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Asia - Malaysia

Humour ban

Ruling on cartoonist's suit awaited, ban on political cartoons still in place

19 July 2012

The final hearing in a civil action that the political cartoonist **Zulkiflee Anwar Haque**, also known as **Zunar**, brought against the Malaysian state and police, accusing them of detaining him unlawfully and causing him material losses in September 2010, is scheduled to take place on 23 July.

Reporters Without Borders is hoping for a fair ruling, one that recognizes the illegality of Zunar's treatment. Such a decision would be all the more important in the current pre-election climate.

"The Election Commission's ban on cartoons during the last 14 days before the upcoming parliamentary elections reflects the government inability to tolerate criticism," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Cartoons are an essential element of a free press. It is important that the role of political cartoonists should not be challenged and that they are not the victims of arrests and searches, as Zunar was in September 2010. We hope that the court will render him justice on 23 July and that it will finally recognize that his arrest and the seizure of his cartoon books were indeed illegal."

Zunar's civil action relates to the raid that the police carried out on his office on [24 September 2010](#), seizing 66 copies of a collection of his cartoons called "Cartoon-o-phobia" on the day they were to have been published and detaining him for more than 24 hours on a sedition charge. If the court rules against him, he may have to pay up to 40,000 ringgits (10,000 euros).

Zunar has meanwhile resumed his battle against the government's censorship policies in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, the date of which has yet to be set. Under his leadership, a group of cartoonists called Kumpulan Kartunis Independent (KKI) has undertaken to wage a cartoon campaign about government scandals. The cartoons will be published during the last 14 days before the elections, in defiance of the ban. The participants include **Nor Azlin Ngah (Jonos)**, **Azmie Muhammad Taha**, **Johnny Ong**, **Azman Muhammad Noh (AMN)**, **Nor Afendi Ramli (Ronasina)** and **Amir Hakim (Ahyat)**.

One of the main targets of their cartoons will be alleged kickbacks in the sale of two French "Scorpène" submarines to Malaysia in 2002. Prime Minister Najib Razak, who was defence minister at the time, has been linked to the case, currently the subject of a judicial investigation in France.

The KKI is openly [opposing the election campaign ban on cartoons](#) which the Election Commission imposed on 30 May. Based on Section 4A of the 1958 Elections Act, it threatens violators with a sentence of up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 10,000 ringgits (2,500 euros) or both.

"The banning of cartoons during the election is comical and ludicrous," Zunar says. "Cartooning is a legally-practiced medium in Malaysia and therefore the Commission does not have the right to forbid its use (...) As a cartoonist, it is my duty to expose corrupt practices, wrong-

doings, wastage of public funds and injustice by the government. The ban by the Malaysian government contradicts the freedom of expression provided to all citizens as cited in the Malaysian Constitution. It is also an attempt to silence the critics and to stop dissident views.”

Zunar was awarded the Courage In Editorial Cartoon prize by Cartoonist Rights Network International in 2011. His five collections of cartoons are currently banned in Malaysia under the Printing Presses and Publications Act. He filed an [appeal](#) against this ban in July 2010 but it was rejected.

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