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Forgive but don't forget, Myanmar comedian-turned-activist says

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Source: [Alertnet](#) // [AlertNet Correspondent](#)



Comedian, actor and political prisoner Zarganar, who was released from Myitkyina prison in northern Myanmar, smiles at Yangon domestic airport October 12, 2011. REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun

YANGON (AlertNet) – For a man who has spent most of his life cracking jokes, Myanmar's most famous comedian and political dissident, Zarganar, has a sober view of the world and takes his self-appointed role as a custodian of the past seriously.

Since his [release](#) from jail in October under an amnesty for political prisoners, Zarganar has focused on ways of ensuring the atrocities of the past are recorded and not forgotten by future generations.

A meeting in Cambodia with the head of the [Documentation Centre of Cambodia](#), a private organisation that has collected documents, films and photographs of the Khmer Rouge, has inspired him.

Zarganar hopes a similar centre can be built in Myanmar, perhaps by 2013. It would be a test of the Southeast Asian country's transition from military rule to democracy since many of those implicated in the abuses are still in power today.

"As we embark on the democratisation process, 1988, 1990, 2007 and 2008 are four historical years we cannot forget," Zarganar, whose real name is Ko Thura, told AlertNet.



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"We need to document what happened," he said, denying that revenge was a motivation.

"We know who committed those atrocities but we don't want revenge. We have a saying that you shouldn't retaliate (against) hostility with hostility. It would be a vicious cycle. We won't be able to move forward."

Zarganar said individuals should no longer face being thrown into jail or being forced to take up arms because of their political beliefs.

"We can forgive but it's impossible to forget what happened because we were the ones who suffered," he said.

MILITARY CRACKDOWNS

In 1998, soldiers from the military junta that ruled former Burma for nearly 50 years following a 1962 coup gunned down hundreds of unarmed pro-democracy students and protesters, arresting hundreds more.

Two years later, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the 1990 election by a landslide but was never allowed to take power.

There were pro-democracy protests again in 2007, with Buddhist monks leading the so-called Saffron Revolution. It was brutally quashed with scores of monks and civilians killed and arrested.

In 2008, Myanmar suffered one of the worst disasters in its history when **Cyclone Nargis** struck the Irrawaddy delta killing nearly 140,000 people.

Zarganar, who had been a focal point for the informal relief effort by private citizens into the delta, was sentenced in 2008 to 59 years in prison after criticising the junta for its slow response to the cyclone.

Clad in a white T-shirt and colourful shorts and sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor of his living room in Yangon, Zarganar said he hopes the new centre would record past and present events, from revolutions to land grabs and rights abuses.

"There's a village in Monywa where a company is trying to evict the villagers. We've gone there and documented what's going on," he said proudly.

SCRUTINY OF DONOR AID

Zarganar's voice croaked from over-work and he apologised for the state of his apartment – with books and papers scattered on the floor and no furniture in the living room – and the constant ringing of his mobile phone.

He's been busy. In January he organised Myanmar's first film festival and screened a documentary about the military's crackdown on the 2007 protests, an unprecedented event in a country previously known for its iron-like grip on the media and intolerance of dissent.

He continues to call for the release of more than 470 remaining **political prisoners**. He's also providing money, food and clothing to current and former political prisoners and their families who are struggling to make a living.

He set up a company to produce documentaries, is involved in a biopic about Myanmar's founding father General Aung San and travels abroad and within the country extensively, taking his messages to international donors and the Burmese diaspora.

Zarganar had a specific appeal to foreign donors looking to ramp up their assistance to a country where a third of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day.

"Please scrutinise carefully to ensure that the money gets to the people who are actually doing the work," he said, adding that civil society in Myanmar is still in its infancy.

MYANMAR CHANGING

The Burmese have seen Zarganar transformed from a dentistry student telling jokes at university fairs to a successful comedian and national treasure, and now a fierce critic of the government.



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Despite his outspokenness against the government, he said it was equally important to applaud the authorities when they did something right.

For example, last year, in what was one of the first signs of Myanmar's new era, President Thein Sein bowed to public pressure and cancelled the Myitsone dam being built on the Irrawaddy River by the Chinese. Power generated from the \$3.6 billion project would have gone to neighbouring China.

"That was good and we should encourage them to do more good things like that," Zarganar said.

He still has misgivings towards the year-old nominally civilian government, especially over its treatment of former and current political prisoners, but said the situation in Myanmar has improved vastly.

The government has been lauded by the international community for introducing unprecedented reforms since coming to power last year. Its efforts to reform have also prompted the European Union and the United States to suspend their sanctions.

"There's a lot more opportunity to do things and more authority to speak," he said.

"I was only released from prison seven months ago. I've been working non-stop since. Some say I'm going too fast. But I think I'm actually quite slow," Zarganar concluded. "I have a handicap – I spent 11 years in prison."

You can read the [full interview](#) on AlertNet.

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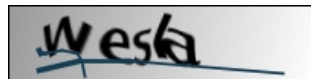
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