

The Joke's on the Generals

Tuesday 26 May 2009, by [Yeni](#) (Date first published: November 2008).

Laughter is a sharp weapon in the hands of Burma's regime critics

BURMA is under siege and the crackdown on anti-regime monks and activists has intensified, continuing day and night. The bloodshed in Burma in September 2007 and the regime's inadequate, heartless response to the cyclone the following May ignited worldwide anger, directed at regime leader Snr-Gen Than Shwe. Yet through it all, the callous, stubborn general remained a figure of fun, arousing mirth as well as outrage.

Rambo meets "Rum Bo."

Contrasting the conventional image of a stony-faced general are cartoons and "doctored" photographs of Than Shwe in humiliating circumstances, placed on the Internet and then downloaded for distribution wherever regime critics gather.

The most popular features depictions of Than Shwe inspecting his troops with his underpants around his knees or from the back of a hearse.

One picture of superimposed images shows him hobnobbing with al-Qaida boss Osama Bin Laden. Another depicts him embracing a large bottle of rum next to a poster advertising the latest Rambo film, which is set mostly in Burma. Than Shwe is identified as "Rum Bo"—"rum" standing for alcohol and "bo" meaning bully. Together, they stand as a metaphor for Than Shwe.

A poster plays with the names Chee Lay Chee & Kway Young Sone, referring to the well-known traditional comedy troupe Thee Lay Thee & Say Young Sone. Chee is Burmese for "excrement," lay is "four" while the words Kway Young Sone mean "dogs of different colors." Put the words together and add portraits of the four generals who rule Burma—and what do you have? Four disgusting objects and dogs of different colors.

Panties for peace game

Dogs featured in one ruse to ridicule the regime—pictures of Than Shwe were hung around the necks of the stray dogs that roam the streets of Rangoon.

The pictures, which rapidly found their way onto the Internet, are the work of an exiled Burmese satirist who goes by the name of Mr Creator. Downloaded copies of his pictures and cartoons are popular items among cyber dissidents.

Internet technology has given satirists like Mr Creator the tools to launch an effective campaign of ridicule aimed at Burma's military leaders.

"Older information technologies such as the telephone or fax are expensive and often practically irrelevant when organizing international campaigns spanning several cities or countries," researcher Mridul Chowdhury wrote in his paper *"The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution,"* a case study for the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

"The distance between the campaign participants and the speed at which the organizers have to strategize and make decisions necessitate heavy dependence on the Internet," he said.

Chowdhury is right. The Burmese people are more likely than ever to see the Internet as a means of achieving freedom of expression with the advent of information technology.

Since the September 2007 uprising led by Buddhist monks, the Internet has helped to shape the way Burmese think, communicate and even have fun in their isolated, military-ruled country. They usually chat away on G-talk, check out the social-networking sites Facebook, Hi5 and Friendster, surf exiled Burmese Web sites and blogs and even share information about how to slip past regime censors by using proxy servers.

In their blogs and e-mail groups, they demonstrate the active role they play in sharing information, debating important issues in politics and other areas of domestic concern—and making the ruling generals angry with cartoons and games.

One such online game was an amusing part of the highly successful "Panties for Peace" campaign, launched by a group of regime critics in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. Players could bombard an image of Than Shwe with missiles in the shape of women's underwear, scoring points for direct hits. It was created by READYAIMVOTE.com, a Web site containing political games.

Burmese cartoonists recently launched a similar game, in which players could use catapults to hit a flying bulldog representing Than Shwe.

Even a crisis as catastrophic as Cyclone Nargis can't suppress the Burmese people's ability to laugh in the face of adversity.

In August, while cleanup operations were continuing in the cyclone-devastated areas, about 400 cartoons inspired by the disaster were displayed at Rangoon's well-known Lawkanat Gallery in an exhibition titled *"Wake from the Storm."*

The 70 contributing cartoonists knew they were courting trouble with the censors, but they defied official disapproval in favor of giving people something to smile about in their times of hardship.

By going ahead with the exhibition, they remained true to the Burmese tradition of satire.

The Burmese people know very well that humor alone can not overthrow the brutal military regime. But they understand that political humor is the most subtle form of revolt, which destroys the self-esteem of tyrants and forms a means of surviving under totalitarianism.

As the American writer and satirist Mark Twain once wrote: *"The human race has only one really effective weapon and that is laughter."*

P.S.

From The Irrawaddy News Magazine.
NOVEMBER, 2008 - VOLUME 16 NO.11

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=14535&page=1