



**Myanmar (Burma)**  
**Zargana**  
**Comedian, poet and activist**

**Arrested and released in October, 2007; detained June 4, 2008**

**Maung Thura ('Zargana') is a comedian, poet and opposition activist who was arrested during the demonstrations in Burma that broke out in late September 2007. Zargana was arrested on 25 September 2007 for his support of the monks demonstrating in the capital, Rangoon. He is thought to remain detained, and there are mounting concerns for his well-being and safety.**

Zargana spent several years in prison in the early 1990s for his opposition activities. During that time he was taken up as a main case by the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN and by PEN Canada as an honorary member.

Maung Thura, more commonly known by his nick-name 'Zargana', is Burma's leading comedian, popular for his political satires. Zargana revived the traditional Burmese role of the court jester who is the only person allowed to criticise the leader. When he joined a travelling troupe of comedians in 1982, Zargana was optimistic about the role of the comic, saying, 'If the government takes a wrong step in the morning, we can criticise it at night...' For a while, the military authorities tolerated him, and even on occasion invited him to perform for them. But as the political climate deteriorated, the authorities lost patience and attempts were made to silence him.

Zargana, whose pseudonym means 'tweezers' referring to his years spent training as a dentist, was born in January 1962, the youngest son of writers Nan Nyunt Swe and Daw Kyi Oo. From a young age he accompanied his parents on speaking tours, and entertained people by giving performances and doing impersonations.. He went on to form a dance troupe and a drama group, which both performed on national television, and between 1985 and 1988 he played lead roles in four films.

During the 1988 uprising, Zargana gave speeches at the Rangoon General Hospital which attracted large audiences and won rousing ovations. He quickly became a leading voice of the student pro-democracy movement although he never officially joined a political party. His crowd-pulling ability was second only to that of Aung San Suu Kyi, and his jokes were passed on by word of mouth throughout Myanmar.

Zargana was first arrested in October 1988 after making fun of the government, and freed six months later. However, on 19 May 1990, he impersonated General Saw Maung, former head of the military government, to a crowd of thousands at the Yankin Teacher's Training College Stadium in Rangoon. He was arrested shortly afterwards, and sentenced to five years in prison. He was held in solitary confinement in a tiny cell in Rangoon's Insein Prison, where he began writing poetry.

In prison, Zargana was banned from reading and writing, so he scratched his poems on the floor of his cell using a piece of pottery before committing them to memory. These poems were only written down after his release.

After his release in 1994, Zargana was banned from performing in public, but continued to make tapes and videos which were strictly censored by the authorities. In May 1996, after speaking out against censorship to a foreign journalist, he was banned from performing his work altogether, and stripped of his freedom to write and publish. He continued to defy the authorities, spreading his jokes by word of mouth, until his arrest on September 25, 2007.

The following poem by Zargana is published in the International PEN anthology of writings from prison

*Oblivion*

At night the moonbeams snap.  
The stars are suffocated.  
That maligned, unhappy barn owl  
screeches out its grief.  
The old train on the tracks  
hurtles to its destruction  
wheezing out its last breath.

And I? I send my thoughts beyond these walls  
day in, day out, from dawn to night  
(from dawn to night, day in day out)  
I dream the endless daydream,  
dream the endless journey  
through the night, fretting,  
champing at the bit:

the one I call for does not come,  
the one I wait for never appears  
Ah, if I could only stop the  
thinking, seeing, hearing, dreaming....

I wouldn't feel a thing.

ZARGANA, Burma, 1988

The translator has asked to remain anonymous.

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