodians of Myanmar's racially charged politics: the country's upland ethnic minorities are invariably mentally impaired comic foils; the Chinese are greedy and parsimonious; the descendants of the Indian subcontinent are sexually rapacious predators.

Despite the significant financial stakes its members have in the nation's movie houses, the board has hindered the distribution of independent works by young up-and-comers that have proven wildly popular with audiences. The chief responsibility of Myanmar's cultural establishment in this democratic era, according to Naypyidaw, is not to make money but to cast the country in the best possible light. Suu Kyi took to the podium at Myanmar's premier film awards night this year to tell the audience just that, and it is an exhortation her government has repeated elsewhere.

As the crackdown in Rakhine state began last year, the Information Ministry called in editors of the nation's major news outlets to solicit ideas on how to combat the international media's reporting on the Rohingya crisis with its own propaganda. The Press Council has similarly urged publishers to proselytise Myanmar's virtues and rebuke the international outrage the country has weathered. One of its chief figures, himself a former Reuters reporter infamous among his old colleagues for attempting to spike coverage of numerous anti-Muslim pogroms earlier this decade, helped thwart a push by a minority faction on the council to condemn the arrests of Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo; soon after, he was offered a ministerial position, in which his chief responsibilities are dissembling when pressed on the overwhelming evidence of atrocities against the Rohingya and frustrating the passage of foreign journalists into the country.

CONTRIBUTORS

VOLUME IV

Eddin Khoo is a poet, writer, translator, journalist and founder-director of the cultural organisation PUSAKA. “Back to Power” was originally published in the November 2018–January 2019 issue.

Bernice Chauly is a Malaysian novelist and poet. “Facing Anwar” was originally published in the May–July 2019 issue.

Anjan Sundaram is the author of *Stringer* and *Bad News*. “A Writer’s Gift” was originally published in the November 2018–January 2019 issue.

Sean Gleeson is a journalist based in Hong Kong. “Submission” was originally published in the November 2018–January 2019 issue.

Rachel Leow is the author of *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia*. “Home Is Everywhere” was originally published in the February–April 2019 issue.

Margaret Scott teaches at NYU’s Wagner School of Public Service, contributes to *The New York Review of Books* and is a cofounder of the New York Southeast Asia Network. “The Killings” was originally published in the August–October 2019 issue.

Peter Guest is an editor at Rest of World. “Splice Unbound” was originally published in the November 2018–January 2019 issue.

Michael Freeman is *Mekong Review*’s poetry reviewer. “Arhats in Clementi” was originally published in the November 2020–January 2021 issue.

VOLUME V

Antony Dapiran is the author of *City of Protest: A Recent History of Dissent in Hong Kong*. “Hong Kong Burning” was originally published in the November 2019–January 2020 issue.

Michael Vatikiotis is the author of *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia*. “Chinese History” was originally published in the February–April 2020 issue.

Sebastian Strangio is the author of *Hun Sen’s Cambodia* and a forthcoming book on the impact of China’s rising power in Southeast Asia. “City of Light” was originally published in the February–April 2020 issue.

Richard Javad Heydarian is the author of *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt against Elite Democracy*. “A Hero of Our Time” was originally published in the November 2018–January 2019 issue.

Pauline Fan is *Mekong Review*’s translation editor. “Carried Away” was originally published in the August–October 2020 issue.

Chris Baker is an historian based in Bangkok. “Thailand’s Future” was originally published in the November 2020–January 2021 issue.

Peter Yeoh is a writer, editor and art book designer. “On Standby” was originally published in the May–July 2020 issue.

Anne Stevenson-Yang is co-founder of J Capital Research. “Rise of Shenzhen” was originally published in the August–October 2020 issue.

VOLUME VI

Abby Seiff is a contributing editor. “Fearless” was originally published in the May–July 2021 issue.

Robert Templer is the author of *Shadows and Wind*. “Technology and Terror” was originally published in the August–October 2021 issue.

Yuan Zhu is an academic based in the United Kingdom. “China Imagined” was originally published in the November 2020–January 2021 issue.

Martin Stuart-Fox is emeritus professor of history at the University of Queensland. “Dateline Vietnam” was originally published in the February–April 2021 issue.

Phil Thornton is the author of *Restless Souls*. “The Tatmadaw” was originally published in the August–October 2021 issue.

Sunisa Manning is the author of *A Good True Thai*. “Call Me Ant” was originally published in the February–April 2021 issue.

Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh is the author of *Floating on a Malayan Breeze: Travels in Malaysia and Singapore*. “Riding It Out” was originally published in the May–July 2021 issue.

Mark Robinson is a photographer and writer based in Tokyo. “Tokyo Diners” was originally published in the August–October 2021 issue.

VOLUME VII

Emma Larkin is the author of *Comrade Aeon’s Field Guide to Bangkok*. “Why We Are Here” was originally published in the February–April 2022 issue.

Jolene Tan is the author of *After the Inquiry*. “Potemkin State” was originally published in the February–April 2022 issue.

James Crabtree is executive director of the Asia branch of the International Institute for Strategic Studies based in Singapore. “Mohan’s World” was originally published in the February–April 2022 issue.

Ben Bland is the author of *Man of Contradictions: Joko Widodo and the Struggle to Remake Indonesia*. “Path to Power” was originally published in the February–April 2022 issue.

Ken Kwek is a filmmaker, playwright and author. “Singapore Rebel” was originally published in the May–July 2022 issue.

Bryony Lau is a researcher based in Southeast Asia. “Resurrection” was originally published in the August–October 2022 issue.

Theophilus Kwek is a poet and writer based in Singapore. “Lee Boo” was originally published in the August–October 2022 issue.

Rowena Abdul Razak is a graduate from the University of Oxford. “Uncle Ramli” was originally published in the May–July 2022 issue.

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portrait of the region.”

–Emma Larkin, journalist and author

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A diverse crop of esteemed and emerging writers such as Bernice Chauly, Sunisa Manning, Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh and Richard Javad Heydarian delve into the promise of Anwar Ibrahim, the legacy of V.S. Naipaul, the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, the military history of Myanmar, dining out in Tokyo, and more. They offer insight and nuance to the rich cultural and political landscape of Asia.

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