

# **'I am not here to entertain': meet Thailand's first transgender MP**

Monday 15 April 2019, by [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 8 April 2019).

**Tanwarin Sukkhapsit, an accomplished film director, has triumphed over stigma to enter politics as an equal.**

Thailand is no stranger to political instability, but Sunday's election, the country's first in eight years, proved to be a new frontier in chaos. Ineptitude and inaccurate results led to widespread confusion and accusations of cheating, [two opposing parties claimed victory](#) and as the days go by, Thailand is no closer to knowing who will form a government.

Yet in amongst the clamour, it was easy to miss small but significant outcomes of the poll. When the elected politicians eventually gather in parliament, Tanwarin Sukkhapsit will be among them as Thailand's first transgender MP.

A celebrated film director in [Thailand](#), Tanwarin is at the forefront of a new political generation, demonstrating that it is no longer the domain of multi-millionaire businessmen and generals.

"I want to write a new political history for Thailand," says Tanwarin, who identifies as non-binary. "I spent years making films talking about the experience of transgender and LGBT people in Thailand but it no longer felt like enough to tell the story. I wanted to change the discriminatory laws. Thai society is patriarchal and unequal and does not value all humans the same. For my whole life, I have been treated as a second-class citizen and it should not be this way."

Tanwarin is known both for short films and feature films that often grapple with the LGBT experience but their most-well known work is *Insects in the Backyard*, a 2010 film about the stigma faced by a transgender father.

They wrote, directed and starred in the film, which was shown internationally but censored by the courts in Thailand for "offending the good morality" of the nation. It was only after a five-year legal battle and the cutting of a three-second nudity scene that the film could be shown. The fight drove Tanwarin to politics.

Growing up without transgender role models, Tanwarin never even considered entering politics. But in March last year, when the junta finally lifted the ban on political parties, a new party, Future Forward, emerged. Liberal, progressive and highly critical of the junta, it put equality at the forefront of its agenda. More to test the reality of this commitment than anything else, Tanwarin approached Future Forward as a possible candidate, and was accepted.

**'I am equal to every other MP'**

It has not been easy being so visible. Tanwarin has faced swaths of online bullying and criticism from voters on the campaign trail.

"I do have more to prove, that I have the knowledge and ability to help run this country, and that's challenging," says Tanwarin. "When I got the seat, some people still said that I will just be an entertainer in parliament. But I am not here to entertain, I am here because I got elected, meaning I have the same honour and am equal to every other MP."

The country has a complicated relationship with its transgender community. While often more visible than in other societies, so-called "ladyboys" are mainly treated as second-class citizens. They are allowed to have only certain jobs and face regular discrimination.

Transgender people are not allowed to change their gender on their identity cards, meaning that those born as men have to take part in the annual military draft enrolment, where every male is entered into a lottery to see if they will be called to serve. Transgender women have to endure a "humiliating" medical exam to prove they are not faking or get an army hospital to certify they have a "disorder". Transgender men and women also cannot get married or adopt children.

Tanwarin, who was born in Nakhon Ratchasima, a city in Isaan province, says they grew up shrouded in shame and living in fear. They began publicly living as a woman at age 17. "I liked dressing as a woman and living as a woman, I still do. But it was later on I realised that I don't want to be put in a box as a woman either. Society forces these gender boxes on us, but I don't fit into either of them and I believe gender should not define us," they say.

For Tanwarin, the main priorities in government will be to push for a change in marriage laws and sex education in schools. "Can you imagine, if you are transgender, sitting in the classroom and your textbook said you are mentally abnormal, how could you be brave enough to tell people about who you are?" says Tanwarin.

With the election result not expected to be officially declared until 9 May, Tanwarin, who is a party list MP not a constituency MP, remains in limbo. It is also unclear whether Future Forward, as part of pro-democracy coalition, will be ruling or in opposition; though most are expecting a pro-military coalition to hold on to power through a system already rigged in their favour.

Tanwarin says: "It's not a fair election and it will not be a true democracy but it's a crucial step forward."

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## **Hannah Ellis-Petersen**

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