

Interview with Thiha, a lifelong anarchist thinker from Burma

Thiha JP

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Thiha JP was born into a mixed religious and mixed ethnic family with a Muslim father and a Buddhist mother. For a time, he studied to become an imam. Later, he became a co-founder of the Burmese Atheist Organization, the very first atheist, pro-democracy, anti-military junta, and pro-humanist activist organization in Burma, which organized secularists, humanists, atheists, agnostics, religious reformers, and freethinkers via physical meetups and social media groups. He identifies as a self-styled anarchist and punk rocker. He translated a lot of Indian philosophical texts and western postmodern philosophical texts. He is arguably one of the pioneers who translated the texts about anarchism in Burma in the 21st century.

Hein: Can you share with us your personal background and how you became an anarchist?

Thiha: To explain how I became an anarchist, I have to start explaining how I became an atheist first. I was born to a Muslim father and a Buddhist mother. My Muslim father is from a Sunni background, and my Buddhist mother is a traditional Buddhist who believes in the supernatural aspects of the Burmese folk tales. When I was young, my mother maintained her faith and identity as a Buddhist. I remember learning about traditional Buddhist practices from my mother when I was young. Later, my mother converted to a Shia sect that leaned towards Sufism, which also shares the supernatural aspect of the mystical tales.

I graduated from high school in 1997. At this time, given all the protests and political climate in the region, universities and colleges are not available. So, I was sent to a madrasa (a specific type of religious school or college for the study of the religion of Islam) in a different town that is affiliated with Iran. So basically, I was learning an undergraduate kind of course that includes Arabic, Farsi, Fiqh, Sharia law, Islamic history, and Islamic philosophy from Shia Madhhab (sect) for a few years to become a qualified imam. It's like a transit top-up study program. I will have to study in Burma for a few years. Then, I will have to travel to Iran for my final year of studies to become a qualified Shia imam. There were some mullahs (Shia clergy) who were also studying. Studying there played a vital role in my becoming an atheist. There is one subject in Islamic philosophy that has its roots in Sufism. Basically, the content is like, "You're at an intersection.

You will have to choose a road to become either successful or fail. Every road is calling for you, and if you hesitate to choose, you will be stuck.” That study content reminds me to re-think and reflects my inner spirituality.

Hein: That’s ironic, right? Studying to become an imam and becoming an atheist. Also, it’s interesting that a Sunni by birth was studying to become a Shia imam, not only a different Madhhab but also a unique sect. How did the study turn out? Did you become an imam?

Thiha: I studied hard for the course. I even read a lot of different books outside of my formal education too. Since my mother used to be a Buddhist, I also learned about Buddhism. However, with all these political situations happening here and there, the program that was meant to bring the university studies to the top was cancelled. Only the mullahs were granted visas to Iran for their studies and graduations. So, I ended up joining the GTI (engineering vocational diploma pathway) through state education. Once I graduated from the GTI course, I was informed that I was eligible for a scholarship program from the Istanbul Development Bank. I applied for it and then passed the interview. I was waiting for the scholarship offer letter since I’ve passed all the steps. However, with the 9/11 tragedy, the scholarship program at the Istanbul Development Bank was put to a halt. Imagine someone who was born into Burma, specifically into a poor town with limited educational access, getting affected by the political situations happening between the western world and the middle eastern world. All of my hopes to get a proper formal education were destroyed. Basically, the whole hope for my family to see me as a graduate was gone.

After all this, I re-invested myself in learning different madhhabs (schools of thoughts). I studied the main sects of Islam: Sunni and Shia. I even studied Sufism and Ahmadiyya as well. With the external knowledge that I got from my non-academic readings, I have more doubts about the integrity of every single Madhhab representing Islam. The more I know about each sect of Islam, the more doubt I have about the integrity of these sects representing Islam.

Hein: I just wanted to clarify two things. Based on what you said, I’m interpreting it more like you just lost your faith in the Madhhab (sects of Islam). I’m bringing this up because I also had a similar journey. I lose faith in all these Sunni Madhhabs, including Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali, and other major sects like Shia, Ahmadiyya, and Sufism. But at that time, I didn’t call myself an atheist yet. I was attracted by the Salafi movement, which basically calls to refuse every Madhhab as well as the sects and to return to the orthodox and authentic teachings of the Quran and Hadiths. To be honest, even now as an atheist, I still respect the Salafi movement as the most authentic revivalist movement of Islam, even though most of the values I uphold are antithetical to theirs. I acknowledge that even though Salafi as a movement is more and more acceptable nowadays in Burma, in your generation, I noticed every Madhhab in Burma hated the Salafi movement to defend their Madhhab and idolatry worships (especially Sufis). I was lucky enough to learn about Salafism because I attended my Diploma of Islamic Studies at the Islamic Online University in Gambia, which was founded by a Salafi scholar, Dr. Bilal Philips. Did you know about Salafism as a movement or Wahabism as an ideology?

Thiha: Even though I just lost your faith in the Madhhab (sects of Islam), I wasn’t technically an atheist at that time. I spent some years as a non-sectarian truth-seeking Muslim by debating around with sects like Ahmadiyya, Sufi (Tariqa), and Shia.

Hein: So, technically, you were a Salaf without Salafi and Wahabi ideology, I guess. Or maybe a Sufi or Quranist guy too if you’re more into spiritualism. By the way, what was and what is your opinion on God or Allah?

Thiha: As I mentioned, I was a non-sectarian, truth-seeking Muslim who also used to study to become an imam. Given my Islamic knowledge, I also critically learn about other religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism.

I also studied western philosophical doctrines such as existentialism. After learning all these, I noticed I had lost my faith in my personal God (Allah). After trying to synthesize all this knowledge that I have and the contradicting philosophies I have comprehended, I became a strong atheist who even doesn't believe in the existence of God or Allah.

Hein: So, since you brought up existentialism, can you share with us your reflections on western philosophy, particularly German philosophy? Since you've both organic knowledge of the religious teachings and the western philosophy, which is indeed unique and rare given the situations in Burma around the early 2000s, can you share with us about them? I assume, as a leftist, you might have read Hegel and other modernist philosophers. Why existentialism over Marxist philosophical doctrines and Hegelian tendencies?

Thiha: Western philosophy (especially modernism) was indeed fundamental to German philosophy. Eventually, around 2000, I managed to read the postmodern philosophical texts and became more and more influenced by them. For me, post-modernism stands for the lack of vanguard for an object reality. So, understanding postmodernism was difficult since there is no objective understanding of it. So as a result, I came to a subjective conclusion about postmodernism as a philosophy. This lack of object reality indeed became a synthesis with all my organic knowledge of the religious teachings. As a result, as a non-sectarian free-thinker agnostic, I became an atheist who managed to see beyond all these rules, regulations, sectarian beliefs, and the structure of these religions and Allah.

Hein: Thanks for clarifying. Let's go to the activism part. You once wrote a poem-like article about a strike or a protest going on in your student life. You called it "an anarchy night in college." Can you elaborate more about it?

Thiha: In 1996–1997, when I graduated with my high school diploma, given all these student protests and political movements against the previous military dictatorship regime of the time, the military regime either moved the universities to the outside of the city or closed the universities (depending on the career, subject, and political consciousness of the students). Just before us, the military regime installed a public university (Dagon University), where it took around 1–2 hours to travel from the city. So, the students protested, and several clashes happened with the military regime. So, Dagon University was also closed. So, for those of us who graduated with our high school diploma around 1997, there were no universities open. As an initiative, the military regime started to offer Bachelor of Arts in subjects like music, traditional music, and artistic painting through the University of Culture, Myanmar. Since I have had some passion for drawing since I was young, I approached my family to enroll in that university. However, it didn't end well. After a few months, the military regime started to open a new institute called GTI (Government Technical Institute), which offered a 3-year engineering course. In 1999, I was a final-year student. Since students from YIT (Yangon Institute of Technology) have a long dispute with the military regime, they have tried to do a lot of reforms to the education framework. The regime wanted to establish a new college called "Government Technological College." So they tried to merge GTI, YIT, and GTC. Even though we attended the same-length course with the same course outline in GTI, the military regime said we would only be awarded a diploma-level educational acknowledgement certificate. They did it because they wanted to award a bachelor-level educational acknowledgement certificate to the other college and university.

Hein: I think I would jump in quickly to explain the educational reforms of that time. The general audience, if not born in Burma, will be confused by the tertiary education system in Burma. Since the first coup conducted by the Socialist Party and the Myanmar military against U Nu's government (the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League) in 1959, the student class has always been against the military regime. Even when the life-long communists and some founders of the CPB (Communist Party of Burma) were confused by U Ne Win and his socialist program, most student leaders demanded social democratic reforms against the one-party authoritarian regime as seen in the Soviet Union. Even in the 1962 coup, students were the most active rebels against the military coup. As a result, the Student Union Building of Yangon University was blown away by the dynamites, and all the students who were running out of it to survive the bombs were killed by the soldiers with machine guns. Even after that, in every single protest and nationwide mass movement against the military junta, such as U Thant's uprising and so on, student activists were the most active ones against the military junta. For students, it's no longer about socialism or liberalism. It's about the oppressions made by the military junta against the student activists. Similarly, even for the military regime, students as a class (no longer limited to student activists) became their prioritized enemy. So, they tried to implement a lot of educational (especially tertiary education) reforms. The tertiary education in Myanmar used to be the same as the global UK standard tertiary education system. You will have a regional-based university like the University of Yangon. Then, the University of Yangon will have different colleges and institutes with different career-wise subjects, such as the Institute of Economics and the College of Medicine. However, the military regime under U Ne Win split all these institutes and colleges to become universities with unique career-wise subject-based degrees like the University of Economics, the University of Medicine, and the University of Dental Medicine. Then, they moved all these universities to far-away areas, so students could not organize across different universities. Moreover, since universities are in faraway areas (at least one-to-two hours' drive from the city), they mostly spend most of their time on recreational stuff like drinking, dating, and drugs instead of focusing on studying, student activism, and so on. It was a tactic of "one stone, two birds" by the military. As a result, most students became counter-revolutionary (zero political interests), unproductive (with the influence of drugs and so on), and could not organize as a mass movement (due to the geographical limitations between each university), even if there were some student movements.

Thiha: Yeah. So, GTI students, including me, were not satisfied with such reforms. We studied the same course with the same number of years of study. So, we want to be properly awarded, not just some random diploma when we studied to be awarded a Bachelor of Engineering. So, we showed our dissatisfaction with every means possible, starting from petitions to walking out of classroom strikes. In December 1999, we started to pursue more radical means to express our voices. We stormed the classrooms, libraries, and canteens inside the campus. We basically occupied the whole GTI campus and didn't let government officials enter it. So, the military regime has installed their soldiers outside of our campus. In my opinion, they were prepared to use the same means as they did against the student union building at Yangon University. However, our Executive Deans and Rectors defended us and requested that the government have more humane crisis handling. Since the military regime at that time was under U Than Shwe, military intelligence was so threatening. They sneaked into our campus and tried to start the riots so they could justify their means of oppressing us. However, since GTI was fairly new, everyone knew every student, so we noticed the military intelligence officers and managed to throw them out

of campus. So, as a means to divide us, they reached out to the parents of the charismatic and popular student leaders and forced them to convince the student leaders to quit their positions. Basically, the parents were the bargaining chips and the hostages at the same time. Some of the parents were government officers, so they were threatened with losing their careers and job positions. So, most of the charismatic and popular student leaders had to leave campus and no longer be involved in our strike.

I was left behind as an unpopular student leader because I had personal beef with the military. A few months earlier, there was a car crash between a GTI student ferry bus and a military car. A lot of GTI students died and were hospitalized due to that crash. I was personally one of the students who got injured in the incident. However, there were no responsibilities or accountability for the military officers. Out of all the students, which were originally around one to two hundred in number, only around eighty were left. At the end of the day, we managed to meet with the ministers and other high-ranking government officials. As a result, we achieved some sort of tertiary education pathway in our interests. That's why I called it "a night of anarchy." GTI students, as a collective identity, practiced direct action as a means to express their anger for their common interests without having to sacrifice any of our individual interests.

Hein: That was such a great syndicalist movement there. Also, let's talk about your self-styled anarchism. How did you become an anarchist? Let's say, for me, an incident was pivotal. For example, I fell in love with my childhood best friend, who is a devout Buddhist girl, whereas I'm just an average teenager who doesn't take religions seriously. The majority of Buddhist society thought of my Muslim bloodline as something they could use to discriminate against me. At the same time, the so-called minority Muslim family members of mine are forcing me to convert my lover of that time by any means if I want to marry her. They said marrying an idolatry worshipper (Buddhist) is not legal under Islamic Sharia law, and it is sinful for me to do so. That's when I started to question everything around me: the whole mainstream politics of victimhood and oppressors and the whole narratives of religions as lovingly and peaceful. Is there a similar kind of incident for you? Not necessarily a love affair like mine, but some sort of tragic moment in life where you became too angry at society.

Thiha: I will have to explain my life to explain that. You will have to understand my socio-economic background. I came from a lower middle-class family in terms of social class. I'm the only son in the family, and my father is the sole source of income in the family, with my mom being a housewife. And the income was not too stable for him. So, this socio-economic burden came to me as well.

After that GTI student movement, some friends of mine managed to get a bachelor's degree and entered the workforce. However, I didn't have that chance. With the qualifications offered by GTI, I tried to seek job opportunities. Since we had to express religion and ethnicity in our CVs and resumes, along with the reference letter from the local police department, most employers used my religion as something they could use to discriminate against me with prejudice. Even the police from the police station asked me if I still could not secure a job, even though I had requested several reference letters from them. Those discriminations I suffered at my lowest time when my family needed me to support them play a role too.

Also, at that time, Yangon University of Distance Education had opened, and law degrees were offered. I am enrolled in a law degree. I managed to graduate around 2005. The more I learned about laws, the more confident I'm to conclude that laws are being written to serve the interests of the ruling class. Laws are attempts to confuse the average population with the words

and sentences to be cherry-picked by a “class of people” who are educated enough to use them. So, technically, laws are more or less similar to religion. Just as the clerical class has this kind of cherry-picking power over the average religious person, the laws also have similar features.

So, even though I graduated with a law degree and was doing my internship chamber at the local state courts, I chose not to become a licensed lawyer.

Hein: Since you’ve graduated around 2005, given your age, were you involved in the Saffron Revolution in 2007? I remembered witnessing these soldiers shoot and attack the monks protesting by singing Metta Suta (the Suta of unconditional love). I was 10 years old around that time. Even though I was young, I still remember those bullets going through our apartments and monks begging the soldiers not to attack them.

Thiha: I was deeply involved in it. Since I graduated in 2005, I am no longer an official student leader during the Saffron Revolution of 2007. I remembered working together with grass-roots people and student groups to develop different slogans. That’s where Al Jazeera got the photos of me involved in the movement. Mostly, I also collaborated with political groups like “Generation Wave.” However, I didn’t subscribe to becoming a member of it because I don’t believe in the integrity of every political institution and political group.

Hein: In that same interview with Al Jazeera, you said you were attracted to Christianity for a moment too. In my opinion, Islam is indeed superior to Christianity when it comes to theology. With your knowledge and experiences inside Insein prison, I have no doubt that you will have some solid reasoning behind your decisions back then. Can you elaborate more about it? Also, you mentioned that finally coming out yourself as an atheist publicly was also attributed to the Vipassana (insight meditation) practice from Buddhism. Can you briefly explain that spiritual process as well?

Thiha: After the Saffron Revolution in 2007, the military regime targeted me as an organizer. I was arrested in 2008 with a lot of charges, partly because of my involvement in underground movements of the Saffron Revolution in 2007 and my ties to gang-drug-related stuff. I’m bringing this up because my experience in prison played a vital role in answering your question.

I was arrested and sued by the state for politically related and gang-drug-related criminal codes. When I’m facing court, I am not bailed. So, I ended up being arrested and put in prison. During my early days in prison, a prison guard imported a book for another prisoner who hadn’t arrived yet. Being a bookworm, I was interested and requested to have the book before the owner or prisoner arrived. It turns out the book was the Bible. Since it’s a used book intended for that prisoner who happened to be a pastor, the book has a lot of written notes, highlighted references, and so on. So, I had the chance to learn from his perspective. However, let me be clear here. I didn’t read the Bible as a believer. I read it as an atheist.

Since I was a political prisoner and also have been accused of having relations with gang-drug-related criminal activities, I was moved to Insein prison. In Myanmar, there is no option for us to register as an atheist or a non-religious person for state-related documents. I had to register as a Christian so I could import the Bible into the prison. During my early days in Insein prison, I’m free except for my court date. Officially, I am not yet supposed to be a forced labor prisoner since I’m still facing court and not yet sentenced. However, since my family never had the chance to visit me in my prison days and I didn’t have financial aid to pay the prison guards and the gangs within the prison, I was treated as a forced labor prisoner. Forced labor includes carrying swage (filth), carrying out farming activities, and so on. In such situations, I noticed a lot of people try to find their purpose in prison life through religious faiths and teachings, given

these inhumane treatments against them. Some put their faith in supernatural beings like God, Allah, and so on. However, for me as an atheist, I observed the situations in a rational and realist sense. I noticed that everyone has lost their cause and has become alienated and fragile.

So, I tried to find my comfort zone in prison. Unlike others, rather than hoping to believe in a supernatural being like God or Allah to help me get out of prison, I tried to find ways to organize people in prison. In Insein prison, there were multi-faith worship places and Buddhist pagodas where people could carry out religious activities. So, I tried to organize a Christian community and build a small church inside Insein prison. With the increased number of Christians in our sector and the non-Christians who are interested in our church activities, I became an organizer and managed to climb some ranks within prisoners. Later, I became a prisoner who could delegate people to the tasks they did in prison. Within our church, we managed to set up a communal society where we all shared our own fruits of labor by contributing to farming activities and so on. Finally, we managed to set up an officially recognized Anglican church, and the authorities accepted us. Even though I was the founder of that Anglican church inside the prison, I was never baptized, and I never had faith in religion. I did it so I could use Christianity as an identity to unite the people for a greater cause of communal conscience. Everyone in my Anglican church from Insein prison thought of me as a devoted Christian.

Later, I was sentenced to 16 years by the court. I was moved to a different sector within the prison. So, I was separated from the church I founded. I was depressed a lot, honestly. With 16 years of prison time, my parents might not be alive by the time I am released. With their socio-economic conditions, they cannot visit me too often as well. Even my partner at that time stopped visiting me after one year of my prison time. So, I was left with nothing. Even if I am released after my 16 years of prison time, I will be in my 40s, and it will be really difficult for me to start a life again outside of prison.

To find refuge for my desperation, I attended short Vipassana meditation seminars in prison. Of course, my former colleagues and friends from the church are so pissed at me for that. I don't really care, honestly. My intention in setting up the church since the beginning was never about religion; it was all about organizing the people to find some greater conscience. Generally, the meditation was helpful to an extent because my mind became calmer while I'm sitting in meditation.

Another thing I'm proud of about myself is that I was the first prisoner in Insein prison who managed to import the books on laws into Insein prison. The authorities tried their best not to get those books imported. Sometimes, they even gave funny excuses like "they wanted to read the books" and refused to import the books.

Later, I saw one opportunity for me to get released earlier. In the 2010s, the military regime tried to reform gradually into a parliamentary liberal democracy. So, I was planning to organize a hunger strike as a political prisoner to get released earlier. However, someone snitched on me, so I was moved to Mupalin Quarry, the prison, which is popular for its inhumane treatment of prisoners. It was called "Graveyards, Not Labor Camps" by Irrawaddy Magazine.

The tasks I had to do there were different from Insein. My hands couldn't even handle the tasks there. For that reason, I got beaten almost every single day, not only by the guards but also by the senior members of gangs in that prison. Eventually, I got used to it, though. Everyone thought I would only get out of Mupalin prison by death. However, I was lucky enough that no one in there knew about calculations and so on. So, I became a financial guy for our sector inside Mupalin prison. So, things turned out better for me after that.

Hein: Those experiences you have had have indeed differed from ours. I really appreciate you sharing these with me. Insein Prison was popular for its inhumane treatment of political prisoners. I remember people making jokes about it whenever someone mentioned politically related topics. Yet, you managed to organize the people there. That's indeed inspiring and impressive. I can understand you using religions as a means to reach a communal conscience. That's great. Let's discuss more next time. I would like to discuss why you wrote about postmodernism and ancient Indian philosophies instead of translating traditional left-wing figures. Maybe next time, when we have time, let's discuss these topics in detail.

Thiha JP once got featured in an interview by "Aljazeera". If you want to read the previous interview where Thiha was asked during this interview, please visit this link below: <aljazeera.com/features/2015/12/30/changing-myanmars-hidden-atheists>

To be continued.

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