A cartoonist's resistance
Soon Chuan Yean a

a School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains, Pulau Pinang, 11800, Malaysia

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A cartoonist’s resistance

SOON Chuan Yean

This visual essay intends to introduce to readers the role of a cartoonist in ‘doing’ politics. A Malaysian cartoonist, popularly known as Zunar, develops his political cartoons within the context of Malaysian repressive political structures, but manages to resist the oppressive state apparatus through cartoons. His political cartoons engage politics in the realm of institutional change, as well as to provide an alternative articulation of ‘history’ and ‘nation’ to juxtapose against the state’s definitions of Malaysian culture, nation, citizenry, and history.

Zunar was born in 1962 in Bukit Junun in Gurun, Kedah. At the age of 12, he started to draw cartoons, which have appeared in various magazines and newspapers. His passion in cartoons is to sketch out his views about society, especially the political scenario and changes in Malaysia. In an interview, he asserts that ‘I like politics and to be involved in politics. It is about our own daily lives’ (Soon 2010: 20).

Zunar’s cartoons styles are clear-cut, bold and naked, (Malaysian) issue oriented, urbanized, satirical, and unashamedly only leaving a limited space for the readers to interpret. His cartoons cover a variety of issues such as the Malaysian judiciary system, human rights, corruption, money politics, freedom of speech, education, religion, ethnicity, and many others.

Zunar has increasingly become a ‘threat’ to the Malaysian state. His magazines were confiscated in August 2008 by the Malaysian Home Affairs Ministry. In June 2010, his book entitled 1Funny Malaysia together with another magazine, Perak Darul Kartun, were banned by the Home Ministry under the reason of being a ‘threat to national security’. Again, on 24 September 2010, Zunar was arrested at his office a few hours before another of his books was launched, a book entitled Cartoon-O-Phobia. Despite the arrest, the launch carried on without the author and the books!

Below are some of Zunar’s latest cartoons.

Acknowledgements

Cartoons courtesy of Zunar (zunar49@gmail.com) and Malaysiakini.com. All Rights Reserved.

Reference


Author’s biography

Soon Chuan Yean trained as a political scientist for his Bachelor’s degree at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Master’s degree at Uppsala University, Sweden. In his doctorate degree, he was exposed to area studies at the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, at the National University of Singapore, which provided him with a multilayered and multidisciplinary lens of viewing politics. He is now teaching Southeast Asian Politics at USM and is interested in the relationship between politics and popular culture, religion and politics especially in the Philippines, and Malaysian cultural politics.

Contact address: School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.
The party logo of UMNO (United Malay National Organization), the dominant party of BN (Barisan Nasional/National Front Coalition) metamorphoses into a frog. In February 2009, three state assemblypersons of the opposition PR (Pakatan Rakyat/People’s Coalition) declared to sit as independents. Prior to the defections, PR had 32 representatives while BN had 27 representatives. The defections have brought the number of state assemblypersons in Perak to 28 (PR) versus 28 (BN) and 3 (independents) who pledged allegiance to BN. In May 2009, the state of Perak faced a constitutional crisis when the Kuala Lumpur Court, on 11 May 2009, ruled that the Sultan was not constitutionally permitted to dismiss the Chief Minister. On 22 May 2009, the Court of Appeal overturned the High Court decision. As the result, Perak returned to rule under BN. The illustration indicates the ‘defected politicians’ incident was a plot of UMNO to regain power as a show of Najib’s power en route to becoming Malaysia’s sixth Prime Minister.
Three heads are placed in parallel. First, a cow head illustrates the event where a cow’s head was placed in front of the Selangor State Secretariat building in protest to the Selangor state government’s (now controlled by the opposition coalition PR or Pakatan Rakyat/People’s Coalition) decision to allow a construction of a Hindu temple in the Malay area. Second is a pig’s head, indicating another incident where pigs’ heads have been desecrated in several mosques. It is believed to have links with the attacks on Christian churches, which broke out following the controversy over the use of the word ‘Allah’ by a Catholic magazine, the Herald. The third head represents the government’s head, to indicate the way in which religious sensitivities have always been the issues swept under the carpet by the Malaysian state.
Top: Underneath the concept of Najib’s 1Malaysia lies racism.

Bottom: In July 2010, Perkasa, a non-governmental organization which advocates the rights of Bumiputra (son of soil), published an article asking for Dr Wee Ka Siong, a MCA politician and Deputy Minister of Education, to be arrested under Internal Security Act (ISA) for questioning the rights of Bumiputra. The article brought the backlash of BN’s other component parties, such as UMNO, MCA, and MIC. Such an event was illustrated by the cartoonist as an old strategy adopted by Najib parallel to the strategy used during Mahathir Mohammad’s administration on 27 October 1987 under the Operasi Lalang (Weeding Operation), where 106 opposition leaders and social activists were arrested under ISA for instigating ‘sensitive issues’ and creating ‘racial tensions’.
Top: Najib, with his close link to APCO Worldwide, a communication consultancies firm that has assisted the Malaysian government in the 1Malaysia campaign. On 30 March 2010, Anwar Ibrahim made a preamble in parliament about the relationship between APCO, Zionism, and the Malaysian government.

Bottom: The spread of Zionism in Putrajaya, Malaysia’s new centre of government administration.
After his first sodomy case in 1998, Anwar Ibrahim, the former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, is facing a second sodomy trial, which began on 3 February 2010 under the Malaysian ‘kangaroo’ judiciary system.
Malaysian Prime Minister’s wife, Rosmah Mansor, was seen to be the power behind Najib. Also, Rosmah is famously known to have obtained her fame by using public funds. The most recent incident was an advertisement placed in the *New York Times* (NYT) on her visit to the US to receive an award. The advertisement first indicated it was paid for by the government, which was later denied by the NYT.
Najib’s administration proposed cutting the subsidies on fuel, food, toll expressways, health and education to prevent Malaysia from becoming bankrupt by 2019.

The cartoonist illustrates that the cutbacks are just excuses to use for other issues. Among others are the issues of politicians’ defection in the state of Perak; the private investigator, Bala, who is now in exile and was believed to have evidence of a Mongolian model’s murder case; vote buying for by-elections; and the old ghosts of cronyism and corruption.
Darwin’s Theory: the evolution of the Malaysian judiciary system.

Salleh Abas was former Lord President of the Supreme (then Federal) Court of Malaysia. He was relieved from his position in the 1988 Malaysian constitutional crisis, which also marked the decrease of the Malaysian judiciary’s independence.

Zaki Azmi’s appointment as the Chief Justice of Malaysia on 21 October 2008 has brought criticism from various public parties. One criticism was of his close relationship with UMNO, where he served as the legal adviser. Another was his short period of service in the judiciary system (less than five years in total).
This cartoon was produced following the ban of several of Zunar’s magazines and books by the authorities. The Malaysian Second Prime Minister (1970–1976), Tun Razak, also father of Najib Razak, promised to confront the spread of communism during his time. In Najib’s time, the administration tried to defeat the cartoonist. On 24 September 2010, Zunar was arrested, and 66 copies of his new book were taken. The arrest was seen as an attempt by the authorities to prevent Zunar launching his other new book, entitled Cartoon-O-Phobia. During the arrest, Zunar was brought to several different police stations in one day. He was then bailed one day later. The arrest and ban have showcased the incremental act of suppression of freedom of speech under Najib’s administration. It has also proved Zunar to be right: that the government is indeed ‘cartoon-o-phobic’.