



SILENCED VOICES: MAUNG THURA

by Sara Whyatt

A few days after his release from detention in October 2007, the Burmese comedian, poet, and political activist, Maung Thura, who has adopted the stage name Zargana, gave an interview to Mizzima, an online newsagency run by Burmese exiles. Asked whether the short-lived uprising that sprang up in Burma in September had been worthwhile, he replied: “My children, who are in their early twenties, couldn’t believe the atrocities committed in the 1988 uprising when I told them about it. They thought we were exaggerating and lying. Now they have seen what happens with their own eyes. Now they realize we were not lying—only telling truths and facts.”



Maung Thura

It is extraordinary to think that it has been twenty years since pro-democracy demonstrators were brutally suppressed in Burma in 1988. Despite the repression, including the arrest of its leader, Aung San Suu

Kyi, and hundreds of its supporters, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a decisive victory in elections held in 1990, a victory that the military government refused to accept. Two decades later, Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, her supporters are imprisoned, and the military dictatorship maintains a harsh hold on power. Heavy censorship and authoritarianism had all but eliminated dissent.

That is until August 15, 2007, when the Burmese authorities announced fuel-price increases of up to five hundred percent. The prospect of huge increases in transport and food costs deepening the already acute levels of poverty, led hundreds of democracy activists to take to the streets in protest, in numbers not seen since the late 1980s. As before, police beat and arrested protestors. The news footage and mobile-phone images of demonstrators being beaten and dragged into police vans in turn led thousands of Burmese monks to join the protests, flooding the streets in their orange robes, in scenes broadcast internationally. Their engagement with the protests, and abuse at the hands of police, led previously reluctant members to also join the rallies. Within days the demonstrations had reached such a scale that there was speculation that maybe, this time, the junta would be overthrown at last. But yet again the military, using batons and bullets, and apparently unconcerned about the international opinion, suppressed the rebellion and within a few weeks the streets were once again quiet.

Yet one person who has refused to keep quiet is Zargana. A remarkable man, he trained as a dentist, but when he found that he kept making his patients laugh, he turned to comedy, adopting the name Zargana, which means "Pliers," in reference to his old job. Over the years he became one of Burma's most popular figures, whose comic routine centered on jokes that ridiculed the dictatorship, made fun of corrupt officials and the dire state of public amenities, and offered a generally scathing critique of what was going on.

Zargana, a high-profile supporter of the NLD, was first imprisoned from October 1988 to April of the next year. He remained free for a year, when in May 1990 he was again arrested, this time for impersonating General Saw Maung, then head of the military government, before a crowd of thousands at a teaching college in Rangoon. This

time he was sentenced to five years, and thrown into Burma's notorious Insein Prison, where torture and vile conditions had been the cause of the death of a number of political prisoners. He was given amnesty in March 1994. Since then Zargana has been banned from performing in public, and recordings of his shows censored. Yet he remained unbowed, even after he was banned from taking the stage in 1996 after he had spoken out against censorship to a foreign journalist. He continues to spread his jokes by word of mouth, calling it "joking from the heart."

True to form, Zargana did not hesitate in joining the 2007 protests, and, on September 25, he was again arrested after he had gone to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon to deliver food to protesting monks. He was freed three weeks later, probably as a result of the international protests at his arrest. Despite the threat of re-arrest, he agreed to be interviewed by Mizzima about his experiences. He spoke of being held in a "military dog cell," a box of about eight by ten feet where prisoners are held in solitary confinement, guarded by around thirty Alsatian dogs. "I was made to sleep on a wooden board. I could not have a bath for the first two days. The food was terrible, as were the living conditions. There was no proper toilet. I had only a dining plate for both urination and excreta. I could use this plate only once for the whole day as it was filled after a single use." Clearly prison conditions have not changed since Zargana was last detained in the 1990s.

During his first spells in prison, Zargana turned to poetry as a means of survival. Having no paper or pens, he scratched his poems on his cell floor with a piece of broken pottery, memorized them, and then, after his release, put them to paper. They were subsequently smuggled out of Burma. His is among the most powerful of prison writings, showing Zargana then, as now, unbowed and defiant. On November 11, 1988, he wrote:

With row upon row of iron bars
They can cage me.

With the heat of seven suns
They can roast me.

SILENCED VOICES: MAUNG THURA

With a battalion of ogres
They can guard me.

But if I took my scarlet blood
And sprayed it across the sky
The bars would melt
The ogres kneel
Their suns kowtow before me.

In 2007 he told Mizzima, “No one can forget what they saw and what they encountered in the recent protests. [The democracy movement] may not re-emerge in the same form as in the recent protests, sacrificing a lot of lives and damaging a lot of livelihoods. It will appear in a different form. It is premature for me to say what form it will take, but the chance of a re-emergence of the protests and the democracy movement is sure.”

Read the full Mizzima interview with Zargana: www.mizzima.com/MizzimaNews/Interview/01-Oct-2007.html

Editor's note: According to PEN, Zargana was again arrested on June 4, 2008, after leading a private effort to deliver aid to cyclone victims.

Appeals for an end to the persecution of Maung Thura (Zargana) and the many other writers and journalists detained and silenced in Burma can be sent to:

Than Shwe, Senior General
State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)
c/o Ministry of Defence
Naypyitaw, Union of Myanmar

Or use this [sample letter](#) to write or fax the ambassador of Myanmar in the U.S.

Sara Whyatt is Program Director of the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN, the writers' association, in London.