



A Vocabulary Test

Derek Duncan

Global Relations Minister for East Asia and the Pacific

Many in the United States are learning a new vocabulary—one familiar to communities that have lived under state authoritarianism. Words shaped by the experience of having to confront governments that abuse basic civil and human rights. Where leaders wield state power against their own people, the language of rights—and their violations—becomes part of everyday life.

The first word in our vocabulary lesson is *Disappeared*. Not gone-off-the-grid, or missing victim of ordinary crime, but rather someone taken by the state. When I started working with partners in the Philippines decades ago, I learned that disappearances, along with detentions and attacks against community members, were surging in numbers not seen since the first Marcos dictatorship. Many picked up were never officially acknowledged, and some were never seen alive again.

In recent months, hundreds in the United States have been swept off streets and from courthouses by armed, often masked men—presumed immigration agents—then transferred to far-off detention centers without notice to family or lawyers. Not just criminals—even those with valid visas and green cards. On July 31, Yeonsoo Go, a college student and daughter of an Episcopal priest, was arrested after a routine visa hearing in New York City and flown to a Louisiana facility. Only sustained public protest won her release four days later, but without such connections, the whereabouts and fate of most who are picked up remain elusive.

The second word is *Extra-Judicial*.

Reports from Philippines partners show how, instead of protecting civil rights, a repressive government acts outside of the legal system in order to avoid making its case in court. State abuse and violence have continued through multiple administrations in the Philippines, and as of June 2025, the human rights group Karapatan has documented over 100 extrajudicial killings under President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.

The US record is worsening. Under the Trump administration, due process has been curtailed by expanding expedited removals of perceived threats. The administration has invoked the Alien Enemies Act to detain and deport without hearings, defy court orders, and restrict Congressional and public oversight of executive actions. Civic leaders have been targeted based on ideology. These measures have eroded the rule of law and constitutional authority in America.

A third word is *Red-tagging*. In the Philippines, authorities routinely brand community leaders and groups, even churches, as communist. An international review found that red-tagging, no matter how warranted the label, enables extrajudicial raids, arrests, and killings. Our partner, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, has been red-tagged for sheltering Indigenous people displaced by mining and agribusiness. Pastors have been jailed on dubious charges, their work with the poor reframed as subversion.

The United States has seen a parallel tactic—the branding of critics as “communists” to delegitimize and intimidate. Trump has used the label against judges, educators, and political opponents, calling them “subversive.” Speaking about New York mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani this year, Trump called him a communist, then mused, “We’ll have to arrest him.”

Our final word is *Impunity*—when abuses go unpunished because the systems meant to check power have been weakened, co-opted, or silenced. Maria Ressa, the Nobel Prize-winning Filipino journalist, warns in *How to Stand Up to a Dictator* that the United

States is not immune to authoritarian drift. She points to the role of tech in spreading disinformation faster than truth, eroding trust and the rule of law. Without truth, she argues, there can be no accountability, and democracy ultimately is at risk.

Our relationships with churches and institutions worldwide are rooted in a principle of mutual support—that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). While our partnerships often call us to stand with other countries facing repression, to speak truth and defend the rights of all, our global partners are now standing with us as we learn the language of resistance and resilience.

Learning these words is not enough. We must also learn to use them—to name abuses, resist intimidation, and protect the principles they represent. This is a test, and history will grade us on how well we do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Derek Derek Duncan serves as the Global Relations Minister for East Asia and the Pacific of the Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

LEARN ucc.org/justice

DONATE ucc.org/donate

ARCHIVE bit.ly/witness4justice

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.

