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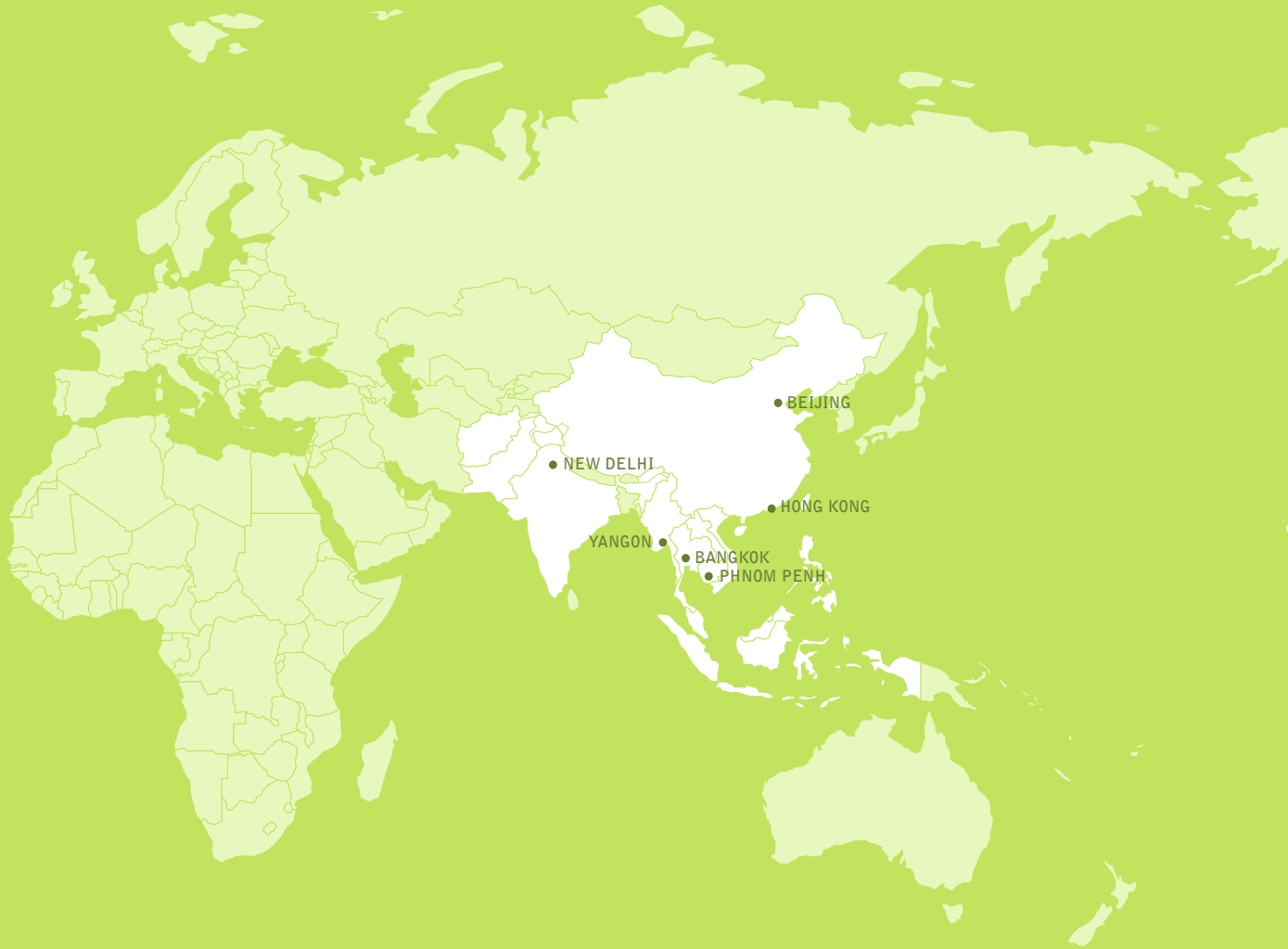
POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

ASIA



Transitions

This edition of **perspectives Asia** is published jointly by the offices of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Asia



## Heinrich Böll Stiftung

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung is a publicly funded institute closely affiliated with the German party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. From our headquarters in Berlin and 33 international offices, we promote green ideas and projects in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Asia concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, social participation for all women and men, and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention, peaceful dispute resolution, and search for solutions in the fight against environmental degradation and the depletion of global resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating knowledge, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Europe and Asia, and on a global dialogue as a prerequisite for constructive negotiations.

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# Editorial

## Transitions in Asia

Change is all around us; experiencing it can be exciting or worrisome, confusing or even disturbing. By contrast, the idea of “transition” stands to provide a sense of direction, in a sea of change and insecurity. Change may be happening to us; a transition has direction, it can be planned, perhaps even be initiated. It moves into a positive, sustainable direction – or so we hope. The equivalent German term “Wende” and its numerous composite terms play a prominent role in the programme of the German Green and in the international work of Heinrich Böll Stiftung (hbs).

This issue of Perspectives Asia showcases how partners, friends and fellow travellers of hbs in Asia look at and participate in these ongoing transition processes.

The *transition to digital technologies* – ubiquitous in Asia – produces sometimes surprising and ambiguous effects. While digital tools are widely used by government and businesses in China, Haili Cao shows how digital networking has contributed to the building of real-life communities under the Covid-19 lockdown in Shanghai. Perhaps these new connections will last.

Digitalisation also creates new ways to address problems faced by ageing societies, especially the increasing need for care work, much of which traditionally provided by women. Miyako Takagi looks at the use of artificial intelligence and robotics in this sector in Japan, where such technology use is perhaps most advanced. She also notes that some applications turn out to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, while others – especially in the world of care – appear largely “gender-neutral”.

The ageing society is only one – the later – stage of the larger *demographic transition*, the process by which societies move from high population growth to often very low

birth rates. While this basic pattern applies to most societies on Earth, different countries in Asia find themselves in very different stages of the process and face different challenges accordingly.

Pakistan, for example, has a very large population of young people, and Mome Saleem points at the policy needs especially in education and training to make this “demographic dividend” work for the people of the country.

All the while, South Korea has undergone the demographic transition rapidly, while achieving OECD standards of economic development in just a few decades. However, gender relationships remain highly inequitable, as women earn less and continue to bear the brunt of house and care work. Sunhye Kim points out that these very patterns of inequity result from South Korea’s “ultra-low fertility rate” today. She argues that instead of pronatalist policies pursued by conservative governments, South Korea needs a focus on reproductive health and rights for everybody.

The combination of rapid population and urban growth, expanding education and the availability of new role models provided by the culture industry have much increased the degree of individual choice to engage in personal relationships among Asia’s youth. But problems remain: Neha Dabhade shows for India how this freedom has come under attack as a part of an aggressive and often violent form of Hindu nationalist politics.

While the Indian case points to risks faced by Asia’s largest democracy, the evidence for a broader *transition to democracy* on the continent remains ambivalent at best. While some of East Asia’s former authoritarian “developmental states” have emerged into robust democracies, recent election

results in the Philippines raised fears of regression or even a return to authoritarianism, as analysed by Cleo Calimbahin. Much worse, however, is the case of Myanmar, for which Su shows how the military coup on 1 February 2021 that ended the country's fledgling democratic transition amounted to an outright social and economic disaster.

Beyond the large-scale trends, there is always the possibility and practice of *transition as a deeply personal affair*. In an interview, Hong Kong activist Kaspar Wan talks about his experience of becoming a transman and the transgender rights movement in the city. Miguel Jeronimo's photostory captures moments of the lives of Cambodians who celebrate their abilities instead of their limitations, focusing on their journey of empowerment and crafting a life of independence for themselves.

Last, but not least, this issue of Perspectives Asia looks at perhaps the most archetypical "green" transition of all: the *energy transition* required to combat climate change. It does not only require political will and capital to invest into renewables, but needs to get the details right. Taking observations from South East Asia, Laurence Delina shows what is required to make the energy transition a participatory and fair process for local and indigenous communities. And while energy planners in many countries have vast expectations about the future role of "green hydrogen" in the energy transition, Dongjae Oh points at the pitfalls of South Korea's current hydrogen strategy that risks to increase, rather than reduce fossil fuel emissions.

Our thanks go to all contributors reporting from Asia in transition.

**Axel Harnett-Sievers & Yoyo Chan**

Hong Kong, March 2023



*Continuity, motion, and transitions in many layers and forms: a bamboo forest in sunlight, Tezpur, Assam, Northeast India. A photo by Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman.*



*From dead branches collected along the roadside in Hong Kong to a collagraph: the process of printmaking itself has bestowed a new life to decayed objects. By Au Wah Yan.*

# Digital Threads for A New Social Fabric: The Case of Shanghai

Haili Cao

At the end of March 2022, Shanghai was plunged into surreal silence, and scarcity. The country's strictest Covid-19 pandemic lockdown lasted for two months. Never, since decades, had the people minded their three meals that much, to the extent of becoming the only thing they cared about. In their struggles for self-sufficiency and survival, group buying came to rescue. Did dwellers find a new sense of community or were they more fragmented?

Group buying is a business model first popularised by the American e-commerce startup Groupon, which was founded in 2008 to connect subscribers with local merchants by offering activities, travel, goods and services. The rationale is that if a certain number of people sign up for an offer, it could reduce risks for retailers, who then regard the coupons as quantity discounts as well as a sales promotion tactic. This business model was adopted by Chinese internet startups in early 2010s.

In early 2020 when the coronavirus first hit, group buying took a new turn in some Chinese cities, where most brick-and-mortar shops were closed and people were asked to stay at home. While non-food goods could still be purchased and delivered (often with a long delay) via online shopping sites, daily food and necessities became hard to come by. As a way to maintain self-sufficiency, some people with connections to suppliers, among whom were local farmers, began to use community WeChat groups, which – prior to the pandemic – were usually created by property management companies, to help solve the problems. Either the sup-

plier who was invited to join the group or some point persons who were affiliated with the suppliers, would initiate a word chain listing the items available for purchase and people who wanted to purchase them can just add their name and preferred quantities before the deadline set by the point person. Normally, the orders would be delivered to the compound's gate the next day for self-pickup, and the point person is responsible for distributing the goods to individual households.

This new initiative became so popular across China in recent years that a new term was coined – “community group buy” 社区团购. However, it had never grown into a trend in Shanghai prior to the lockdown. Retailing in this city is so well-developed and convenient that people are used to shop physical outlets downstairs or a stone's throw away. Also Shanghai never had a large-scale lockdown since the beginning of the pandemic and had been relatively successful in managing the number of Covid-19 cases, until the spring of 2022.

A citywide lockdown, along with drastic suspension of all transportation and last-mile delivery, put the metropolis and its 25 million inhabitants at stake. Shanghai's market-based economy gave way to a highly controlled management. With only a handful of companies chosen to be “legitimate” suppliers and acquired special permits needed for delivery, Shanghai citizens had no choice but to resort to group buying for survival.

Each community, organised by its property compounds, has one WeChat group which connects all dwellers including landlords and tenants. Sub-groups have also been created by categories such as a fruits



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group, a milk group, a steak group. Each group has a point person, mostly a volunteer, whose job is to contact and coordinate with suppliers for logistics details as well as to collect purchase orders and payment from neighbours.

It's not an easy job. Helena, a friend who volunteered for four sub-groups, found the coordination between suppliers and neighbours so time-consuming that it was almost like a full-time job at an IT company. She had to bookkeep every transaction and submit the compiled records to the community committee at the end of the lockdown after having the numbers "audited" by professionals and publicly shown to all members in the groups.

Thanks to digital technology and e-commerce business that China has developed for two decades, neighbours who have never met before were thus brought together in the same group and got to know each other. Bound by the shared challenges and circumstances – food and endless Covid-19 tests, it's a new experience both for the old and younger generations. The old generation who might have stayed offline must now learn to rely on smartphones and WeChat, while the younger generations, who most often were newcomers and used to living independently, got to experience a community life and a refreshing neighbourhood bonding.

Helena, for instance, once lived in Shanghai's former French Concession where history and information about the

area is quite accessible. She moved to her current neighbourhood in Southwest Shanghai several years ago. The area used to be a farming land, and many of the landlords in her compound had been farmers previously. She had wanted to learn about the neighbourhood but couldn't find ways to. Now that everyone was in the same group, she managed to get acquainted with some local senior residents to learn about the history and interesting anecdotes.

Another friend, Chen Jibing, a Shanghai native and longtime editor/writer for local publications, won a special victory together with his neighbours during the lockdown: they managed to evict the property management company and the head of the owner committee. As he explained, due to the lockdown, everyone had to stay home and suddenly had a lot of time to attend to things they wouldn't have time or energy for otherwise. It was right at the time when the property management company's term was expiring. Having been unhappy with the company and the committee for a while, residents united and worked together through a WeChat group, and finally succeeded in replacing the management company and the owner committee head.

Others went back to the old-fashioned barter trade system – trading a piece of meat for a can of Coke, or a litre of milk for a pack of eggs. A software engineer working for a big e-commerce company who lives alone in Shanghai told me that he didn't cook at all but managed to eat a lot of chicken, because



two young women living in the same building traded cooked chicken with him for cans of Coke, which became a luxury and ersatz currency during lockdown.

Indeed, when Shanghai was locked down and many inhabitants considered themselves being thrown into the worst-managed and most unbelievable situation, where people were suffering from unnecessary hunger, limited access to hospitals because they were not allowed to leave their home or enter hospital without PCR-test results. Even worse, no one could be sure when the lockdown would end, which originally was set for four days but only indefinitely extended. At the end of the day, regular citizens needed to support each other so as to shine on the more human side of society. For example, some helped the elders who lived alone without a smartphone or any idea about group buying; some gave a hand to migrant workers who were often neglected by their community committee whenever it came to food allocation.

The solidarity didn't stop at food distribution, as Chen Jibing told another story. One day a neighbour had a heart attack and his family didn't have a car. They sent a message to the community WeChat group crying for help, after which everyone geared up immediately: "Let's get him to a hospital quickly". A task force was quickly assembled – who is arranging a car, who is getting the gate exit permit from the community committee and so on. In less than an hour the neighbour concerned was transported to a hospital. He has been recovering since.

Of course, in normal hours, this shouldn't present a problem – the family could easily get a taxi and no special

permit would be needed to get out of the compound. But when normal social and business systems stop working due to external circumstances, "the connection based on how physical proximity increased, like going back to the traditional acquaintance society," said Chen.

The new-found connection might sound a bit contradictory to what digital technology is supposed to serve: to break and go beyond the physical and spatial boundaries to connect people with shared interests virtually. People connect with each other through their interests and values, no matter which city or country they are from, regardless of their nationality, age or gender. Digital tools, such as social media platforms or blogs, have allowed various connections to thrive, even though they haven't met or may never meet in life.

The Covid-19 pandemic in China, on the contrary, has brought people back to their neighbourhood community for an unexpected reason. Residents needed to work closely together so that they can feed themselves and struggle for another day. The perfect example of merging the virtual and the physical realms with technology in extreme times was seen in Shanghai.

However, would this present a new social fabric? The answer might not be that obvious.

Shanghai is no doubt a unique case. The suspension of all transportations and last-mile deliveries, which had caused shortage of all living supplies, was never implemented anywhere else in China even though some cities, such as Shenzhen and Chengdu, also experienced citywide lockdown later on (with far shorter time). The



# 牛奶团&奥乐齐团总结

2022年5月10日



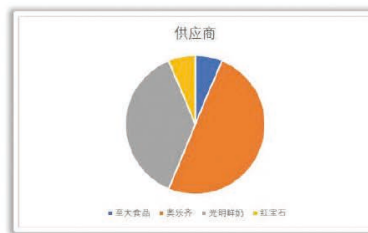
## 团购总结

4月7日至5月9日期间，奥乐齐团和【光明鲜奶团】共完成15次团购。奥乐齐（店）货物品种相对多样，响应及时，所以成团次数最多。

十五次团购的最后一公里配送是由公寓二十二位主力志愿者完成。他们有的出时间整理报表、有的出力搬运分发、有的开着自己的车帮助派发到楼栋；此外，居委的、保安队和物业的也一直在默默支持，居委及时提供了分发时的防护设备和交通工具，我们才能顺利实现有序派发。

## 商家返点

有两家供应商在保供我们小区的生活物资上，提供了返利。



## 团购供应商一览

商品ID/名称	收件人信息	商品信息	订单金额
3		光明鲜奶3.8升牛奶 (罐) ¥59 x1 = ¥59 光明 奥乐齐安蒂林酸奶 (桶) ¥49.9 x3 = ¥149.7	商品总额: ¥208.70 已退: 0元 共计: ¥208.7 ¥10.7退款中 >
1		光明鲜奶3.8升牛奶 (罐) ¥59 x1 = ¥59 光明 奥乐齐安蒂林酸奶 (桶) ¥49.9 x1 = ¥49.9	商品总额: ¥108.80 已退: 0元 共计: ¥108.8 ¥6.9退款中 >

## 快团团后台常温奶制品退款截屏

A group-buy report provided by Helena, summarising the group-buy activities of her compound: From April 7 to May 9, they have completed 15 times of group-buy from four suppliers (the pie chart), among which a dairy producer and a chain grocery store were the top. 22 volunteers have helped with the last-kilometer delivery and distribution. Support from the community committee and property management team was also appreciated.

type of bonds among neighbours in Shanghai, made possible with group buying and other responsive actions by citizens, also didn't happen at the same level in other cities. However, regardless of the situation, technology is always the foundation for social changes and the evolution of human history. But the process usually takes a long time, decades, or even centuries, if you think about the evolution from an agricultural to an industrial society, to the high-tech Internet society where we are in now.

However, if the social fabric is changed drastically within a short period of time, the cause is usually not technological, but political.

To put it in context, China is a latecomer and follower when it comes to technological

advancement and the change of its social structure. The urbanisation process China embarked on since the 1980s (with a huge jump after 2001 when China joined the World Trade Organization) emerged in the West 100 years earlier and accelerated after World War II. Yet the side effects of urbanisation in China are way greater than that in the West in terms of weaker inter-community connections and more discernable distrust and indifference among people. Compared to the image of a traditional "big" Chinese family, families of smaller size are not only a result of urbanisation and technology development, but also a direct result of the country's one-child policy.

On the other hand, the impact of technology weighs bigger and faster on China



than in other parts of the world. China's e-commerce is more advanced than most developed markets – not because the country first invented it, but it had an easy start due to the differences in its business and legal systems. The 2003 SARS pandemic played an instrumental role in the consumers' shift towards online shopping domestically.

Technology is a double-edged sword. While it increases efficiency and connects people in ways that would have never been imagined, it also gives the government a leg up on tightening social control. As the pandemic evolved, the Chinese government has doubled down on the zero Covid-19 policy for almost three years. As long as there were Covid cases – even a single one – tracking, quarantine and lockdown measures were imposed. Without digital technology, it would have been hard for the government to implement the zero Covid-19 policy as it entailed massive data collection, tracking and analysis for a substantial period of time, especially given the vast scale of the Chinese population and territory.

Such virus-control efforts have filtered into everyone's life in almost all aspects, whether to take public transportation or visiting a shopping mall. The digital technology made it possible, yet the cost has been high, so has the damage on economy and livelihood. Even worse, sometimes it is abused for social stability purpose, as in the case of the Henan bank crisis in central China. In April 2022, some depositors from the five

town-level banks in the Henan province found they could not withdraw or transfer money. They spread the word online and triggered thousands of depositors from other cities and provinces to visit the bank branches. The local government arbitrarily, also unlawfully, turned the health QR code of these depositors' red so as to prevent their entry into the province. For some more time, one could only travel when his or her health QR code was green.

By the end of 2022, the zero Covid-19 policy and its mechanisms have finally come to an end. After the two-month long city-wide lockdown was over at the end of May in 2022, Shanghai citizens might have returned to their normal life, but psychologically it will never be the same. Group buying is no longer needed. Helena did a survey in one of the sub-groups she managed to decide whether to keep the group or dissolve it. To her surprise, 98% respondents said they wanted to keep it.

The same happened to many group-buy groups. Although members of the group are no longer as active as before, they sometimes use the group for the exchange of daily necessities or help each other out on small things.

"If you ask me what I would like to carry on from the lockdown experience, it's the bond and connection among neighbours", said Chen Jibing. ■■■

# Robots for Ageing Societies: A View from Japan

Miyako Takagi

In Japan, despite the hiking single elderly population, there is a chronic shortage of caregivers for home visit. As many single seniors struggle to find a conversation partner, what about interacting with a robot instead of a human? Recently, the United States introduced communication robots to minimise medical costs incurred from the elderly's social isolation. What can the world learn from Japan?

On 1 October 2021, the total population of Japan was 125.5 million. The population aged 65 and over was 36.21 million, accounting for 28.9% of the total population (ageing rate). By sex, the population aged 65 and over consisted of 15.72 million males and 20.49 million females, with a male-to-female ratio of approximately 3:4.

Recent trends have shown an increase in the number of men and women aged 65 and over living alone. In 1980, men and women aged 65 and over accounted for 4.3% and 11.2% of the population respectively, but by 2020, among the one-person households with the member being 65 years old or over, men accounted for 15.0% and women 22.1% of Japan's total population of 126.15 million.

The biggest problem in an ageing society is the increase in the number of dementia patients. The number of people over 65 years old with dementia in Japan was estimated to be about 6 million in 2020, and it is predicted that about seven million people (about one in five elderly people) will have dementia by 2025. Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) is a condition in which memory loss is neither normal nor dementia, although it does not interfere with daily living. About half of those with MCI will transi-

tion to dementia within five years, and it is believed that starting preventive activities at this stage can delay the onset of dementia.

Engaging in interactions such as having conversations has a significant effect on dementia prevention. However, according to the "Survey on Livelihoods and Support" published by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in 2017, the frequency of conversation for single elderly men is considerably lower than that for single elderly women. Owing to Japan's company-centric culture, most men struggle with building new relationships after retirement, and hence fewer conversation partners. Also adding to the strain is the chronic shortage of caregivers who can visit elderly people at their homes to assist them with daily living and strike conversations.

How, then, should the Japanese society support the elderly who live alone?

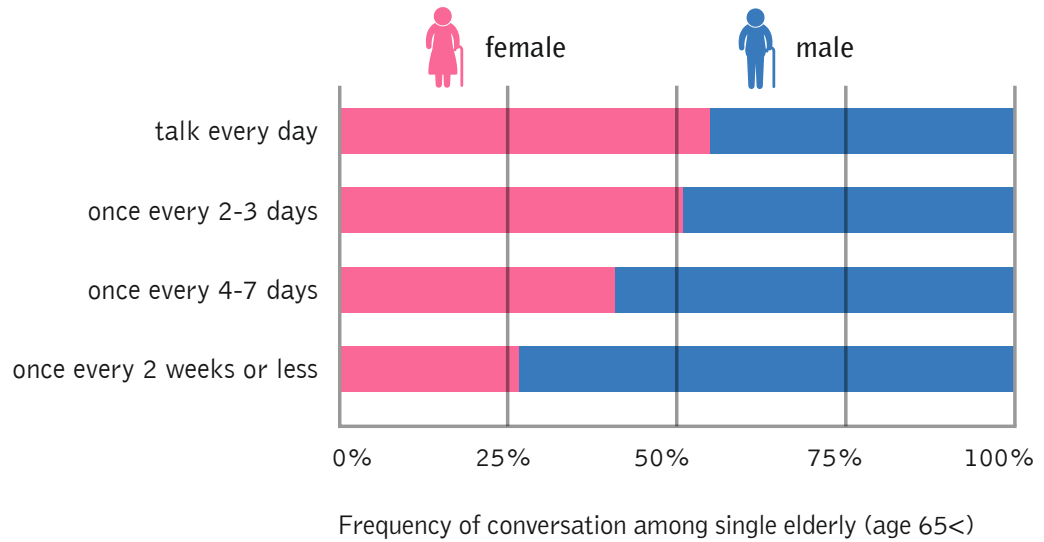
## Human–Robot Partnership

Robots that can communicate with humans through conversations and movement can be found in restaurants and electronics stores across the country nowadays. Whereas for households, Aibo, a dog-type robot that was redesigned in 2018, and Paro, a baby seal, are some of the common models.

Aibo, which looks like a digital gadget, has built-in communication with a cloud software that realises the character and intelligence of a pet. The more you see it, the more it learns about you and recognises your face; and the more gently you treat it, the more affectionate it becomes. The first model of AIBO, sold from 1999 to



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2006, costed Japan yen (JPY) 250,000 (USD 2,380). It was so popular that the first 3,000 units ordered were sold out within 20 minutes, and a total of about 150,000 units were shipped. The current model of Aibo sold more than 20,000 units over the first six months since its launch in January 2018.

The release of new communication robots is no longer a rare occasion these days. LOVOT, one of the most popular communication robots developed by GROOVE X Corporation, is more than just a cuddly, lovable figure. Its 360-degree hemispheric and temperature cameras allow it to keep an eye on the entire room and quickly find out where its owner is. The behaviour of a LOVOT is not programmed in a fixed manner, but processed by deep learning and other machine learning methods to create real-time movement. The company made headlines when billionaire entrepreneur Yusaku Maezawa acquired all its shares in March 2022.

PALRO, marketed by FUJISOFT, was created with the mission to “help people lead richer lives”. The conversational humanoid records and accumulates information on people’s behaviours and tastes during conversations, so as to deepen its understanding and convey topics and information of interest at the perfect moment. In addition, it replies around 0.4 seconds after the other person finishes speaking, allowing for smooth conversation.

From a global point of view, Japan is undoubtedly a pioneer of communication robots. With most of the suppliers from Japan, communication robots are mainly found in the domestic market. In fact, a



A model of LOVOT



*Aibo, Sony Store, Ginza, Japan*

one-month survey conducted in December 2019 suggested that Japanese of all ages and both sexes seemed to accept communication robots as a comfortable conversation partner. Among the 1155 respondents in their 20s to 60s, 40% were male and 60% were female. In the question “Would you like to use a communication robot when you are in a hospital or medical facility?”, 17.2% answered “Yes, I would like to use a communication robot” and 36.6% said “Somewhat I would like to use a communication robot”, meaning over half of the respondents were open to the option. As for the reasons for wanting to use a communication robot, 55.1% respondents said they wanted “to relieve loneliness”, 53.9% hoped “to relieve free time”, and 44.5% had the “prevention of dementia” on mind.

Why has the communication robot boom not occurred outside Japan? This difference may be attributed to the differences in the popular understanding of robots in Japan and Western countries.

The word “robot” is derived from the Czech word *Robota*, which meant “forced labour” and was used to classify peasants who were obliged to do forced labor under the feudal system. A common view of the West is that robots should be subservient to humans, who are in the constant fear of a robot uprising. The “three laws of robotics” devised by science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov already in 1942 have pervaded the genre as well as popular culture. They pro-

hibit robot injury to humans and establish robots’ obedience to human instructions and protection of human existence.” Such rules have taken firm root and continue to dominate popular imagination, despite the rapid development and much wider application of robotics technology over the past decades.

In Japan, by contrast, popular culture has long cultivated the idea that humans and robots could coexist in harmony. In the 1960s, Osamu Tezuka’s *Astro Boy* was animated for television, after which Japanese children have since been gripped by the weekly episodes of a story where robots work with humans to defeat social evils. Another much-loved character is *Doraemon* – a robotic cat who lives in a Japanese family’s house and shares meals daily as equal friends – has been enjoying its popularity since the 1970s. The generations who watch *Astro Boy* and *Doraemon* from a young age recognise robots as their friends, a conception that may be passed on to the future.

## Robots and Ageing: Different Strategies

On 30 May 2022, the New York State Office on Aging (NYSOFA) announced plans to distribute communication robots to more than 800 seniors across the state, with the mission to maximise the ability of seniors to receive non-medical support services



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Voice Recognition Doll and Stuffed Animal Series

and to age well and independently in their communities. The Pew Research Center reported that more than a quarter of adults over the age of 60 live alone in the United States, which was picked up by Fortune magazine and entitled the article “New York is turning into Japan by giving robots to old people as companions”.

ElliQ, the communication robot distributed by NYSOFA, was developed by an Israeli company with approximately USD12 million in funding from the Toyota Research Institute, Inc. (TRI). Unlike Japanese robots, it is not humanoid in shape. The robot body is made of two parts, and only the upper part can nod and rotate, a concept rather similar to a smart speaker. The main difference between Amazon Echo and ElliQ is that the former does not talk to people actively or at all – unlike most communication robots developed in Japan.

The living arrangements of the elderly in Japan and the US are consistent with countries with relatively developed economies, where people tend to have fewer children and live longer beyond their childbearing years.

NYSOFA's efforts to launch EliQ aim to address the growing social isolation of older adults in the US. Efforts to quantify the cost of loneliness have shown that for Americans aged 65 or above, social isolation costs the government approximately USD7 billion annually in additional health care costs. Lonely elderly people are more likely to suffer from health problems such as depression and heart disease and longer hospital stay.

In Japan, the eight million born during the baby boom after World War II will be aged 75 or over in 2025, sparking fears for

social consequences. In view of the increase of MCI patients from 2.56 million in 2000 to 6.69 million in 2019, the surge is likely to persist well beyond 2025 and the MHLW estimated that 2.43 million care workers would be needed by then. In 2017, care workers were added to the foreign technical training programme, which was expected to significantly increase the number of foreign care workers, but even now it is not sufficient. Furthermore, the current depreciation of the Japanese Yen is accelerating the outflow of foreign workers.

Under these circumstances, the use of communication robots to care for the elderly is believed to be the one and only solution, and hence the shift of Japan's national policy to focus on promoting the use of nursing care robots. If nursing-care robots, including communication humanoids, are utilised under the cooperation of the public and private sectors, a solution to the healthcare worker shortage may not be as far away as it is assumed after all. ■■

<sup>1</sup> [https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/whitepaper/w-2022/zenbun/04pdf\\_index.html](https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/whitepaper/w-2022/zenbun/04pdf_index.html)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/kokoro/known/disease\\_recog.html](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/kokoro/known/disease_recog.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ipss.go.jp/ss-seikatsu/j/2017/seikatsu2017.asp>

<sup>4</sup> <https://nursing-plaza.com/download/download-1227/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2017/10/medicare-spends-more-on-socially-isolated-older-adults.pdf>

# Reaping the Demographic Dividend in Pakistan: Education, Skilling and Employment

Mome Saleem

Pakistan is in the middle of the demographic transition. The right investment in young people is required to realise the “demographic dividend”.

According to the National Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2018, 64% of the population is below the age of 30 and a total of 30% are between the age of 10 and 24 years i.e. 64.5 million. This trend will continue until 2050 with 1.9% average population growth between 2017 and 2030. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Pakistan is on decline i.e. from 3.6 children in 2017-2018 to 3.3 in 2022.<sup>1</sup> According to the Pakistan Demographic Survey 2020, the population will continue to increase despite further declines in fertility.<sup>2</sup> By 2030, of a total estimated population of 280 million people, 100 million will be youth. This historical moment is a make-or-break situation for Pakistan.

The right investment in young people can open up numerous opportunities for the country's future. However, if the country fails to channel the potential of young people, it could become a burden not only for the country but for the region at large. Does the country have a holistic approach, systems and infrastructure in place required for the smooth transition so that the country can reap the demographic dividend? This article looks at challenges and presents a number of voices connected to Pakistan's “Green Youth Movement”.

## Jobs and Skills Challenges

Every year a large number of young people enter the job market. According to the 2020-2021 Labour Force Survey, the unemploy-

ment rate is 6.3%, surely an improvement compared to 6.9% in 2018-2019, but still a major challenge. To fill the gap, the country has to generate 1.3 million jobs annually in the next five years.

As one of the major drivers of economic growth, young people in Pakistan display a dearth of required skills that becomes a hindrance in harnessing their potential. Time and again employers have hinted at the gap and mismatch of skills provided by the education system and those required by the industry at large.

*At the moment, digital skills such as content creation and graphic designing are high in demand for young students like myself. Skills are important for long-term employment. However, there is a disconnect between demand and supply. There are very few opportunities in the industry for my services as a microbiologist. We [have to] work alongside studies. I have to miss my classes to cope with the work-based demands and the salary is too low. The system is not accommodative, so that the students can benefit from flexible hours at work to continue their studies. (Muhammad Dilawar, Master's student in microbiology)\**

Currently, Pakistan has the second largest number of “out-of-school children” (OOSC), i.e. 22.8 million children aged between 5 and 16 years do not attend an educational institution. Part of the problem is the low allocation of funds for education and the cumulative education expenditures accounted for 1.77% of the GDP in 2021



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*Undergraduates working as interns at the Public Health Reference Lab in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the National Agriculture Research Centre – a required component of the Pak-Austria Fachhochschule Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology*

according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2021-2022.<sup>3</sup> Dropout rates are high on the post-primary level of education, due to non-availability of public schools, cultural barriers especially for girls such as early marriage, lack of female teachers and child labour owing to poverty. Those in public schools face learning challenges due to poor quality of teaching and curriculum with almost no civic education, technical, digital and transferable/soft skills which are important for workforce readiness. This poses a great challenge to the country's human capital development. Meanwhile, Pakistan is faced with threats such as displacement caused by climate disasters and the Corona pandemic which further exacerbated the situation in the past years and resulted in halted learning and increased number of school drop-outs.

According to an estimate, 31% of Pakistani youth are not in education, employment and training (NEET).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the education system does not provide soft or technical skills required by the industry at large. The Technical and Vocational Training Education Institutions (TEVT) in the country also lack quality content and linkages to the labour market. The TEVT courses do not offer soft skills such as adaptation, interpersonal, analytical, cognitive, communication, project management and problem solving to name a few, which are sought by the employers. Thus the graduates of TEVT are not always able to transition towards employment or entrepreneurship.

## Promoting Youth Entrepreneurship

The large number of young people entering the job market cannot be provided employment as there are far less formal jobs than employees. Pakistan's economic situation requires a shift in the employment from jobs to entrepreneurship. However, the mindset for this is largely missing among young people.

*It is the responsibility of universities to guide us about the future of work and provide transferable skills. We lack the knowledge and soft skills outside of course textbooks for our career development such as digital, communication, entrepreneurial and cognitive skills. During my sixth semester, I applied for internship at various organizations. However, my university didn't provide me [with] reference letter, because as per the policy of the university, it supports internship only for the final semester students. We don't have the required mindset to think outside the box for business ideas and innovations. The risk of entering the entrepreneurial space is linked to the lack of platforms to launch them and [limited] financial support from the system. At times, we need guidance to translate the idea into a business but we don't have a platform. A student would instead provide his or her services as a freelancer. (Ushna Saeed, student of environmental sciences at the University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences in Lahore)\**



Startups in Pakistan have mushroomed over the years owing to the joint efforts of the industries and the government. Pakistan was ranked among the top ten freelancing countries in the world according to the Global Gig Economy Index, i.e. 47% in 2019.<sup>5</sup> In partnership with the private sector, the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecom established a number of National Incubation Centres across the country under the vision of increasing digitalisation. These centres incubate ideas, accommodate startups, build capacities of young entrepreneurs and establish linkages with potential investors. Since 2015, Pakistani startups have been able to generate USD 563.5 million and 62% of them were founded in 2021 alone.<sup>6</sup> However, not all startups are able to gather such funds to become major businesses and, in the wake of inflation and international funding drying up, there is a risk that the industry might be impacted negatively.

In addition, the country needs to bridge the digital divide in terms of access, availability and skills especially among girls. Teaching the tech revolution should be made mandatory throughout all stages of the educational system and especially in higher education to develop their passions and goals. Higher educational institutions such as the Colleges of Technology should partner directly with the market, sending their students to receive hands-on experience and get to know how to grab an opportunity.

## The Right Support Needed

Since 2013, subsequent governments have introduced a dedicated youth programme with a three-pronged approach to the development of young people i.e. education, employment and engagement. A loan scheme for young entrepreneurs of startups, a youth entrepreneurship scheme, skilling and international certification, TEVT sector reforms including the establishment of National Accreditation Council for TVET Stream, funding for innovation, as well as engagement programmes such as National Youth Council (NYC) and sports and environmental initiatives such as the “Green Youth Movement” have been introduced on federal and provincial levels. A national skills strategy speaks about the need for skilling, upskilling and reskilling of the existing labour force. The scale of the programmes cannot match the number of



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*A cleanliness and plantation drive arranged by the GYM club of the National Skills University, Islamabad*

young people in need, especially in the rural areas. However, other actors such as bilateral and multilateral development agencies and private sector are also working in the same direction. The silo approach to the agenda of youth development is a major challenge that hinders scaling-up.

*Some of the initiatives in the pipeline include national youth employment policy which ensures connecting employers and employees to make space for bridging the demand and supply of the skills available and required by the labour market. Moreover, the policy also explicitly talks about the facilitation of different kinds of employment streams, i.e. job and self-employment. We are mindful of the age-specific needs of the young people. It is important to ensure a cross-cutting approach to youth development where the basics of human capital development are ensured such as education, health and skilling needs. Digital skills are a priority and the Prime Minister has formed a task force around IT that focuses on e-commerce. The aim is to boost the IT export from the current amount of USD 2.6 billion to USD15 billion. (Muhammad Ali Malik, Deputy Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Youth Programme)\**

The analysis of youth development landscape clearly shows that there are three main aspects that need attention to harness the potential of young people – edu-



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A plantation and cleanliness drive organised by the University of Chakwal

cation, both soft and vocational skills, and entrepreneurship. However, the life cycle approach to connect education to skilling and employment is largely missing. The concept of integrated skilling in adolescence or at school level is not a priority in the educational institutions. Despite efforts by the governments, the TEVT sector has so far been unable to match the skill needed of the future labour market such as the green and blue economy and the digital industry. The transition to decent work through quality education and soft and technical skills need to be a prioritised agenda for the various stakeholders in the arena.

## Conclusion

In order to maneuver the demographic transition and to reap the demographic dividend, Pakistan needs to focus on three areas:

- Reforming the education system to address the needs of the future through the right curriculum and integration of transferable, lifelong skills which can also be linked to the market demands facilitate self-employment. Technical skills including STEM and matric tech need to be introduced and scaled up in the formal schooling. Teachers training for effective delivery and provision of school infrastructure for girls especially beyond primary is a must. Besides those already enrolled in schools, there is a need to reduce the number of OOSC

through accelerated learning programmes with integrated skills and market linkages.

- Bridging the digital divide through training, and provision of infrastructure is the utmost need of the hour. Rural areas need to be connected, and trainings for young girls at school level with digital security could pave ways for future opportunities.
- A majority of young people are aspired to look for jobs, whereas at present the need for entrepreneurship is even graver. There is a need to guide young minds not only to seek jobs but create them through school-based skilling around financial literacy and business analytics. On the other hand, policies that strengthen businesses are important along with the facilitation of the transition to online work. ■■■

\* Quotations are from interviews with young people and policy makers conducted by the author.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.population-trends-asiapacific.org/data/PAK>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/publications/pds2020/Pakistan\\_Demographic\\_Survey-2020.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/publications/pds2020/Pakistan_Demographic_Survey-2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter\\_22/Highlights.pdf](https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_22/Highlights.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2257632/empowering-our-youth>

<sup>5</sup> [https://metadataaetc.org/gigontology/pdf/q2\\_global\\_freelancing\\_index.pdf](https://metadataaetc.org/gigontology/pdf/q2_global_freelancing_index.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1680216>

# From Population Control to Reproductive Rights: Feminist Perspectives on Low Fertility Rates in South Korea

Sunhye Kim

Population policies should be devised within a reproductive justice framework as women's bodies have been easily objectified and utilised for national development when maternity is only understood as a woman's duty. South Korea's current pronatalist approaches have failed to address the real issues of low fertility trend.

One of the current, critical issues facing Korean society is the ultra-low fertility trend. In 2020, the total fertility rate in South Korea reached 0.84 – the lowest in the world<sup>1</sup>. Although the Korean government has aggressively promoted childbirth since 2005 when they defined the low fertility rate as a serious national crisis, the total fertility rate has dropped continually from 1.48 in 2000 to 0.84 in 2020. Under these circumstances, this essay critically examines why this rapid demographic shift has occurred and how the South Korean government has reacted to the population change. By focusing on the impacts of the government's population policies on women's bodies and reproductive rights, this essay argues that the policies only reflect a concern for numbers – specifically of population growth – rather than the living conditions and quality of life of individuals; as such, the current policies are not only ineffective but also fail to guarantee the reproductive health and rights of the Korean people.

## Population Policies from the 1970s to the 2000s

In contrast to the current low fertility trend, as recently as 30 years ago, South Korea was more concerned about overpopula-

tion. In the 1960s, the total fertility rate in South Korea was more than 6.0. To reduce the fertility rate, the government adopted a “family planning programme” as part of its Economic Development Plan in 1961 and enacted the Mother and Child Health Act in 1973, which was the legal basis of the “family planning programme.” At that time, South Korea could receive international aids such as USAID by following the recommendations of a birth control campaign and importing contraceptive technologies. The representative slogan of the national campaign was “give birth to only two children, regardless of sons or daughters”. As part of these new population policies, families who had three or more children had to pay an extra residence tax and additional fees for the country's national health insurance. Under the antinatalist policies of this era, abortion was widely practised and encouraged by the government even though it was technically illegal. Women could easily access abortion and sterilisation procedures at family planning clinics. As a result, the total fertility rate dropped to 2.8 in the 1980s – and then further to 1.6 in the 1990s. Thus, South Korea's “family planning programme” of the 1960s and 1970s has been cited as one of the most successful examples of a population control project (Hernandez, 1984).

However, as the total fertility rate continued to dip in the 2000s, the direction of population control policies dramatically shifted from an antinatalist approach to one that focused on boosting childbirth. In 2005, the South Korean government enacted the Framework Act on Low Birth Rate in an Aging Society and tried to promote childbirth by targeting single individuals and



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Family Planning Campaign 1974 "Give birth to only two children regardless of whether sons or daughters"



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Family Planning Campaign 1980, "Two are too many"

newly married couples by providing newlyweds with housing benefits, childcare allowances, and infertility treatment subsidies. Although the South Korean government changed the direction of the nation's population policies in the mid-2000s, what has not changed is their primary target: women.

Under the nation's antinatalist policies in the 1960s and 1970s, women were considered responsible for lowering fertility rates and were the main targets of sterilisation campaigns. When the government reversed its policies in the 2000s – and the discourse on Korea's low fertility rate crisis expanded – single women were singled out as the main culprit. For example, in mass media throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the low fertility rate trend was portrayed as a type of dystopian future. Op-eds and media pieces painted stark pictures of labour shortages, higher life expectancies, a growing number of elderly people, and the individual and societal burdens of caring for an ageing population. In 2016, the Ministry of the Interior launched the "birth map" website, which showed the total number

of women aged between 15 and 49 (child-bearing age), and fertility rates by city districts and regions. However, no data about the number of childbearing-aged men was shown on the map. In Korean society, since all fertile-aged women are considered potential mothers, the issue of low fertility became all women's responsibility – and their bearing of children was viewed as an obligation that was crucial for the nation's survival.

## Gender Inequality Aggravated by Low Fertility

To explain South Korea's unprecedented low fertility trend, many scholars have analysed changes in the nation's demographics, family structures, economic structures, and the labour market. Using previous research on demographic changes, feminist scholars in particular have argued that the low fertility trend cannot be discussed without taking into account the double burden placed on Korean women. Stereotypical gender roles

가까이로 아이들셋  
하이로로 희망한국

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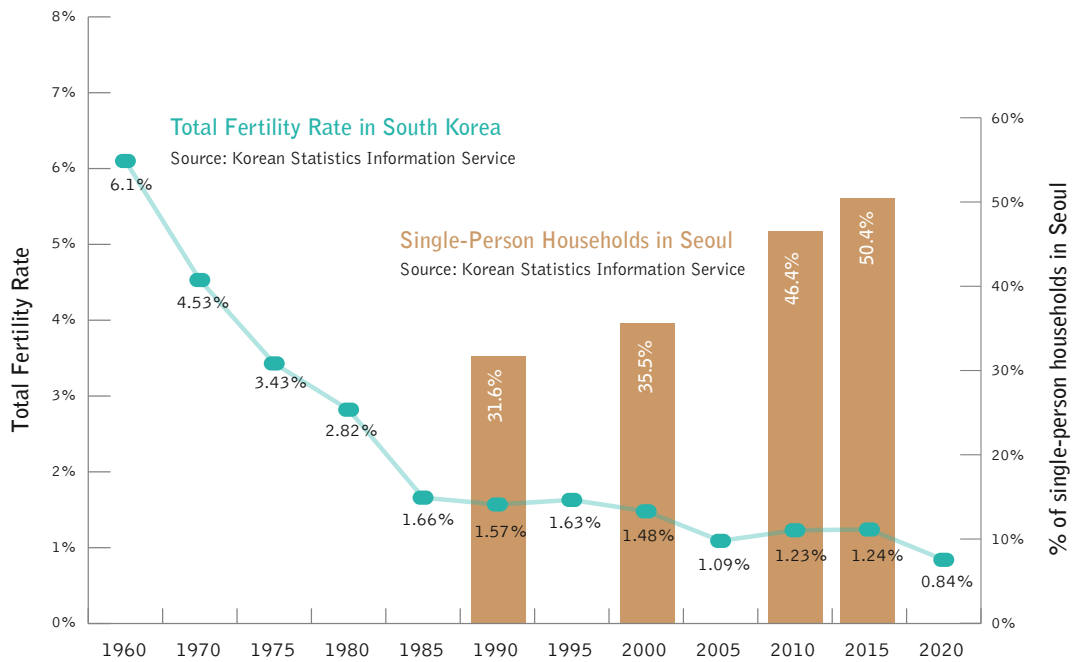
Childbirth Promotion Campaign 2000, "One is lonely"

and norms (such as those that categorise males as breadwinners and females as caregivers) have been weakened in the last few decades, and more women are attaining higher levels of education and participation in the labour market. For both men and women, a career-oriented life course has become a standard. The expansion of family-friendly policies tend to support married women and mothers by minimising the conflicts between work and family, but has failed to address why women are expected to perform most household chores. According to "2022 Men's and Women's Lives Through Statistics, the gender gap in the labour participation rate, employment rate, and wage levels in South Korea have yet to be relieved. For example, women earn 72.6% of what men do, and the women's employment rate is 51.2%, which is 18.8% lower than that of men. Furthermore, the data show that 17.4% of married women leave their jobs due to childcare (43.2%), marriage (27.4%), and childbirth (22.1%) (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2022).

Under these circumstances, the number of people who are delaying marriage are childless and living in single-person households has been gradually increas-

ing in South Korea. Moreover, perceptions regarding marriage and childbirth have rapidly changed among young people. For example, in a survey by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs in 2018, 19.5% of the single female respondents aged 20 to 44 said that they should have a child, 28.8% said that having a child would be better than being childless, and 48.8% didn't regard having a child as a matter. The attitudes of single men aged 20 to 44 were similar. In other words, almost half of the single men and women aged 20 to 44 in South Korea no longer find marriage and childbirth their essential life tasks. As these attitudes about childbirth have changed, the actual single population has also increased. As shown in Figure 2, 31.6% of Seoul's population that was aged 20 to 49 was single in 1990, but this number increased to 50.4% in 2015. Although the nuclear family model – consists of a heterosexual couple and two children – is still a strong social norm, the numbers tell a different story and indicate that a single-person household has become a "new normal" in South Korea.

While the government has invested more than South Korea Won (KRW) 225 trillion (USD 155.7 billion) over the last



Demographic Trends in South Korea

15 years in a bid to boost the number of newborn babies, the fertility rate has not rebounded. Thus, recognising the country's demographic shifts, new social policies for supporting diverse forms of families are more urgently needed than childbirth promotion policies that maintain the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family.

## Reproductive Health and Rights Under South Korea's Pronatalist Policies

Although the South Korean government has emphasised the protection of maternity health in its reproductive and family planning laws, its pronatalist policies have ironically put reproductive health and rights under threat. The government has been expanding supports for the use of assisted reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF), while limiting the access to contraceptives and abortion. In 2005, the government removed contraceptive technologies (including sterilisation surgeries, oral contraceptive pills, and emergency contraceptive pills) from the national health insurance. Any support for contraceptive methods would be deemed in conflict with the country's new pronatalist policies. Meanwhile, the Ministry of

Health and Welfare acknowledged its plan to establish abortion prevention policies. As a result, the criminal codes on abortion were revived, and accessibility to abortion services became very limited. The enforcement of these codes continued until 2019 when a Constitutional Court decision finally decriminalised abortion. However, the government remains reluctant to support abortion-related health care and services because lawmakers believe that they contradict the country's childbirth promotion campaign. For example, the government expanded paid maternity leave in 2012, including in cases of miscarriage and stillbirth, but excluded paid leave for abortion procedures. Moreover, while abortion is now legal in South Korea, abortion procedures are still not covered by the national health insurance.

Reproductive justice recognises both the right to have a child and the right to not have a child as well as the right to parent children in safe and healthy environment (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Yet, in each phase of its reproductive health care policies, the Korean government has only partially recognised its citizens' reproductive rights. During the period when it sought to reduce population growth, contraception and abortion were supported by lawmakers, but fertility treatments were neglected; conversely, since the 2000s during which

ultra-low fertility rates have been recorded, various restrictions have been imposed to impede contraception and abortion, and fertility treatments have been encouraged. Indeed, one can argue that the country's current pronatalist policies violate reproductive rights because they only focus on the number of babies born rather than individual women's bodies, experiences, and needs. Women's bodies and reproductive capacities become objectified as tools for population growth. To effectively guarantee one's choice and rights to have children or not have children, affordable medical services, education, and information should be provided in a way that guarantees every individual's reproductive rights and health.

## Conclusion

Considered a basic human right, reproductive rights are described and enshrined in various international human rights treaties. The South Korean government should not simply focus on forced-birth policies to reverse declining population growth; instead, they must prepare comprehensive policies that guarantee the reproductive health and rights of all individuals. However, the current government is heading in opposite direction. President Yoon Suk-yeol pledged to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) and blamed the low birthrate on feminism during his election campaign. After he was elected, the plan to abolish the MOGEF and establish a new department of Population, Family and Gender Equality under the Ministry of Health and Welfare was announced on 6 October 2022. The replacement epitomises the government's anti-feminist sentiment. Many feminist scholars and activists have expressed concerns that abolishing the MOGEF could reduce all the policies related to gender equality. Also, the name changing from "Gender Equality and Family" to "Population, Family, and Gender Equality" sweeps gender equality issues under the umbrella of population policy rather than considering it as part of reproductive rights. The concept of reproductive rights is never fixed, and it has and will always evolved with the feminist movement. In South Korea, the defense of reproductive rights remains a battle in progress. ■■■

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<sup>1</sup> A total fertility rate of 2.1 is estimated as the replacement level, a fertility rate below 2.1 is considered a low fertility rate, and a number below 1.3 is defined as the "lowest-low fertility" rate (Kohler et al, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/766528.html](https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/766528.html)

# Anti-Conversion Laws in India: Undermining Democracy and Women's Rights

Neha Dabhade

Interfaith relations and marriages are fairly common in a multicultural society such as India. Long history of shared neighbourhoods and women's rights movements made such unions easier in the last few decades. However, religious majoritarianism and bigotry are posing unprecedented challenges to interfaith marriages and, most importantly, the agency of women.

India is a complex society with layers of identities as well as contradictions. There are hierarchies in Indian society based on constructs of caste, gender, religion and class. While social changes propelled by globalisation, urbanisation and better access to technology and communication have led to increasing social and, to some extent, inevitable inter-mingling and interfaith relations on many levels, patriarchal control over women's bodies have remained firm. The boundaries of caste and religion exert strong regulation over intimate relationships including marriages.

In June 2021, a Sikh woman called Amandeep Kaur was summoned to a police station in the city of Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh along with her father. They were not allowed to leave unless Amandeep filed a case against Usman Qureshi, with whom Amandeep was formerly in a relationship. Though she insisted that they were consensual partners, she was coerced into filing a case accusing him of converting her into Islam forcefully. She eventually gave in to the intimidation of the Hindu right-wing groups – Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad – whose members were present at the police station. Days later, on 27 June 2021, Qureshi was arrested; three months later, he was charged for rape, breach of trust, cheat-

ing and forgery. Three of the five charges were non-bailable.<sup>1</sup>

Amandeep's life has since been turned upside down. What also haunted her was the stigma she faced from her neighbours and co-workers, leaving her no option but to take a break from work. For the next six months, she did everything in her capacity and out of her meagre savings to prove that the charges against Qureshi were fabricated. Qureshi was finally granted bail by a local court after a couple of months.

Maya (name changed), who married Sameer and lived in Vadodara in Gujarat, suffered a similar ordeal. Maya was a Dalit Hindu and Sameer a Muslim. Their families had no objection to their marriage despite different religious identities and neither of them converted. Unfortunately, Sameer later started beating Maya up. Maya went to a local police station to complain about domestic violence and stated her desire to continue living with her husband. However, the police charged Sameer of forceful religious conversion and sexual exploitation. Appalled with the false allegations, Maya filed an affidavit in the court, stating that the police had fabricated the case against her husband. Sameer was granted bail after several months of arrest.<sup>2</sup>

The stories of Amandeep and Maya are unfortunately not isolated. Hindu women who are in interfaith relationships are facing unprecedented challenges in India. Accounts point towards how Hindu right-wing vigilante groups hound and intimidate young couples and their families claiming to "rescue" Hindu women from "love jihad" – a conspiracy theory that accuses Muslim men of luring Hindu women into romantic relationships and marrying them to con-



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An Indian woman holds a poster protesting against the anti-Muslim controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB CAA) in Mumbai in 2019.

vert them into Islam. Though these claims are never backed by any evidence or government data, different states in India have passed new legislations to restrict interfaith marriages and arrest Muslim men such as Amandeep's and Maya's partners. It is not surprising that the leaders in power have not condemned such violence. Anti-conversion laws are becoming alarmingly prevalent in most Indian states and have the ideological support of the majority right government.

## Institutionalised discrimination

It is not uncommon in India that women across religions and castes face immense pressure to marry men within their caste or men chosen by the head of the families. Thus, there are heart-wrenching accounts of honour killings where the men of the family brutally kill the girl for marrying someone from a different caste. But these honour killings are different from the recent dilemma faced by women who are in inter-

faith relationships, as the latter marks an institutionalised form of restrictions initiated and backed by the state with the anti-conversion laws. Ironically, some of these laws that prohibit religious conversions and create obstacles in interfaith marriages are named "Freedom of Religion Act".

For instance in Uttar Pradesh, according to the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, marriages between individuals from different religious communities will be declared null and void if they are found to be intended for converting the women to another religion. This offence carries a maximum of 10 years in prison and a fine that ranges from Indian Rupee (INR) 15,000 to 50,000 (USD 180 to USD 600). Interfaith couples who wish to get married must inform the district magistrate two months in advance through written applications. Similar provisions exist in other anti-conversion laws operating in various states of India.

These anti-conversion laws have been weaponised to criminalise Muslim men in India. These laws along with other dis-



People protested against the controversial anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB CAA) in Mumbai in December 2019.

criminary regulations including the ones in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat come from supremacist ideologies, which believe that Hindus are legitimate citizens of India. There are consistent demands from Hindu right-wing groups to establish a country where Hindus are given special privileges and rights over Muslims and Christians who are considered “outsiders”. Though the Constitution of India guarantees the right to equality as well as the freedom of religion and belief to all citizens, there have been increasing hate crimes against Muslims in the forms of mob lynching and other physical attacks since the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in Central India in 2014. In Uttar Pradesh alone, which is also ruled by the BJP, 79 cases were filed under the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion Act over a span of eight months in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, 80 persons were imprisoned while 21 were on the run after being charged under the same Act in the same year.<sup>4</sup> These figures reflect how this law was used to prosecute Muslim men en masse.

## Hindu right wing on the rise

The Hindu right-wing vigilante groups existed since long but became more active and emboldened in targeting of couples, women and Muslim men after 2014. The fearless actions of these groups can be attributed to the impunity given to them by the state, as they are rarely brought to justice for their threats and even physical assaults under the pretext of defending women or Hindu culture. Besides impunity, the state at times gives right-wing groups the cover of legitimacy in targeting interfaith couples.

The Hindu right-wing groups are using the trope of “love jihad” to mobilise Hindu families against Muslim men. Kanak Jhala, leader of AntarRashtriya Hindu Parishad in Himmatnagar, Gujarat revealed that “in the last three years I have brought back 22 Hindu girls from the houses of the Muslims. That’s the power I yield and terror I have amongst the Muslims. They don’t dare to question me”.<sup>5</sup> As he explained, they reached out to the parents of Hindu girls and assisted them in filing cases against Muslim boys. He also admitted that in some cases, the parents

were reluctant to file a case or pursue the matter legally but he persuaded them into it. He noted that love jihad was an important means for his organisation – like other Hindu right-wing groups – to mobilise the Hindu communities.

Besides the women and their parents, the Hindu right-wing groups also put tremendous pressure on the police to send the women to their parents or to state institutions against their own will. These women have undergone torture such as unlawful confinement after being forcefully separated from their partners.

## Undermining women's agency

Apart from the discriminatory agenda of the new laws and the false propaganda of love jihad, these narratives succeed in undermining the agency of women. Under the Constitution of India, all citizens are equal before law and entitled to a life with dignity. It also promises the freedom to profess, practise and propagate any religion. But the love jihad propaganda seeks to infantilise women by implying that they are incapable of decision making or can easily fall prey to Muslim men. Women are supposed to have as much a right as men to privacy and choice of partners, but such misogynist narratives legitimised by the state have become tools to control women's bodies and sexuality.

Rashid and his brother from Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh were arrested when they reached the marriage registration office after the mother of his partner Pinki accused him of seducing her into marriage and converting her with a job offer. Pinki, who was pregnant at this point, was taken to a government shelter where she suffered a miscarriage. But she stood her ground and insisted in front of the magistrate that she married Rashid out of free will. In another case, Hadiya was illegally confined by her parents after she married Shafin Jahan. She had converted to Islam way before she married, but her father alleged that the marriage was Jahan's conspiracy to convert Hadiya and recruit her into the terrorist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Kerala High Court annulled their marriage and the Supreme Court subsequently ordered the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to launch a probe into the alleged terror links. However, the NIA found no evidence to back the allegations and the courts

ordered Hadiya's parents to set her free. In both cases, Hindu right-wing organisations were active in supporting the women's families to press charges on the husbands.

## Why is love jihad significant?

The propaganda of love jihad, which is institutionalised by the state through anti-conversion laws, plays an important part in shaping India's public discourse and feeding into the myths and stereotypes promoted by the Hindu right wing. They fuelled the myth that Muslims aim to overtake the Hindu population in India, though the statistics say otherwise. Other narratives strengthen the stereotype that Muslim men are virile predators with a large sexual appetite, thereby demonising them and the Muslim community as a whole.

Deeply intertwined with this politics of hatred is the suppression of women. The stigmatisation of interfaith relationships reinforces the patriarchal constructs of honour and control over the female body. Women are equal citizens under the Constitution of India, but such misogynistic narratives reduce them to mere objects or properties of men while fulfilling the nationalist agenda. Such divisive propaganda and laws are transiting India into a country where women's rights are undermined and the peaceful coexistence of communities is fractured. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/26/manufacturing-a-love-jihad-case-in-indias-uttar-pradesh-state>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.counterview.net/2021/08/incentivizing-cops-love-jihad-cases.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/79-cases-booked-under-unlawful-conversion-law-in-up/article37127689.ece>

<sup>4</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/meerut/80-in-jail-21-absconding-under-ups-love-jihad-law/articleshow/84213845.cms>

<sup>5</sup> <https://countercurrents.org/2022/08/fact-finding-report-of-himmatnagar-and-khambhat-riots-in-gujarat/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/79-cases-booked-under-unlawful-conversion-law-in-up/article37127689.ece>

# Post-Election Philippines: Running on Democratic Reserves

Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin

As the dust of the 2022 presidential election settles, the alliances, the compromises, and the policy trajectory become more visible under the Marcos-Duterte government. The well-curated campaign must now give way to the actual governance work and the pressing issues faced by the post-pandemic Philippines.

The results of the Philippines' presential elections on 9 May 2022 has surprised the world, as it seemed unimaginable to have, yet again, a Marcos taking the helm of the country. It is a family name many international observers associate with images of excesses, jewellery, and a jet-set lifestyle, while the poverty incidence of the country stood at 59% at the end of his rule.

However, a majority of Filipino voters remember the Marcos years differently, almost fondly. Many believe that it was a period of prosperity and infrastructure development. The popular notion, albeit inaccurate, is that the Philippines experienced a golden economic era during the martial law period from 1972 to 1981. Never mind that in the mid-1980s, the Philippines was called the "sick man of Asia" due to the country's poor economic performances. Economists attribute the Philippine economic slump under Marcos Sr. to an "authoritarian political climate, along with insecure property rights, widespread corruption, and unproductive, fraudulent debt."<sup>1</sup> For multiple reasons, including disinformation, disillusionment, the influence of campaign finance flows, there is a widespread embrace of the Marcos brand past and present.

The durability of authoritarian nostalgia reflects a common frustration, alongside wider structural issues. Democracy did

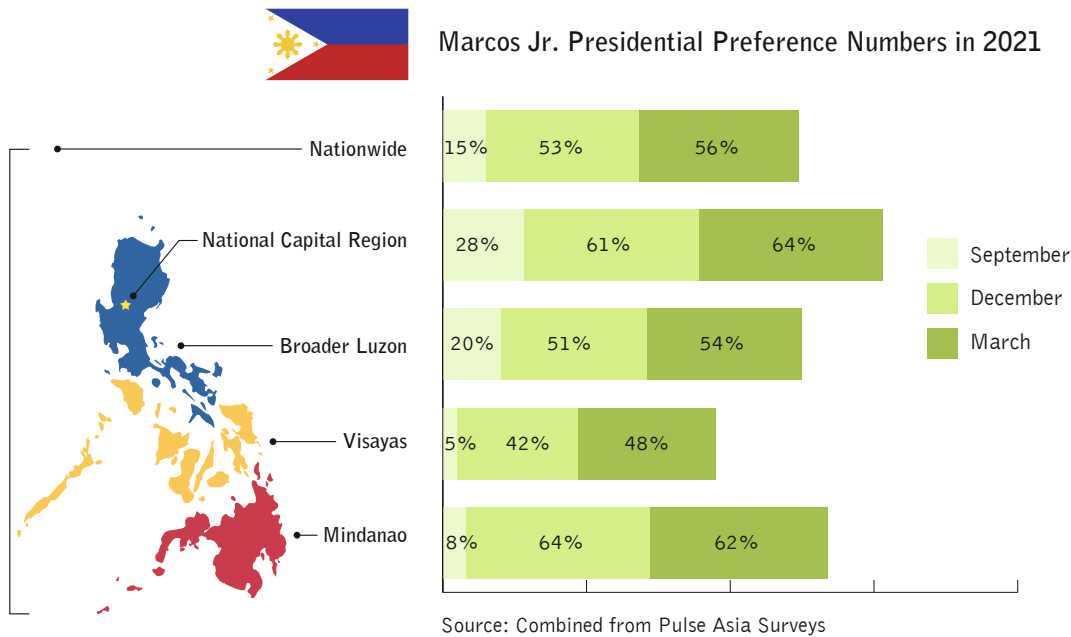
not bring development. In 2021, overseas Filipino workers remitted an average of three billion dollars a month. The need to leave the country for better employment and opportunities continues to hound the Philippines. A comparison of the 1999 and 2019 surveys on Social Inequality of the International Social Survey Program conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) shows the self-identification of social class by the respondents. More importantly, the compared findings of Mahar Mangahas revealed that after two decades, there is an increase in the number of Filipinos who see the Philippine society as elitist and fewer who see it as egalitarian. Income inequality and concentrated wealth in the hands of the few are evident. From 2010-2011, the 40 top Filipino billionaires saw their collective wealth increase 37.9% to USD47.4 billion. In 2021, there were 50 Filipino billionaires (the minimum wealth is USD200 million), with a collective wealth increase of 30% to USD79 billion. Despite the bright forecasts on the country's pre-pandemic economy, the brutal poverty remains a prominent issue. For many, democracy failed to usher in development. Worse, the harbingers of democracy in 1986 became political figures embroiled in corruption cases and part of the furniture of the Philippines' patronage democracy.<sup>3</sup>

## A Coalition of Convenience

The Marcos dynasty is a force to be reckoned with in the north of the Philippines, while the Duterte dynasty remains strong and widespread in Mindanao, the country's south. Riding on the coattails of her father



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and former president Rodrigo Duterte, Sara Duterte outgrew her local sphere of mayoral influence in the last six years. She gained national attention by showing that she could remove non-allies from key positions, even a Speaker of the House. At one point, Sara challenged her father's political party with a regional party composed of dynasties.

The Dutertes enabled the return of the Marcos family on two levels. First, Rodrigo Duterte gave Marcos Sr. a hero's burial and convinced his broad base of supporters that Marcos Jr. was cheated out of the vice presidency in the 2016 elections. Second, Sara Duterte gave way to running as Marcos Jr.'s vice president even though her pre-election numbers were higher.

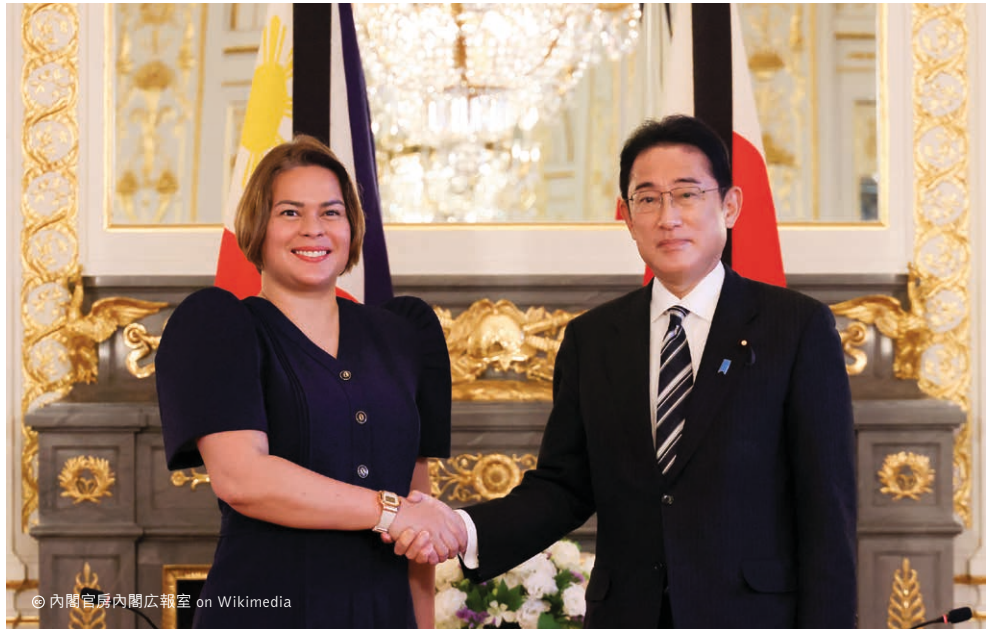
Once the Marcos-Duterte alliance was agreed on, the duo filed their certificate of candidacy for the 2022 elections. Political clans aligned themselves with these two scion candidates and threw their support, which means rallying the votes from their bailiwicks. Sara Duterte's Mindanao bloc of supporters carried Marcos to Malacanang Palace, evident in the shift of preference from 15% in September 2021 to 53% in December 2021. The Marcos-Duterte tandem won support from across all socioeconomic groups and regions.<sup>4</sup>

Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte promised unity and projected a youthful campaign using popular social media platforms. Avoiding debates, they kept their messaging simple and on point. None of them talk lengthily about the dreary state of economic affairs or any detailed plans for a post-pan-

dem recovery. And the public did not seem to mind. For Marcos Jr., it was a message of hope to a disillusioned public by pointing to a nostalgic – and not so accurate – past. Marcos Jr. and his campaign promise projected triumph over adversity. It was a message that gained traction among many Filipinos, while there was no heavy lifting or talk of policies and programmes. Are voters to blame? Personality politics and the fragmentation of political parties are deliberate top-down strategies, coupled with campaign money flows that come from the top. Consolidating democracy requires building strong democratic institutions such as a fair electoral system, functioning political parties, judicial independence, accountability institutions. But none of these was present or on the way to materialise for the Philippines. With democratic institutions being weakened over time, the Philippines is a state and society burning through its democratic reserves.

## Patterns of continuity and discontinuity

As the country transitions into the Marcos Jr. presidency, it is more about continuity than change. Accountability institutions, including the Department of Justice, the Commission on Audit, and the Office of the Ombudsman, are controlled by appointees allied with the Marcos or Duterte families. President Marcos Jr. mentioned “continue” and the theme of continuity 13 times in his



*Sara Duterte as Vice President of the Philippines and Fumio Kishida before the funeral of Shinzo Abe in Japan*

first State of the Nation Address. He enumerated what he intends to continue from the previous administration, including economic policies, health policies, infrastructure plans, public-private partnerships, transportation development, and foreign affairs. There was no mention of human rights and justice for victims of extrajudicial killings. There was no mentioning of how to combat corruption even though business groups consider it the top risk for the country's economic recovery ahead of rising inflation.

Politics-wise, it is expected to run in the same vein as their families'. The political clans allied with the Marcoses and Dutertes are old hands that have sustained their power over time. These same clans used their local machines through community leaders who could deliver the votes. It combines personalistic ties and a patronage system that dispenses resources and access to social benefits. These clans stand firmly and closely behind their patrons. The alliance of influential national and regional political dynasties is composed of the same families who supported Rodrigo Duterte in 2016.

As Marcos Jr. has shown less illiberal tendencies than his predecessor, the public must be watchful. The country, after all, has seen authoritarian values made more acceptable when couched under populism. Recently, 17 books were initially banned by the Commission of Philippine Language and labelled as "anti-Marcos, anti-Duterte, anti-government" by the National Task

Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). The memorandum banning the books became void after several commissioners withdrew their signatures, however. In addition, historians who present human rights violations and other facts occurred during the martial law era are either trolled or threatened online. Red-tagging and the threat of libel suits for critics have become rampant since 2016. Even more worrisome is the lack of solid outcry for the abuses of power, especially against those labelled as government critics. The seeming indifference comes from a fragmented civil society, pushback against dissenting voices, and cynicism toward opposition groups.

## Reality Bites

Since his inauguration on 30 June 2022, the challenges faced by the Marcos administration include higher poverty incidence, hiking prices of essential commodities, and an impending sugar shortage. Marcos Jr. has branded himself as a visionary like his father, even taking on the agriculture portfolio to show that he plans to boost agricultural productivity and self-sufficiency like his father's rice programme, Masagana 99 (Abundance 99). Unfortunately, this rice programme is among the many bloated achievements of Marcos Sr. that have seen the rounds on social media. In truth, the rice programme caused the bankruptcy of



Marcos Jr. with his sister Imelda "Imee"

many rural banks.<sup>5</sup>

Marcos Jr. needs to maintain his high popularity as leverage with other political clans, including those supportive of his vice president. He has managed to minimise the influence of Sara Duterte, for now. When Marcos Jr. left for a state visit to Indonesia, Sara Duterte took on the caretaker role and immediately called for a meeting with the top brass of the security sector. In that meeting, the vice president told the military to “show no mercy to criminals and terrorists”. The office of the vice president asked for a 2023 budget that is more than a double of that a year prior. These include funds for satellite offices across the country and “confidential funds”. Part of the national budget, confidential funds are lumpsum funds for surveillance operations that support the agency’s mandate.

Marcos Jr. got the overwhelmingly youth vote in the 2022 elections. According to Pulse Asia, 71% of Filipinos aged between 18 to 24 years old voted for Marcos Jr. Likewise, 63% of those aged between 25 to 34 voted for him. In addition, 63% as well of those aged 35 to 44 voted for Marcos. Among the senior citizens, 55% of those from 65 years old and above voted for Marcos.

If the Marcos wants to keep this support base, he needs to address the real challenges facing this sector of the population. A recent report by the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM) mentioned that the country has many children and young people until 2035 as a source

of “robust and potentially effective workforce”. The same report mentioned that the number of senior citizens (60 years old and older) have doubled in the last two decades. The Marcos administration will have to address the need for better education, easier access to jobs, and better resources to provide social benefits for the country’s ageing population.

Marcos Jr. has a unique opportunity to prove the critics of his family wrong. To do so, he must roll up his sleeves and work as a chief executive. Well-curated digital narratives can only go so far. As his mother famously said: “Perception is real. Truth is not”. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bworldonline.com/opinion/2022/03/06/434082/the-economic-legacy-of-marcos/>

<sup>2</sup> See Mahar Mangahas column on social classes: <https://opinion.inquirer.net/157062/social-classes-seen-from-below>

<sup>3</sup> Teehankee, J. C., and C. A. A. Calimbahin. "Patronage Democracy in the Philippines: Clans, Clients, and Competition in Local Elections." (2022). Ateneo de Manila University Press.

<sup>4</sup> From Pulse Asia March 2022 survey <https://pulseasia.ph/march-2022-nationwide-survey-on-the-may-2022-elections/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2020/05/22/169053/dominguez-vs-marcos-when-imee-marcos-attempts-to-revise-history-again-but-fails/>

# Experiencing Post-coup Myanmar

Su

1 February 2021: Almost everyone in the country woke up in horror to the mounting bad news. An internet blackout and the inability to withdraw cash from ATMs have sparked anger and anxiety nationwide, as most employees in different cities were supposed to get their salaries via the banking system on the first day of the month. But this angst has gone far beyond the first month of the military takeover in Myanmar. It has since become a permanent feature.

I was among one of the many who were frustrated for not being able to use mobile services including financial ones that required internet access. And like many, I was engulfed by an avalanche of inexpressible emotions regarding the political situation of what would happen next. Watching television news broadcasted from the state-owned channel about announcements on the military coup had indeed triggered public outcry. Later, many people – both from urban and rural areas – experienced the same as soon as they had figured out about the situation via radio or TV.

Shortages of cash at ATMs were widely reported and many banks have not been fully functional since that morning. Some branches halted their operations entirely. There were limits in withdrawals from private banks for both individuals and businesses. People had lost faith in the banking sector. And one of the extreme consequences was that they had to pay agents that are connected with banks for informal cash withdrawal services, paying a commission of 3% to 6% of the withdrawn amount. This remained the case throughout the first year after the coup. Overall, the economy

has gone back to a cash-based one due to unreliable online banking and internet services. As of August 2022, limitations on cash withdrawal have stayed in place. Anyone who wants to withdraw more than the set limit has to pay about 0.5% extra from their own bank accounts to these agents. The cash crunch was one of the many signs that marked the beginning of the collapse of economic activities in Myanmar after the coup.

Since 1 February 2021, political instability has a severe impact on businesses in the country. Many businesses closed or were forced to be halted for months while recovery from the Covid-19 crisis was also delayed.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) report, the Myanmar military's decision to seize power has generated public resistance across the country. Over 4,700 anti-coup demonstrations had been held by the end of June 2021. Peaceful anti-coup protests including street protests during daytime, banging pots and pans in the evenings, and other more innovative ways to protests such as digital strikes have fuelled and accelerated the pro-democracy movement against the military coup.

The civil disobedience movement is no doubt one of the pillars for what many people describe as a revolution. Several other forms of resistance taking place both online and on-the-ground, such as social punishment campaigns and digital movements, have also been key to support the resistance and the People's Defense Forces (PDF). A clear public endorsement of the anti-coup movement manifested itself in the form of direct material and financial support. Indi-

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*A woman who works in the waters for the whole day for a living. She collects stones for Gemstone paintings in Mogoke, Myanmar. Mogoke is known as the country's Ruby Land.*

viduals and businesses alike donated food and supplies, offered free transportation, besides attending peaceful protests.

At the same time, economic activities have slowed down due to the chaos of military oppression. Throughout 2021 and 2022, the mass movement has evolved into both armed and unarmed resistance. In addition, the emergence of more and more local defense forces has led to more hardline oppression on civilians from the military. The worst areas for security have also seen the worst economic activities.

Myanmar has been battered by civil war for decades, which started even way before most young protesters like me were born. However, though the 1988 Uprising was one of the most remarkable political moments in Myanmar's modern history, it has long been left out of our history textbooks. But I bore witness to the 2007 Saffron Revolution when I was in high school. If my memory serves me right, that was the first time I have come to know what a protest was and how cruel the regime could be.

The present resistance movement propelled primarily by Generation Z has seen violent conflict across the country. Bombings are frequent in Yangon, the country's most prominent commercial centre. Even a mere commute to the workplace would not come without a risk. In fact, many peo-

ple have lost their jobs. A significant surge in unemployment in different cities was recorded since businesses have shut down and many international companies left the country. Those who have managed to stay in their jobs with the same income are faced with doubled living costs and commodity prices due to inflation. Those from the outskirts of the city and rural communities are particularly struggling with making ends meet and providing decent education to their children as they had to cut down on both food and non-food consumption. More and more people have moved abroad to nearby countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, in view of the growing difficulties to make a living in the cities.

Meanwhile in the rural areas, villagers are confronted by increasing threats to livelihood and safety. As there are more than 70,000 villages in Myanmar, community practices in individual villages must be understood before tapping into livelihood issues amid the ongoing conflicts. According to Myanmar Peace Monitor, 1132 clashes between the PDF and the military occurred between 1 May 2021 and 20 September 2022. In the Dry Zone including much of the Magway and lower Sagaing regions, farmers and others rely mostly on irrigation from underground water and water from dams – which is largely inaccessible to the wider popula-

tion due to the system's limited coverage – to grow their crops such as pulses, beans and peanuts in the seasons of monsoon and winter. Since the fuel price hike, much of the fieldwork depending on underground water has been halted. The fuel price in villages is about Myanmar kyat (MMK) 1500 to 2000 (USD 0.7 to 0.95) higher than that in the cities. While farmers can grow crops using rainwater in villages that are less affected by fighting, the armed clashes have obstructed most of the agricultural activities in the two regions.

Even if crops can be grown, harvesting has been uncertain, not to mention the disruption caused by the marauding of junta troops. The junta forces torch houses and destroy paddy seeds at warehouses or storages, leading villagers to flee their homes instead of farming or harvesting. In September 2022, about 400 soldiers raided 40 villages in the two regions and destroyed paddy seeds by opening seed bags and grinding them with vehicles. The destruction of paddy seeds was intended to stop agricultural activities in villages where resistance has been strong. In particular,

small-scale farmers who harvest manually require more time to finish before the junta forces intrude again. Each raid usually lasts three to five days, after which villagers would return to their place. However, in the case of more frequent raids, villagers have to evacuate more than twice a month. The constant struggles with livelihood have led to the rise of massive forced displacement.

Some displaced villagers use monasteries as sanctuaries, others seek refuge in neighbouring villages. They survive on a bare minimum of rice given by their neighbours, vegetables grown in their yards or plants from the forest. Neighbours often share their produce with each other, which has become a beautiful community practice by which people can reinforce resilience and gain strength from each other. But such communal efforts were also met with suppression. For example, in August 2022, a businessman from Mandalay posted on social media that he would give out free paddy seeds. Five days after the announcement, he was arrested by one of the military forces.

Transportation is another issue, as com-

*The livelihood of people who live just a one-hour drive from the city of Yangon.*



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*People from Dala Township cross the Yangon River to work in the city and go back to their homes every day. This is one of their major means of transportation to their workplaces.*

muting between cities has become increasingly challenging. Truck drivers have to stay very cautious to avoid landmines, which can be found on the sides of thoroughfares. Thus almost all vehicles drive in the middle of the road. The cost of transporting goods and agricultural products has risen, as some truck drivers dare not take risks. Apart from security concerns, extra charges at informal checkpoints add to the costs.

Many migrant workers and people who are not in farming used to work in the construction sector in Mandalay, a large commercial city. But this does not happen anymore, as most construction sites have been shut. At present, many people are facing the daily struggle to put enough food on the table.

Villages have been burnt down by the military during its purge of rebels and driven thousands to flee. It has a profound impact on the agricultural production around the conflict zones. Farmers cannot grow or harvest crops whereas seasonal workers are not

able to secure their employment.

Since 2020, economic hardship in Myanmar escalated, first due to the Covid-19 pandemic and then due to the military coup. Agriculture, one of the country's major economic engines, has been crippled by the conflicts across the country. People are also experiencing uncontrollable inflation of food prices and costs of non-essential items, driven by the hiking of fuel prices and transportation costs, obstructions to farming activities in remote areas due to political turmoil and uncertainties, etc. Two years on, the military rule has persisted, and so has the economic hardship under unpredictable life-threatening risks shared by people in both urban and rural regions in Myanmar. ■■■

# A Peek into Gender Transitioning in Hong Kong

## An Interview with Kaspar Wan



**Kaspar Wan** is a proud trans-man from Hong Kong, who has acquired gender X on his Australian Passport. He has made an award-winning short documentary on his journey of finding himself – “Kaspar X – If I Had a Soul”. In 2015, Kaspar established Gender Empowerment, a charitable organisation that supports trans individuals at different stages of their gender transition and works with different stakeholders to create social changes. He also received the 2016 Hong Kong Transgender Inclusion Champion Award. Over the past decade, Kaspar has participated in various regional and international conferences concerning trans issues, including the WPATH Symposium, the Asia Pacific Trans Health Blueprint meeting and the “Being LGBT in Asia” regional dialogue organised by the UN.

How and when did you start identifying yourself as a trans person?

I was an assigned female at birth and I realised that I’m a trans person in 2010 when I was 32. I read a biography by Ayana Tsubaki, a trans woman from Japan, called *I Went to a Boys' School*. When I read it, I was surprised by the many similarities between us, from how we think to how we feel. Like her, I always had another name in mind when I was small, which is my name now.

When I read the book, I suddenly connected all the dots in my life. As long as I could remember, I had always wanted to be a boy and imagined how my life would be like if I was a boy. When I learnt about the trans identity, everything fell into place. I’m not a tomboy, I’m not a lesbian. Not that I “wanted” to be a boy, but I identified as one instead. I’m a trans and that’s me.

As a devoted Christian, how did you handle your identity transition in relation to your faith?

At around 28 years old, I met a girl and grew so fond of her that I couldn’t deny anymore. As a Christian, it really hit me because I was not a boy and I liked girl, did it make me a lesbian? Am I sinning against God? That would be the last thing I want. I would rather die than to sin against my God.

I then took some time to travel around Europe, with an incentive to find a place where no one knew me and stay there till I die. I didn’t want to exist anymore. I kept questioning my God why he created me this way – I had always wanted to be a boy since I was small, before I was fond of any girls. That time was very sad and depressing. After three months, I came back, felt a bit better but the bigger question – whether I was a lesbian or not, or whether I had sinned against God – was not resolved.

When did you reveal your realisation to your family and how did they respond?

It all happened within a month. In early September 2010, I told my parents that I’m not going to marry and that I like girls, then at the end of the month, I told them that I wanted to be a boy.

Before I came across the concept of transgender, the confusion and struggle had already lasted for two to three years, and I couldn’t find another answer. So I thought: “If I am a lesbian, so be it.” And I told my parents: “I like girls because I am a boy.” I didn’t know how I came to this kind of logic, but the only explanation was that because I’m a boy.

My parents didn’t say much after my short message. But after a few days, my dad asked my mum what happened to me, whether I had a psy-



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chological problem. Then after a week, I read Tsubaki's book and found out that I am a trans.

When I told my parents that I wanted to be a boy – which implied I would take some actions, my father looked at me for a while and said: “Well, this must be something you have longed for since you were small. But do sit on it.”

I brought my mum along to the first psychiatrist consultation. And it's the first time she heard my full story. The psychiatrist also asked my mum what she thought. My mom said she actually thought of disowning me just to make me think twice. I did not know she had that idea, though I lived with my parents. They never said anything harsh or asked any questions. My mum finally dropped that idea because she was afraid of losing me if she said something against my decision.

#### What drove you to go for a gender affirmation surgery?

Initially after reading Tsubaki's book, I was happy to finally find myself and didn't think about having a surgery. But I also recalled my many questions for God, so I was like: Alright, I don't want this issue to come between us. Maybe surgery is the way out.

And it actually worked, in the sense that I could have that peace of mind. And I no longer challenge God why I was not a boy but had a boy inside. God and I could co-create my life. That's how I decided.

Also, I wasn't comfortable with my top part, so I had a top surgery and felt more like in my body. And I took testosterone, which deepened my voice and made me look more like a man. So I'm very happy with the changes.

#### What were the medical procedures or hurdles that you had to go through to change your identity?

Compared to other trans, I think I had a very smooth transition – I read a book, I looked back at my past and connected all the dots. I became certain of who I am. I'm just so happy to find myself and to tell everyone: I'm not a lesbian, I'm a trans.

After the first consultation, the psychiatrist was pretty sure that I'm a typical binary trans and referred me to meet with an endocrinologist and a surgeon.

For the transition journey of a trans person, you could only know whether this is something you want after you take the step, because you



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can't imagine the change even if you try to. Some may be happy with how testosterone can stop their period or change their voice, but then they may start losing hair. There can be many back-and-forth, many frustrations throughout the process.

Besides medical procedures, what are the other challenges you have faced during the course of transition?

When talking about gender transitioning, there are multiple aspects, like social, medical, and legal. The physical aspect is about how you change your body; the legal part is about how we get recognition. Non-binary trans don't want to be categorised as either male or female, but it's not a legal option in Hong Kong. In some countries, people can identify as gender X on their documents, like in Australia, the United States or Nepal, but not in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup>

For me, I can't change the gender on my Hong Kong identity card. I often encounter issues when I present my ID card, because it's incongruent with my masculine appearance. I am always prompted to explain, which is very inconvenient and uncomfortable, even stressful at times. The social aspects could be the most challenging part for a trans person.

Of all the struggles that you had been through in pursuit of yourself, which was the hardest?

Once I realised I'm a trans, I could put up with anything. It's hard to say which is the most difficult, but whatever it might be, I could just get through it.

And this is something I've learned from my experience of being an assigned female, what trans people are going through is very similar to all the struggles in the women's rights movement. Whether you have the power over that part of your body or not, how you look, whether you are addressed as a "Miss" or "Mrs"... it's all about how you are being perceived and recognised.

When you first found your identity, what was the trans community in Hong Kong like?

A community already existed back then in 2010s, and it was accessible. There was one church that welcomed LGBTQ. It had more gay people, but had also gathered some trans.

It was also when Joanne Leung, a trans woman, was starting an organisation for trans people – so I was very fortunate. We got a small community of about 30 people. The community today is still quite small – maybe a few thousand, with only about a few hundred visible ones.

Do you know any trans who are considerably older and have undergone similar experience before you? How was it in the 80s or 90s in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong is probably one of the earliest places where [gender affirming] surgery has been subsidised and supported by the public healthcare system since the early 80s<sup>2</sup>, so you don't have to scramble for money or fly to Thailand for it.

There was only one surgeon – Dr Albert Yuen Wai-cheung – who performed the gender affirming surgery. He is highly respected among trans and many of us call him “the father” as he has given us our second life. As he once said in an interview, he was just a doctor and he saw that this group of people needed help, then it's his medical responsibility to provide the service. Of course, he upholds strict standards on whether one is suitable for a surgery and would deny those who are considered not ready.

Socially, many trans have gone through a lot of struggles over the years. I know one person who did her surgery in the 90s when she's 27 years old. She belongs to the earlier generation of trans. She was very happy with her second life herself, but a lot of her “sisters” [other trans women] were very miserable and many of them ended up in jail for drugs or prostitution.

In 1997, a famous trans woman who had appeared in many TV shows committed suicide and similar stories of trans suicides were reported a few times in the 2000s.

Throughout your years of trans advocacy in Hong Kong, what are the major controversies and how would you respond to them?

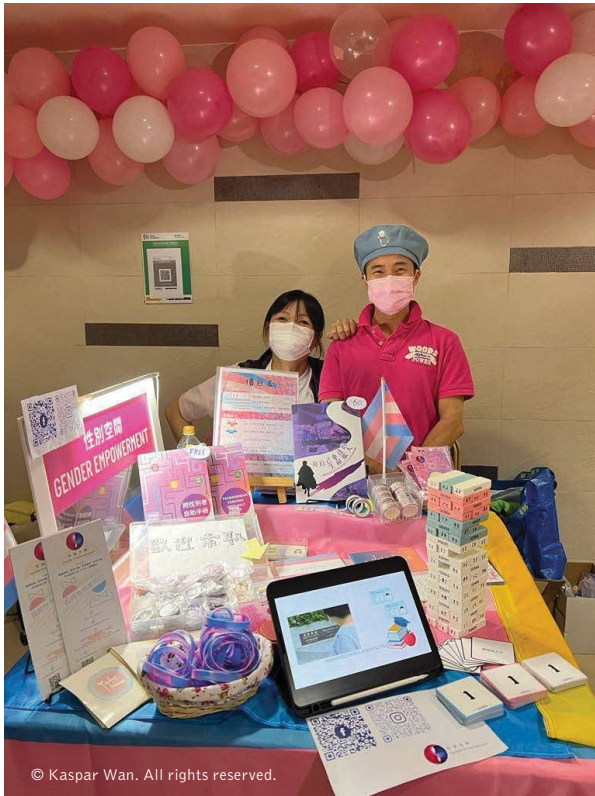
There's the controversy of whether trans persons are fully informed before making the decision or whether they would regret afterwards, especially for young people. But what's the worst consequence? Like for a young trans woman, her penis may not be fully developed because of the hormones used during puberty and she wouldn't be able to have her own offspring. Biologically that would be the consequences of using puberty blocker. But as a trans, whether binary or non-binary, you have to own up to your decision, just like everyone else.

As a trans person who has been supporting my peers, I would say that giving as much space and as much information as possible to a trans person is very important. So that they would know about the consequences, know that they could take their time and are not rushed into making any decision.

What is the youngest case you have come across at your charitable organisation Gender Empowerment?

A 13-year-old. It's about the start of puberty when they grew more anxious about their bodily changes.

For trans youth before puberty, only social transition is possible, like changing your name or pronoun, and nothing much about the body because no medical intervention is allowed and their body dysphoria may



Giveaways and educational toolkits for better understanding of the trans community at the booth by Gender Empowerment @ PinkDot 2022

not have been so severe. After a string of assessment, an adolescent may be prescribed puberty blocker to buy more time before making the actual decision of further physical transition, in terms of the use of hormones and/or surgeries. It can help alleviate or even prevent symptoms of gender dysphoria. Of course, the whole process is closely monitored.

### Has the process of gender transitioning changed your interpretation of “transition”?

Transition used to be a concept that involved going from one point to another. But now I would say that it's more like leaving or starting from the status quo, it does not necessarily mean that you know where you would finally end up at.

Transition is a process, as I always emphasise. You will find the destination in the end, and it's totally fine even if you are not certain during the process. You may have a direction, but you can stop anywhere or change anytime. Like for me, full surgery could have been my destination, but after I started my journey, I could stop at the top surgery or at how much hormones I wanted.

I think it's good to always remind ourselves that there's no definite goal and even if you have one, you can change your mind during the course of transitioning. It's always good to have that freedom and flexibility. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> On 6 Feb 2023, Hong Kong's top court ruled against a government policy that bars transgender people from changing the gender on their ID cards without undergoing full sex reassignment/ gender affirming surgery.

<sup>2</sup> In Hong Kong, the first documented case of gender affirming surgery was performed in 1981 in Princess Margaret Hospital (Ng et al., 1989). In 1986, a Gender Identity Team was established as part of the sex clinic of the University Psychiatric Unit of Queen Mary Hospital to address the growing number of people seeking the procedure. <https://gender-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/53/2013/02/epaper5-eleanor-cheung.pdf>



# From Disability to Visibility: Faces of Cambodia

Miguel Lopes Jerónimo

I CAN is a series of portraits of people with disabilities (PwD) in Cambodia taken in celebration of their capabilities instead of their limitations. It focuses on their journey of empowerment and crafts a life of independence for themselves. From a farmer to an NGO director, from a tailor to a fisherman, they all have the abilities to do what everyone else does and these photos show exactly that, not their disabilities. Created in collaboration with various local NGOs and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

## Hip Phalla, hearing health clinician (31), Phnom Penh

Her hearing was impaired due to a toxic reaction to an antibiotic when she was in high school. She did not come to All Ears Cambodia as a patient until she was 26. Now a staff of the NGO, she tests patients' hearing abilities and gives treatment advices, after studying audiology and nursing in university.

"I wanted to contribute to the lives of people with the same problem as me. And I want people to know how to take care of their ears and fix problems early."



### Miguel Lopes Jerónimo

Portuguese freelance photographer, curator and vagabond writer based in Cambodia. Passionate about impactful NGO projects, artist collaborations and meaningful exhibitions. With an interest in visual storytelling and art for awareness and social development, Miguel is in search of visual poetry through conceptual and documentary photography. An academic background in emotion AI and experience in social entrepreneurship frames his enthusiasm for philosophy, eco-sustainability, solo traveling, poetic naturalism, and crickets as the future of food.

## Mom Phy, rice farmer (49), Thlok Chrov, Kampong Chhnang

A survivor of a landmine explosion in Koh Kong in 1987. With a prosthetic leg, he is fully independent in supporting himself and his family, including collecting palm sugar to sell.



## Seun Kaiy, owner of a beauty salon (28), Tro Peangpor, Phnom Penh

Polio left permanent marks on her legs. Seun founded her own beauty salon and is currently training new interns.

“What helped me to overcome what happened to me was going to the NGO and seeing so many people with disabilities more severe than mine, and they were still fighting to get back on their feet. We always have to try our best to stand by our own self and not rely on others, not even our parents or siblings.”



## Rous Mam, fisherman, cow farmer and musician (70), Amchang Rong, Kampong Chhnang

An amputee from an explosion in Kampong Chhnang in 1984. He now earns his living from various jobs, including playing music at weddings and running a shop with his wife.





## Mey Samith, NGO director (41), Phnom Penh

Director of the Phnom Penh Center for Independent Living, an NGO that focuses on disability rights and access to services for people with disabilities.

Mey Samith has to use a wheelchair due to polio at a young age, but that didn't stop him from finishing a training in electronic devices repairing and a bachelor's in management and business administration in 2014. He now works with the government to promote community inclusion, including a project that provides PwD with a monthly subsidy and a personal assistant. He has also helped implement a welfare taxi with access for PwD, after having set up an accessible tuk-tuk in partnership with the Agile Development Group.



Ieng Sovannara, IT manager and teacher (33), Phnom Penh

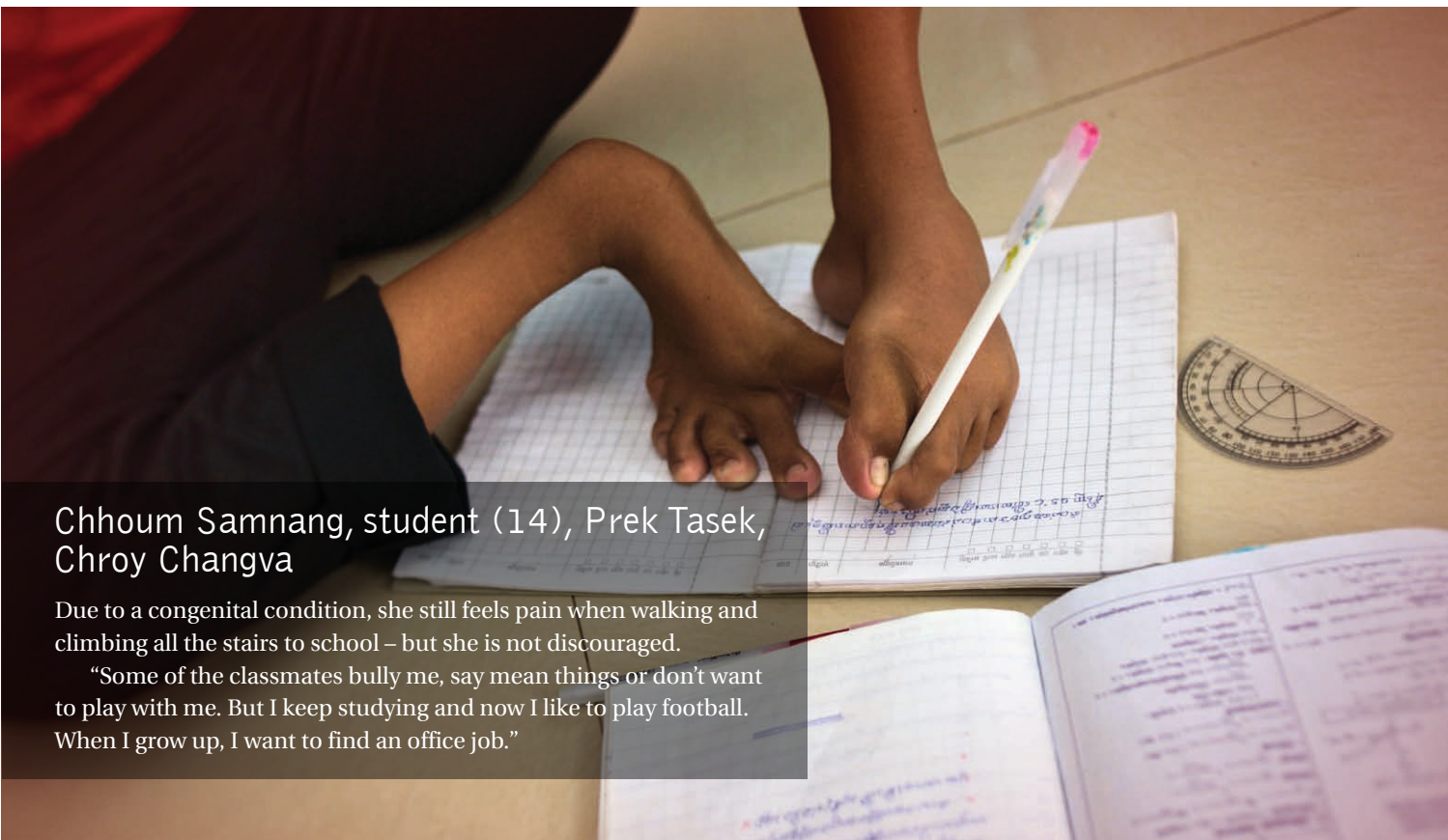
Text-to-speech technology has been revolutionary for blind people. In 2011, he started teaching ICT to blind children. He is also helping a recording studio that creates audiobooks for blind people.

“I started a YouTube channel called Sreyneang Chheun because there is a lack of content for blind people in Khmer. It's not easy to find books in Khmer Braille and there is no Khmer text-to-speech software so blind people who don't speak English have no way to use computers or smartphones.”



So Chamreun, tailor (44), Orussey, Phnom Penh

“My message is to work hard and study hard to get success, do not feel hopeless. And do not discriminate disabled people, give them motivation to succeed.”



Chhoum Samnang, student (14), Prek Tasek, Chroy Changva

Due to a congenital condition, she still feels pain when walking and climbing all the stairs to school – but she is not discouraged.

“Some of the classmates bully me, say mean things or don't want to play with me. But I keep studying and now I like to play football. When I grow up, I want to find an office job.”



Seng Morm, mechanic (61), Trouk, Kampong Chhnang

A leg amputee from an explosion in Pailin in 1986. He and his wife now own a successful shop that fixes motorbikes, sometimes making up to US\$25 per day.

# A Call for Energy Justice in Southeast Asia

Laurence L. Delina

Southeast Asia's energy transition needs not only to be accelerated in terms of technology deployments but also to be processed and accomplished justly. Doing so requires hinging the region's energy transition plans and activities to the distributive, recognition, procedural, and restorative tenets of justice.

The transition towards the greater use of renewable energy in Southeast Asia, both in terms of new capacity and replacement of extant fossil fuel assets, is already underway but needs speeding up. At the same time that these opportunities beckon, engineering, policy, and social challenges have to be hurdled. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional group comprising ten member countries, has a regional understanding that the transition to renewables must happen within this decade. Serious work to translate this vision into reality, however, remains missing, especially in ensuring that these changes in energy systems occur sustainably and justly. This is particularly crucial given that most Southeast Asian governments, such as Indonesia, plan to continue exploiting dirty fuels in their post-pandemic recovery plans. In this piece, I outline the key challenges and opportunities for pursuing a just energy transition in this region.

Southeast Asia's shift to renewables must occur at an unprecedented rate and scale. This transition necessitates not only changes in electricity-generating technology and systems but also critical social, behavioural, financial, and institutional changes. This is more especially needed if the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals are to be met. A just transition framework fulfils the twin nor-

mative aims of climate action and sustainable development for all while ensuring that social inequities and deprivations are not exacerbated.

A just energy transition framework helps to achieve this goal by putting vulnerable communities and affected workers in Southeast Asia at the forefront of the energy transition debate.

There will be trade-offs in terms of, for example, prioritising the transition to renewables over other crucial development aims such as improved public health, as this world region transitions its energy systems. Possibilities and problems will manifest disproportionately on the individual, home, community, provincial, and national levels. Because stakeholders prioritise different challenges, a just energy transition framework must consider multiple points of view.

In Southeast Asia, these stakeholders include government agencies involved in developing energy and climate policies, related international commitments, financial resource mobilisation, and energy transition implementation. Local government units are also crucial transition actors, as seen in the Quezon City in the Philippines, where some public schools have been solarised. Additionally, formal and informal energy industry workers and their employers, marginalised communities such as the urban poor and indigenous peoples, and unelectrified off-grid communities, such as those found in islands and remote places, comprise key transition stakeholders. Suppliers, installers, and funders are also crucial in this actor landscape.

One significant storyline in a just energy transition is the moral imperative of leaving no one behind, even those who may be



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*A biogas digester in Kaeng Krachan uses cow manure as a feedstock. This plastic digester is an innovation from the classic concrete-style biogas digesters.*

disadvantaged during the transition, which effectively asks for informed decision-making. Engaged decision-making is thus a critical feature of a people-centred just energy transition.

Including this storyline in the transition agenda begins with identifying non-government stakeholders, particularly vulnerable communities, such as indigenous peoples, to facilitate stakeholder discussions and co-create appropriate and just transition plans. Coproducing equitable energy transition methods begins with identifying stakeholders' context-specific social and equity requirements and ways to satisfy them. Following the identification of needs, a priority list to address them, including their respective timescales, is created.

A community in Kaeng Krachan National Park in the Thailand-Myanmar border provides an example of an effective use of public engagement in local transition. In my research work in this community (Delina 2018), I found how ordinary citizens can engage in the transition, while closing their energy poverty, transforming their households and neighbourhoods in living laboratories for energy transition<sup>1</sup>, for example by upgrading a household-scale energy system through a plastic biogas digester using domestic feedstock for cooking fuel.

So far, most of the just transition discourse and measures have focused on industrialised countries. Little work has been conducted to investigate how a just energy transition can be implemented and achieved in developing nations, including those in Southeast Asia. While most existing examples are on the local level, work

at the national scale remains slow. Some regionally specific situations and aspects are missing from the existing energy transition frameworks. These circumstances can be investigated with the four tenets of energy justice: distribution, recognition, procedural, and restorative justice.

## Distribution Justice

The first tenet, distribution justice, asks: "Where are the injustices?" It needs a fair allocation of the costs and benefits of energy systems among all members of society. This also includes the technologies' locations and those who may have access to their outputs. Distributional justice takes into account the unequal distribution of responsibilities in the allocation of these costs and benefits. In terms of energy use, energy poverty has revealed an uneven cost distribution in terms of inexpensive, dependable, and modern access to energy services.

Few research and advocacy projects have been conducted in Southeast Asia on how a just energy transition can improve or hurt the lives of vulnerable individuals and groups. The lack of access to reliable (24/7 available), modern (e.g. electricity and cleaner cooking fuels), and affordable energy services constitutes energy poverty. Most of Southeast Asia's energy-insecure people and communities live off-grid, in rural or island regions. Energy poverty exacerbates people's vulnerabilities during and after strong typhoons in typhoon-prone island areas. In the Philippines, for example, there remains households and communities

in islands that do not have access to modern forms of energy, particularly electricity.

Many low-income households in urban areas would, at present, get power from the grid indirectly by tapping into a neighbour's meter. With distributed solar energy directly installed in their homes, these households could, over the long run, save money on electricity costs.

Distributional justice also addresses the impacts of temporal fluctuations of past and present energy choices on future generations, particularly fossil fuel assets. Another missing component when focusing on Southeast Asia's energy transition is how fossil fuel systems' responsibilities, benefits, and costs might be appropriately divided across society.

As fossil fuels and their combustion systems are phased out in the energy transition, little is known about how households and communities whose livelihoods are heavily reliant on coal mining and combustion for electricity may transition to more sustainable and secure livelihoods. There are currently no strategies to assist coal communities in Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

## Recognition justice

The second pillar of energy justice, recognition justice, inquires who is overlooked. Many parts of Southeast Asian societies would suffer unfairly due to the energy system's allocation of inequities. Misrecognition can be classified into three types: cultural dominance, non-recognition, and disrespect.

Indigenous peoples, for example, may not enjoy as many benefits from renewable energy projects built on their territories as other users. My study of hydropower development in the Philippine Cordillera suggests a continuing contest between the rights of indigenous peoples to their resources and the version of development foregrounded on extraction (Delina, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. While hydropower is considered renewable, the question of whether it is a sustainable source of modern energy persists, especially when it involves constructing large dams that have impacts on river-based communities and the biodiversity of the river systems.

Another example is the failure to recognise the gendered dimensions of energy systems (Abunales and Goelnitz 2021)<sup>3</sup>. Male renewable energy engineers, for example,

outnumber their female counterparts. The gendering of the engineering profession is a crucial aspect of recognition justice. Wives and mothers are often the decision-makers in the family; however, little is known about how the energy shift will affect men and women differently. Research to address this knowledge gap remains absent. Women's perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of the energy transition are likewise less well researched (Cortina 2022)<sup>4</sup>.

Knowing these conditions is critical for recognition justice, which institutionalises a larger perspective on who may be disadvantaged by the energy transition while also recognising the specific needs of these particular socioeconomic groups. Failure to recognise not only results in injustice, but also the loss of potentially helpful information, values, and stories that these communities possess and may offer to achieve a just energy transition.

## Procedural justice

The third tenet of energy justice, procedural justice, inquires whether there is a fair process. Procedural justice necessitates both formal and informal modes of participation in policy-based decision-making that account for the full acknowledgement of individuals affected, alternative locations and methods, and involvement in producing a more equitable outcome.

Because local knowledge is a vital motivator for engaging affected people, leveraging it and their real-world experiences is critical in just energy transition (Ramos Castillo and McLean 2012)<sup>5</sup>. During my fieldwork in Thailand, I have witnessed how citizens could develop their agency in energy decision-making through communal deliberations on what matters most to them (Delina 2018) but little is known about how communities in other parts of Southeast Asia envision their potential roles in determining their future energy systems.

The energy transition requires institutional changes. These adjustments include engaging multi-level stakeholders across a wide range of agencies, developing knowledge capacity, and reducing impediments to effective information exchange, including opening up opportunities for policy complementarity among government agencies. We still lack mechanisms to allow inter-agency work on energy transition.





A community deliberation meeting in Kaeng Krachan, Thailand, where neighbours discussed how they could deploy more household-scale renewable energy solutions.

## Restorative justice

Restorative justice, the fourth tenet of energy justice, investigates how negatively harmed people can be adequately compensated. Despite their almost negligible previous emissions contributions, poorer nations and people are often the victims of the worst effects of climate change. Restorative justice necessitates that historical high-emitting countries fund adaptation, loss and damage, and energy transition in developing countries. The inability or unwillingness of rich nations and polluting businesses to transfer international cash and technology to developing Southeast Asian countries for these purposes demonstrates an ongoing injustice.

Host communities should receive proper benefits and remuneration as renewable energy technology and systems are deployed in their places. Those who stand to lose their jobs in the fossil fuel sector should also be provided with social security. We know very little about how coal-dominated Southeast Asian local economies, for example, see the energy transition and its implications for their livelihoods, and little work has been done to advocate for them.

In closing, a just energy transition in Southeast Asia encompasses access to engineering solutions and social and policy changes that nod to recognition, distribution, procedural, and restorative justice. Energy transition opens up opportunities

for accelerating climate mitigation, ensuring Southeast Asian countries contribute to the goals of the Paris Agreement. A just energy transition also bears on new social transformations, including an opportunity for inclusive decision-making that brings front and centre the needs of historically marginalised sectors of Southeast Asian societies, particularly women and indigenous peoples. A just energy transition in this world region, thus, is a worthy aspiration. ■■■

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# Wag the Dog: Hydrogen Policy of South Korea

Dongjae Oh

As long as hydrogen production relies heavily on fossil fuels, the policy will distract South Korea from its 2050 carbon neutrality strategy and end up emitting enormous additional greenhouse gases. To keep the net-zero pledge on track, South Korea should adopt a renewable-energy-based hydrogen scheme by drastically cutting down its reliance on fossil fuels.

The “wag the dog” diversionary strategy – a metaphorical expression popularised by a 1997 Hollywood blockbuster of its same name – does not only exist in US power politics. The story of South Korea's hydrogen scheme also saw the small “tail” wagging the “dog”, distracting attention away from a bigger, more important issue with something of lesser significance. The scheme, which has been developing and evolving over the last four years, is a symbolic case that shows how industrial needs and interests have spun and distorted the original rationale of clean hydrogen as a carbon emission-free and climate-friendly technology in South Korea's energy transition.

## Background

The idea of the hydrogen economy, which quickly captured the attention of South Korea's government and energy industry, in the beginning was regarded as a future energy technology rather than an industrial opportunity. However, after the introduction, in January 2019, of the “Hydrogen Economy Promotion Roadmap”, the government released in November 2021 the “First Basic Plan for the Implementation of the Hydrogen Economy” that describes a

mega-scale hydrogen scheme.

Hydrogen is more an “energy carrier” rather than an “energy source”. Unlike renewable energy or fossil fuel, hydrogen does not occur naturally in large quantities. As hydrogen is bound up in nature such as in water or hydrocarbon molecules, its extraction requires energy-intensive sources like renewables, fossil fuels, or nuclear power. Considering the massive energy needed to produce hydrogen itself, hydrogen should be considered a means of energy storage that can later be used for example in a fuel cell to produce electricity. The question of energy efficiency is a major issue here, because substantial losses arise from the conversion processes involved.

Despite these issues, the discussion about hydrogen was initiated mainly because of the aggravating climate crisis. As the previous government under President Moon Jae-in (until May 2022) pushed forward its new green policy and commitment to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, expectations for hydrogen began to run high. While hydrogen does not emit greenhouse gases or other air pollutants when being burnt, some experts also expected that hydrogen-run fuel cells and turbines could supplement and improve the flexibility of renewables and thus increase grid stability.

At the beginning, the initiative was driven by the 2050 carbon neutrality goal. However, what ultimately shaped the current hydrogen scheme were the expectations and needs of the country's industry. As no countries have established an overall value chain for hydrogen – from production stage to distribution and consumption – the South Korean government has been seeking relevant opportunities for industry stakeholders. To align with the government's ambition,



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conglomerates including Hyundai Motors and SK are committed to investing South Korea Won (KWR) 43 trillion (USD 30 billion) in their hydrogen projects at least until 2030.

Finally, the “First Basic Plan for the Implementation of the Hydrogen Economy” was published in November 2021. It aims to expand South Korea’s hydrogen production to 28Mt by 2050, which outnumbers the current supply by 127 times. In the short run, Korea plans to supply 3.9Mt of hydrogen by 2030.

## How Industrial Needs Sway the Hydrogen Economy

The steep rise of hydrogen production in South Korea’s plan may come as a surprise and even a shock to experts. According to the government’s plan, hydrogen will be responsible for a third of the total energy consumption in 2050. This is entirely incompatible with the limited role of hydrogen in the existing concepts. To treat hydrogen as an “energy

carrier” raises many doubts.

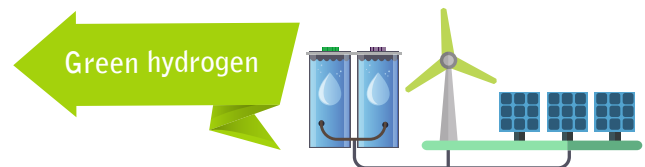
What’s even surprising is that, through the confirmation of the roadmap, the government overturned its existing hydrogen supply plan under the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which had been updated a month before. The government doubled the hydrogen production/consumption expectations (1.9Mt) of the updated NDC. The incremental production increase was propelled by “grey” hydrogen (generated from fossil fuels) and import, while the demand side was driven by the power sector.

As the result, according to the NDC, by 2030, the domestic production will still heavily rely on fossil fuel-based hydrogen for 87% of the whole supply. Hydrogen was considered climate-friendly as aforementioned, but its impact on the climate varies a lot according to which energy sources are they based on. South Korea’s current hydrogen scheme, which was promoted as an “establishing new market”, was an extension of the fossil fuel

## Colours of Hydrogen

Depending on the process of generation, hydrogen has come to be described by different “colours” that identify different production pathways and degrees of environmental friendliness.

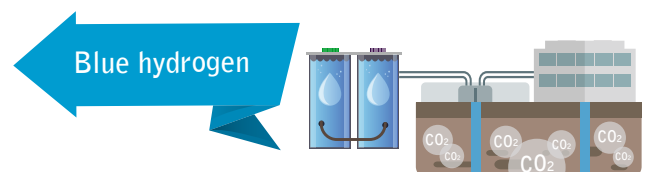
**Green hydrogen** is produced by using fossil-free electricity (such as surplus renewable energy sources) to electrolyse water, splitting it into hydrogen and oxygen. It is climate-neutral.

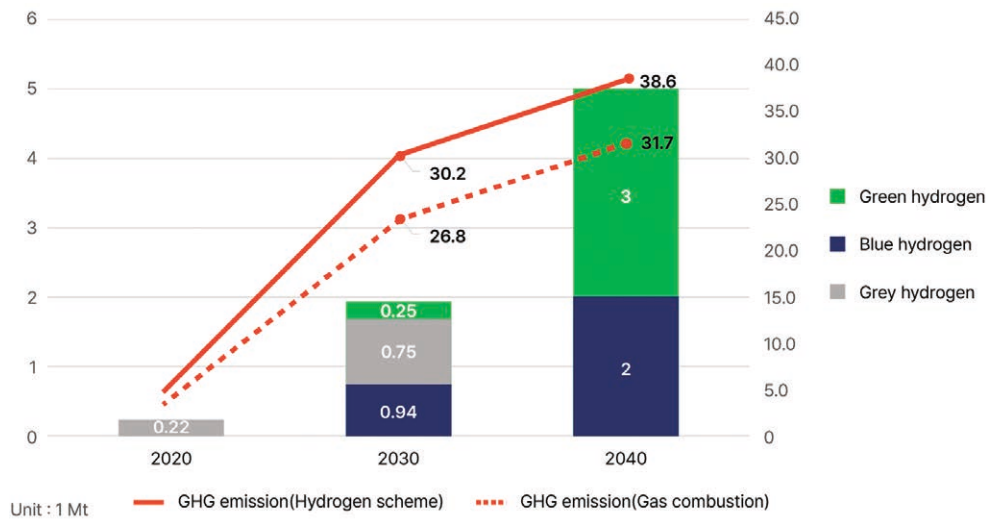


**Grey hydrogen** refers to hydrogen produced from fossil fuels. The types of grey hydrogen are discriminated into “extracted hydrogen” produced by reforming natural gas and “by-product hydrogen” from petrochemical/steel manufacturing processes”. The same amount of energy produced from grey hydrogen has a worse climate impact than if it came directly from burning natural gas.



**Blue hydrogen** uses the same process of “steam reforming” as grey hydrogen but adds carbon capture and storage (CCS) to it in order to reduce its climate impact. The efficacy of CCS technology as a means to reduce greenhouse gases on a large scale is much debated.





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### Greenhouse gas emissions projection of the South Korean government's hydrogen road map

value chain. Even renewable energy-based green hydrogen is projected to rise fast, after 2030, fossil fuel-based hydrogen still consists of 40% of domestic hydrogen production by 2050.

For that reason, the hydrogen scheme has gone far away from the 2050 carbon neutrality initiatives of South Korea. With reference to the methodology of a Cornell and a Stanford University study<sup>1</sup>, Solutions For Our Climate, a Seoul-based climate advocacy group specialising in energy policy, estimated the government's additional greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 based on the current announcement<sup>2</sup>. The analysis showed that South Korea's fossil fuel-oriented hydrogen scheme could end up emitting 30.2 MtCO<sub>2</sub>eq additionally. By using fossil-based hydrogen, it would even emit 3.4 MtCO<sub>2</sub>eq more than burning fossil gas directly to acquire the same amount of energy.

Even fossil 'blue' hydrogen – which makes up most of the fossil fuel-based hydrogen of South Korea – is challenged for its actual contribution to mitigating CO<sub>2</sub>eq. Blue hydrogen was recognised as “clean” by cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions through Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies. However, the Cornell and Stanford research suggested that blue hydrogen still emits 88% to 91% of the greenhouse gas produced from grey hydrogen. A major component of the problem consisted of methane's fugitive emissions throughout the overall value chain of fossil gas. As a major component of fossil gas, methane has a potent global warming potential in the short run, reaching 86 times

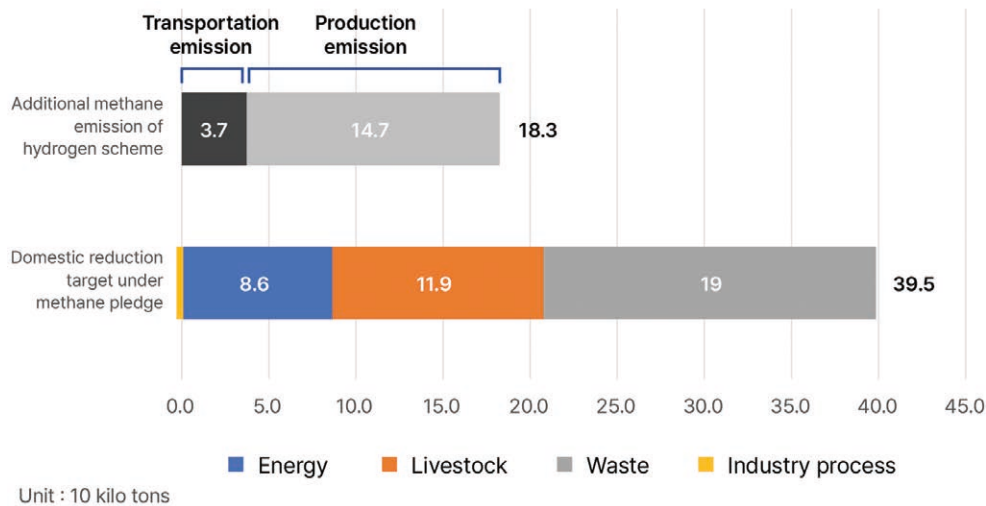
that of CO<sub>2</sub> in a 20-year timeframe. On top of that, capture rate restrictions of CCS and additional combustion emission make 'blue hydrogen' carbon-intensive hydrogen.

If the methane emission from the hydrogen economy is looked at independently, South Korea's hydrogen scheme may also come into conflict with the methane reduction target under the Global Methane Pledge, which the government signed in 2021. Signatories of the Pledge committed to collectively reducing global methane emissions by at least 30% from 2020 levels by 2030. However, South Korea's hydrogen scheme is expected to emit about 183 kilotons of additional fugitive methane in 2030, which is almost half of the country's 2030 methane reduction target of 395 kilotons. Eventually, domestic efforts from relevant stakeholders to reduce methane emissions could be in vain if the government proceeds with its hydrogen economy.

Even though the hydrogen discussion was started as an effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions drastically to meet the 2050 carbon neutrality goal, the final destination of the roadmap, as has been formulated by the government of South Korea, is expected to create massive additional emissions. Industrial needs seem to have wagged the grander hydrogen scheme successfully.

### Shadows of Fossil Fuel Risks

At present, South Korea is paying its cost for its high reliance on fossil fuels. The current power generation relies heavily on coal and



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### Methane emission projection and reduction target comparison

gas, which account for up to 70% of total power generation. As gas prices soared due to post-pandemic economic recovery and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, KEPCO, the state-owned utility company, is reporting a massive operating loss. As long as South Korea is reluctant to transition to renewables which will become cheaper in the near future, the whole burden would be shouldered by its citizens and future generations.

Considering the hydrogen scheme's reliance on fossil fuel-based hydrogen, the current fossil fuel crisis in the power grid could also extend to the grey- or blue-centred hydrogen economy that itself is part of the fossil fuel value chain.

As gas prices skyrocketed in Europe, fossil hydrogen has already lost its price competitiveness compared to green hydrogen. According to the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), the levelised cost of green hydrogen (LCOH) has become cheaper over the past two years, within the range of USD4-6 per kg, while the cost of grey hydrogen and blue hydrogen soared from USD1-3 to USD6-12 per kg<sup>3</sup>. Even though the gas price is expected to recover to the previous level in the near future, the trend would not change. The Bloomberg New Energy Finance projects that even with the lowest gas price, green hydrogen will secure price competitiveness, following the decline in renewable energy prices.

As long as South Korea sticks to the current fossil fuel-oriented hydrogen scheme, the cost risks of fossil fuel will be transferred to hydrogen consumers, such as Fuel

Cell Electric Vehicle (FCEV) users and retail electricity consumers, while the revenue still goes to the fossil industry.

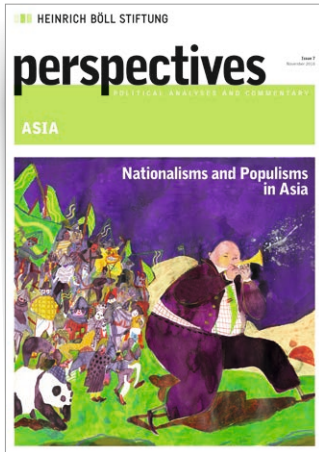
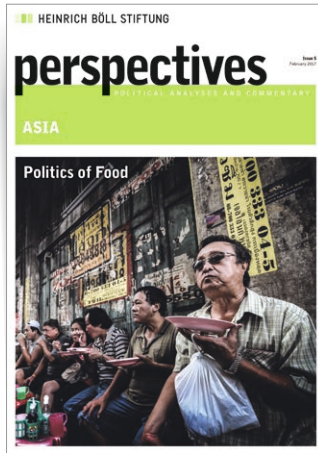
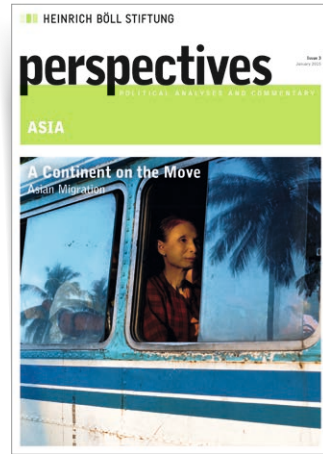
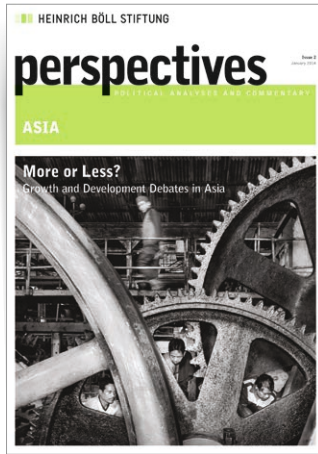
Given that the current fossil fuel-oriented hydrogen scheme will not only slow down the country's green hydrogen from becoming competitive, but also expose its hydrogen industry to various risks related to fossil fuels, the government should drastically cut down its reliance on fossil fuels.

Additionally, the overall supply and consumption target for hydrogen needs to be adjusted realistically. Hydrogen surely has a role in the decarbonisation of the steel industry by replacing coking coal. However, considering the usage of hydrogen in the power sector, as well as its limitations as an energy carrier, its role should be restricted to supplement the variability of renewables. To do so, while reevaluating the proper portfolio of hydrogen on the grid, efforts should be devoted to install as much renewable energy as possible domestically and internationally. The challenges of renewables – especially domestic permission hurdles and fossil-oriented public finances' investment overseas – must be addressed before stepping up to the next stages of the energy transition which would involve converting excess electricity from renewables to hydrogen. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> <https://doi.org/10.1002/ese3.956>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ieefa.org/resources/russia-sanctions-and-gas-price-crisis-reveal-danger-investing-blue-hydrogen>

<sup>3</sup> <https://about.bnef.com/blog/green-hydrogen-to-outcompete-blue-everywhere-by-2030/>



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