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Q+A: Time for Myanmar to move forward, activist-comedian says

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



Comedian, actor and former political prisoner Zarganar speaks at a ceremony to mark political activist Min Ko Naing's 49th birthday at a monastery in Yangon, October 18, 2011. REUTERS/Soe Zeya Tun

YANGON (AlertNet) - Myanmar's most famous comedian, Zarganar, was jailed in 2008 for 59 years after criticising the then military junta for its slow response to Cyclone Nargis.

He was freed seven months ago under an amnesty for political prisoners, and recently granted AlertNet an interview in his home in Yangon.

Q: Can you tell us what you've been doing since your most recent release from prison last year?

A: Since my release in October 2011, the first thing I wanted to do was to work on the release of all political prisoners and provide help in terms of food, money and clothing to those who are still in jail.

Most of our friends were released in January but there is still some left, like [Ko Aye Aung](#). We have written appeal letters to the president.

Those who have been released from prison are facing difficulties. Many marriages have broken up. Many have no jobs either. How are they going to eat? I've passed on donations I received from the talks I gave in San Francisco or New York or Canada.



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(Pointing to a young man) He's just released from prison too. He's got nowhere to stay. So he's sleeping at the office of the Bogyoke Aung San film executive board.

What's worse is kids (who've been imprisoned) cannot continue their studies. The university will not welcome them back. I've sent them to schools and groups who can provide them with an education.

I ask my friends abroad to teach these kids. They said they'd help but the kids couldn't get passports to leave the country. So I brought lecturers from abroad for a two-week course. You don't learn much from a two-week course, but it's better than sitting around doing nothing.

We've also just set up a group to provide courses in information technology and public communications within Myanmar.

In January we organised the Art of Freedom Film Festival. The youth here have become very interested in documentaries. So we brought in documentary filmmakers from America for classes.

We now have over 50 graduates from those courses. So I set up an organisation called HOME, House of Media and Entertainment, to make documentaries.

We also have the Bogyoke Aung San film. I also travel a lot. So it's tiring, both physically and mentally. But we need to do (these things) when we have the chance.

Q: When you were first released, there was a lot of interest in political prisoners from international organisations. Do you think that interest has died down and has that affected both aid and coverage?

A: I said the same thing when I was at the State Department and at NED (National Endowment for Democracy) and USAID roundtables.

If they think everything is fine now and are looking at donating money, at least please scrutinize carefully to ensure the money gets to the people who are actually doing the work. At the moment, that's not happening.

That's not the fault of the donor or the people taking the money. We haven't been very successful in establishing a vibrant civil society in Myanmar. This is partly because many of us have just been released from prison. We hardly know anything. I don't even know how to write a proposal.

We haven't got exposure either, because we can't travel abroad.

So the money ends up with people who have a passport in hand, can write a good proposal, and speak English fluently, while the people who've sacrificed their lives and worked for the public good have nothing.

And let's say I want to set up an NGO (non-governmental organisation). I applied for a registration. I couldn't get it. That's why I had to set up HOME as a company. As an NGO, you have to renew (the registration) every year.

All we want is, for example, relief in Kachin state. We'd like the money to go to those who are helping the displaced directly.

The truth is we haven't received support from anybody.

Q: How important is it to document the events of 1988, 1990, 2007, 2008 and 2010?

A: As we embark on the democratisation process, 1988, 1990, 2007 and 2008 are four historical years that we cannot forget. The biggest step is 1988. But I'll be honest – we didn't get involved in (protests in) 1988 because we understood what democracy is or were politically aware. It was all about emotion. But we also thought the country would prosper and develop as a result.

I met friends I have not seen for 23, 24 years the other day. We're all older. Some of us cannot walk very well anymore. Some are psychologically affected.

We need to document what happened. But that doesn't mean we are going to use this to gain people's sympathy. And we know who committed those atrocities but we don't want revenge.



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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.

We don't want them to happen again. We don't want anyone to go through what we have in 1988, 1990, 2007 or 2008.

It should no longer be the case that you are thrown in jail or have to become an insurgent because of your political beliefs. We want a new history. We can forgive but we can't forget – it is impossible because we were the ones who suffered.

When I went to Cambodia, I met Youk Chhang. He's a Harvard man and way smarter but we were born on the same day. He set up the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam). It's because of DC-Cam that they discovered the Killing Fields. They also have lots of documentaries about land grabs and forced evictions.

I want a documentation centre like that here. That's why I tried my best to make this film on Bogyoke Aung San possible and give these documentary classes.

If we could have lots of documentaries on land grabs, ethnic issues, human rights violation, violation of labour rights of female workers etc, perhaps one day we will have DCM (Documentation Centre of Myanmar).

I'm going to work for the establishment of a Documentation Centre of Myanmar by 2013, I hope.

In Monywa, there's a village where a company is trying to evict the villagers. We've gone there and documented what's going on. We now have record.

I've only been released from prison 7 months ago. I've been working non-stop since. Some say I'm going too fast. But I think I'm actually quite slow. I have a handicap – I spent 11 years in prison.

So if we are thinking about revenge, we (cannot) move forward.

Q: You were most recently arrested for providing assistance and criticising the government after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Now that you are free, what humanitarian needs do you still see in the country?

A: We need a lot of humanitarian aid. People in Bogale and Labutta (two places affected most by Nargis) are facing a lot of problems rebuilding their lives. It's not enough just to give them loans. It's also about what kinds of livelihoods they can have.

In central Myanmar there are still many villages that still do not have access to water. Families only get a tank of water every two days and it takes the whole morning.

Food is another problem. For example, there was an announcement that we shouldn't use this oil from China because it's bad for your health. It's been in our stomachs for like 2 years! I heard Japan supported setting up a food lab but it's been closed because there are no funds

If I have to say how much help we need, I'll never finish talking.

Q: Do you see a difference between your last release and this one?

A: Yes. During (previous) releases, it was a huge struggle. So many people didn't want to associate with me because I was an ex-convict and the government restricted everything.

Now there's a lot more opportunity to do things and a lot more authority to speak. We have contact with the authorities. We can talk about what problems the country is facing and what we could all do. So that's one avenue of cooperation and it's good.

Another thing is if an action by the government is good, we should not hesitate in saying it's good. There are few people who have bad-mouthed the government as much as myself but if the government does something good, we should give them recognition.

And encouragement. When the Myitsone Dam was suspended, that was good. But we should also encourage them to do more good things like that. Another is warning. We need to warn people not to regress.

We've come a long way but not all our friends are free and I'd like to request they are all freed.

Q: Does the public need to be prepared for the 2015 elections as much as the government and opposition parties?

A: To be honest, the general public – including myself – are not yet accustomed to democracy or elections. The most important thing is to raise awareness and educate people. That's one of the reasons we travel extensively within the country.

I've invited a Canadian group called Forum of Federations to Myanmar in September because the army and the police think federalism means separatism. So when I was in Canada I spoke to the group and asked them to give talks to the army, the police, the general public and the politicians.

If they come here for two months and provide classes and people understand what federalism meant, the misunderstandings will disappear. That's what I think.

I'm still trying. I'm hoping it won't all be in vain.

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