

Zunar Draws London Crowd Into Corruption

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For Zunar, Malaysia's first and only political cartoonist, the pen is definitely mightier than the sword. If the reception at Zunar's first solo exhibition is anything to go by, then Prime minister Najib Abdul Razak will have to go back to the drawing board to contain Zunar's wit and humour.

The controversial Zunar, also known as Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque, was in London, entertaining sell-out crowds with his stories and sketches.

If he were to give up drawing, he could easily be a stand-up comedian; poking fun at Malaysian leaders and the ruling elite. Apart from his funny drawings, Zunar had the crowd laughing at his jokes and his take on Malaysian political life.

Zunar's exhibition in London was followed by visits to meet cartoonists at 'The Spectator' and 'The Daily Telegraph', and deputy-editor at 'The Guardian', the following day.

It appears that arresting Zunar in September 2010 did not have the desired effect. Far from stopping him, his brief detention has made him more determined than ever to fight for a better Malaysia.

The authorities have banned his books, threatened the printers which dared publish his work, warned the vendors which stocked his publications and raided his offices. All these scare tactics proved fruitless. The authorities failed to realise that their arrogance gave Zunar added publicity, so much so that his reputation worldwide was enhanced.

The year after his arrest, Zunar was honoured with the "Courage in Editorial Cartooning" award presented by the Cartoonists Rights Network International (CRNI) body, from the USA. For three months in 2011, Zunar was in Bilbao, where he was the Artist-in-Residence at the BilbaoArte/Fundacion and Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa (BBK), Spain. Other international recognition includes the Human Rights Watch Hellman/Hammett Award for 2011.

And yet, his talent and creativity are being repressed in his homeland, Malaysia. Despite this, Zunar has found time to open his month-long exhibition of political cartoons at the gallery of the Free Word Centre in Farringdon London.

Organised by Article 19, an NGO which fights of freedom of expression, Zunar's introduction into the London art world was attended by around 100 people, both Malaysians and Europeans and members of the press.

The theme of the free exhibition, "To Fight Through Cartoons", showcased around 80 prints of Zunar's works featuring abuse of power, human rights violations, corruption and the famous self-styled "First Couple of Malaysia", the Prime minister Najib Abdul Razak and his wife, the shopaholic Rosmah Mansor.

Zunar hoped that his sketches would inform people of money politics, scandals including murder, and cover-ups in Malaysia. He said that Malaysians should take a stand and not just be bystanders to injustices of the country. He told his audience, that one way of making people understand the issues the country faced, was through laughter.

If his cartoons are humorous, his narrative of Malaysian politics is equally funny. He drew laughter relating his source of his inspiration saying that back home, Malaysian politicians filled him with ideas, saying that all the politicians had to do was open their mouths.

"The Prime Minister and his Cabinet ministers look very smart and intelligent, until they open their

mouths. The moment they start to open their mouths, I open my sketch book."

His depictions of the main decision maker in Malaysian politics (read the self-styled "First Lady of Malaysia") Rosmah Mansor, drew much laughter from the crowds with her bouffant hairstyle and her penchant for Birkin bags, designer shoes, million dollar rings and bags of cash.

The hapless Najib did not have a chance in the cartoons. He was either hiding behind the mass of his wife's hair, or crushed under several designer shopping bags.

One observer of Malaysian politics said, "Most of us shop till we drop but Najib is like Atlas, supporting a weight of shopping on his shoulders, instead of "the weight of office".

If the late Tun Razak, Malaysia's second Prime minister was anxious about the threat of armed communists, his son, the current PM is fretful of cartoonists "armed" with pens.

One student in the audience remarked, "I am ashamed that our leaders cannot take criticisms and jokes, especially those in the form of cartoons."

A Malaysian professional working in London said, "The talented Zunar is a national asset. He is a gifted artist, and filled with courage. Zunar's cartoon is mightier than Umno's kris. Umno can intimidate but they cannot lock his spirit up. The people are with you, Zunar."

An English fan of Zunar said, "In the west, government leaders or public figures are fair game for cartoonists. They aren't bothered by these caricatures of themselves. Many share in the laughter of the images that these cartoonists have created."

Zunar's message was to inform Malaysians that it was morally wrong to be neutral in the face of corruption and human rights abuses by the government. His warning to those who continued abuses of power was simple.

"I will keep drawing till the last drop of my ink."

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