

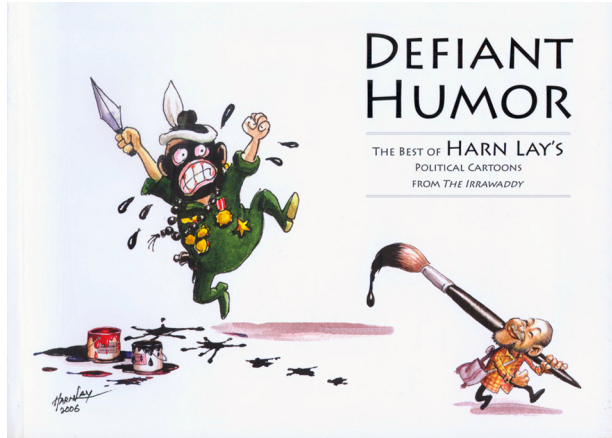
## Noted

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# Frontline humour takes on generals

*Defiant Humour: The Best of Harn Lay's Political Cartoons from the Irrawaddy*, by Harn Lay. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Irrawaddy Publishing Group, 2008, 207pp. No ISBN. [www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org)

THIS IS a new political cartoon collection by Burmese artist and cartoonist Harn Lay. It is a revealing insight into Burma—where political resistance and traditional art and performance meet. The book demonstrates and is part of the ongoing resistance to an unjust abuse of power. Lay portrays key issues such as political prisoners, extended house arrest of pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, the military's response to sanctions, Burma-ASEAN relations and business deals with neighbouring countries.



Political satire has a long tradition in Burma and is a common practice—important because it makes people happy in a place where the majority of people are suffering from political oppression and poverty. It makes people happy in a subversive way: when you look at the cartoons, you escape the repression of the country and get to laugh at the military generals in power. Rather than being portrayed as strong and all-powerful, they are shown as being incompetent, stupid, ignorant and politically primitive.

Lay often depicts generals as animals. In one cartoon, the military is depicted as a buffalo while ASEAN, EU, US and other foreign powers are surrounding it, encouraging moves towards democratisation by playing music and singing. This alludes to a Burmese proverb, 'if you play a harp near the ear of the buffalo, the buffalo will not listen'.



A graduate from Rangoon's Fine Art Academy School, Harn Lay—currently working as an artist and cartoonist for several Burmese media groups in exile—left Burma during the 1988 political uprising. He joined forces with Burma's opposition movement. He successfully portrays the political events in Burma and the region in an exciting and amusing way.

While Harn Lay is able to produce his political art from the safety of exile in Thailand, some of his satirical comrades inside the country have been targeted by the military regime and have been imprisoned.

One recent case is Zaganar, a

comedian who showed defiance through traditional Burmese performance, called a *nyein*, a genre where, until recently, the mocking of the powerful was tolerated. He was arrested mid-2008 and was sentenced last November to 45 years in jail.

Art has long been used for agitation in Burma, and art is an important battleground (Fink, 2001, p. 207). *Defiant Humour* is a fine example of the continuation of this battle.

#### Reference

Fink, C. (2001), *Living silence: Burma under military rule*, London: Zed Books.