# Zunar's Political Cartoons: An Analysis of Rhetorical Devices

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**Abstract.** As a form of social commentary, political cartoons hold a unique commentary position of media discourse used to express opinions, and bring up valuable arguments. Visual rhetoric of metaphor, symbolism, and exaggeration are used to communicate the cartoonists' message and creativity in portraying issues of public interest. The aim of this analysis is distinguishing and identifying the rhetorical devices used in Zunar's political cartoons. As a prominent Malaysia cartoonist, Zunar's cartoons are rich with the elements of rhetorical features. It therefore creates an awareness thus providing mechanics of the mapping of rhetorical devices as an effective tool to editorial cartoon readers.

**Keywords:** Political Cartoons · Visual Rhetoric · Malaysia · Zunar

## 1 Introduction

Each cartoon tells a tale about an event or a circumstance. This happens when a reader comes into contact with a cartoon and can occur in many layers. Exaggerations, inconsistencies, distortions, metaphor, and humor, as well as the disgusting and sublime, are used by cartoonists to criticize the intended target or to deliver the desired message [1]. They create images in their cartoons by selecting settings, people, costumes, and circumstances to depict [2]. A cartoon likewise strives to convey a lot of information with a little amount of data. Because of its spontaneous nature, it is frequently seen as a straightforward and simple expression of a message.

For a long time, political cartooning has been utilized as a medium for funny and witty commentary. When print media became widely available and widely used, cartooning became one of the most popular arts for making social and political commentary.

Cartooning is an exceedingly adaptable technique of communication that may be used to invent, exaggerate, overstate and distort the qualities of any character or circumstance generating a semblance of the original in order to deliver the intended message. Political cartooning is a speedy means of communicating since it may capture the reader's attention and provide a complete knowledge of the problem in a single glance. It has the power to either tickle or harm the target [3].

It is the core sociological capability of the political cartoon, which is primarily "a culture-creating, culture-maintaining, culture-recognizing artefact," [4]. On this socio-cultural level, cartoons expose preconceptions and biases, tapping into collective knowledge in a way that supports cultural values and aids readers in retaining a sense of self, others, and society.

Malaysian political cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Haque, often known as Zunar, tells Channel New Asia that one of the most important things about cartoons is that they bridge age ranges, demographic groupings, and socioeconomic levels. There are people who live in remote rural areas who do not read or are unable to read, but the pictures still able to understood and relate by them. He's on a mission to reach and communicate to them. He continues that by exposing societal problems and injustices, it is more necessary than ever to extend free speech, educate people, and keep the government on its toes [5].

Each cartoon is created by its portrayal of the country's social, economic, and political institutions. Zunar considered to be one of Malaysia's top editorial cartoonists. Despite recent international prizes like the Human Rights Watch Hellman/Hammett Award in 2011, he remains an unpopular figure in the mainstream media, which continuously harasses him for what he draws.

## 2   Problem Statement

The knowledge gap addressed in this study is identifying the rhetorical components embedded in Zunar's political cartoons that were published in Malaysia's social media landscape from 2013 to 2020. Understanding rhetorical components may help cartoonists develop a better argument and be more convincing in their work. At the same time this will create awareness and appreciation of the value of cartoons as important vehicles for communicating political ideas.

## 3   Literature Review

Political cartooning, is a mirror of the culture and historical time that produces it, as well as an expression of corrupt societal situations, often conveys unreported experiences, and may encourage people to seek good change [6]. Political cartoons, which are almost exclusively featured in news periodicals, visually represent a point of view on current topics. It symbolizes both the seen and the unseen, and it offers insights and meanings that go beyond the literal. Scholar underlines that comprehending a cartoon necessitates acquaintance with current concerns, comprehension of cultural settings, and analytical judgments because the viewer must explore the image's more deep insinuations beyond the evident meaning [6]. An image serves as a text, producing meaning based on real-life conditions and allowing for different interpretations [6].

Understanding political cartoons is an unexpected technique that involves individuals relying on a wide range of different ability levels, as well as a broad recall of knowledge about recent and historical events published [7]. Cartoons influence people's ideas, points of view, and attitudes on socio-political issues. Cartoon cognition and interpretation need an understanding of history, culture, and politics. Rhetoric is a type of communication that aims to organize social action. This endorsed by rhetorical theorists like Kenneth

Burke and Douglas Ehninger, whose are prominent among conventional rhetoricians since they not only presented the idea of rhetoric in the context of verbal symbols but glorifies visual elements as significant aspect. Ehninger described rhetoric as the deliberate employment of symbols by humans to influence one other's opinions and manners [8].

The hilarious linguistic components of political cartoons normally offered by political cartoons are logical but purposely incomplete; they do not spell out everything for the reader [9].

Many cartoons' are composed by either visual centric (visually-based), and logocentric (language-based) in manifesting various rhetorical strategies. This offers valuable insight in analyzing prevailing method and components rhetorical devices of political cartoons. However, comprehension of background issue of a political cartoon is needed to aid effective understanding on the message that the cartoonist wishes to express [10].

## 4   Method

This study adopted a methods presented by Mwetulundila and Kangira [10]. This method offers framework and rhetorical devices to examine the visual and linguistic elements in a cartoon and to understand a cartoonist's deeper message. Mwetulundila and Kangira [11] suggested rhetorical content analysis to be used to explain the pattern of communication of cartoonists in political cartoons.

Mwetulundila and Kangira [10] have developed rhetorical devices as persuasive tools and underpinning the cartoon's meaning, expression, representation, and communication to its audience.

Content analysis is an important tool for researching and assessing media contents as well as other relevant graphic or visual texts, particularly cartoons. In contrast to simply aesthetic concerns, visual rhetoric considers pictures as sensory manifestations of cultural meaning [11].

## 5   Cartoon Sample and Approach

This study analysis focuses on six rhetorical devices encoded in the cartoons, as per framework by Mwetulundila and Kangira [10]. Six rhetorical devices were chosen and evaluated for illustrative purposes. Zunar uses these rhetorical devices to manifest approach in delivering his perspective on Malaysia's political spectrum. The rhetorical devices of the cartoons are divided into six categories: titles and captions, exaggeration, symbolism, metaphor, irony, and labelling. The aspects have been widely utilized, particularly in the analysis of political cartoons, and have been accepted by many theories and scholars [10].

The samples comprises of nine cartoons were chosen based on specific theme from cartoonist Zunar's website. The selected theme is particularly involves his works on Sedition Act in Malaysia in between 2013 to 2020.

The cartoons were analyzed in terms of finding out answers to decoded effectively provided the viewer has prior knowledge of the context in which the cartoons are based on the cartoon is intertwine linked to the point it makes (Table 1 and Fig. 1).

**Table 1.** Presents frequency distribution of rhetorical devices used by Zunar's political cartoons

| Cartoon | Titles and Captions | Exaggeration | Symbolism | Metaphor | Irony | Labelling |
|---------|---------------------|--------------|-----------|----------|-------|-----------|
| 1 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| 2 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 4 | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 5 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 6 | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 7 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 8 | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 9 | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |



**Fig. 1.** Zunar's Sedition Act Cartoon (Sources: https://www.zunar.my/)

# 6   Analysis and Discussion

The study is designed to systematically analyses Zunar's approaches in conveying his message through political cartoon. It will also outline the frequency of the rhetorical devices used by Zunar in his cartoons in Table.

1. Politically, the cartoons drawn by Zunar are both provocative and sarcastic, as well as containing commentary, generally on the Sedition Act in Malaysia in between 2013 to 2020 event or persons involved. Zunar's political cartoons frequently employ exaggeration, in the sense of showing an issue through perspective distortion. To convey a point, he exaggerates some components on his cartoon characters.

Exaggeration is widely used by cartoonists to exaggerate any physical attributes or characteristics of an individual or item in order to emphasize their point of view. This is done by amplifying the issue, event, incident, problem, or individual. Certain representation is overblown to emphasize on the main character or object and their characterizations (size, distorted shape). Zunar has unique vision and used exaggeration widely in his work. His strength on this aspect includes ability to identify symbolic opportunities to be exaggerated within the property of his representation. It project 'double meaning' in a way presenting his case. In Cartoon 1, Zunar exaggerates the strips on the Malaysian flag in a way it makes up the idea of jail bars, with people (likely Malaysian) in connotation being jailed with the Sedition Act.

Symbols stimulates readers to think critically because, it can work in many layers although it aim for a specific predominant meaning. These symbols of object, person and ideas are always conveying a message or bringing a point of view to the forefront. Zunar frequently use familiar objects or symbols and turn it to convey complex notions or ideas. In principle, symbolism plays important role in his political cartoons, to deliver the primary message and at the same time stimulate audience to dive deeper into layers of its meaning. As per Cartoon 9, the crocodile can be seen as a strong symbolism in attributing a predatory character of the Sedition Act law in its way to silence journalist.

Labelling is defined as positioning of new meaning on a character or an object by the means of force association. Labelling also emphasizes a specific issue that requires attention. Labeling is also seen in most of his cartoons, to help build and guide into a specific narrative. Cartoonists frequently used labeling technique to elucidate the underlying meaning of nonverbal aspects in their works, with the goal of concentrating their views on specific ideas or concepts as a whole Cartoon 5 emphasis on Zunar's travel ban as repercussion of the government's Sedition Act. He employs several labelling on symbols and objects.

Visual metaphor is the use of a visual picture to represent a person, place, thing, or concept, implying a relationship or point of resemblance. Metaphor works as elicit ideas and implies object in a clear and exaggerated manner in context of transformation, qualities, expression. Both linguistics and visual metaphorserve to clarify essence of being. Zunar employs visual metaphors in his cartoons unexpectedly and in thought provoking way. In Cartoon 6, Zunar uses a mechanical torturing device in pressing people's freedom to express. Audience is provoked in feeling the pain imaginable as the tool being squeezed; which implies how SeditionAct is put to work. Visual metaphors in Zunar's cartoons operates in a way it indirectly expressing emotional meanings since they frequently involve sentiments, attitudes, and emotions.

Titles and captions provides the big idea of what the cartoons are about; to a certain extent provide a hint on information, interpretation or pinpoint an issue. Once readers get a hint, they may deduce what the structural depiction signifies. Contrary to labeling strategy which is more direct, Zunar has pattern to use titles and captions in the manner it juxtapose words that bring new concept and meaning; like 'Sedition Flag', 'Sedition Brain', 'Cartoon Terrorist' or 'Squeeze Sedition'. Such unique juxtaposition of words, bring mnemonic positioning quality to his reader at the same time enforce significant of the issue in the audience mind. In cartoon 3, Zunar introduce a 'big idea' of 'Sedition Brain' which impose imprisonment of thoughts, expression by the aggression of regulation.

Irony, is an expression of meaning by using language that signifies the opposite, usually fuse with humorous or emphatic effect: commonly used by cartoonists to craft and strengthen their perspective and conviction on an issue. Zunar's political cartoon phenomena normally appears so spontaneous that it works with reader's subconscious mind at the same time entertained by humorous sarcastic and sometimes sadistic and surreal punch.

Just in Cartoon 7, Zunar use himself as subject of his political cartoon still working his way to freedom expression despite massive and raging legal allegations put on him.

## 7    Conclusion

Rhetorical devices analysis framework by Mwetulundila and Kangira [11] provides valuable insight in analyzing structural components and approaches of Zunar's political cartoons. Based on this study, it appears that Zunar has unique vision, able to see and capitalize various opportunities of rhetorical devices. His capitalization and craftsmanship of those rhetorical devices is what makes him efficient in his political cartoon. Zunar appears to maximize the use of various dimension of rhetorical devices in making up his case but pattern in this study shows that exaggeration, symbolism, metaphor and label is common denomination of rhetorical devices in most of his political cartoon. Some of the most remarkable techniques by Zunar can also be seen in the fusion of many rhetorical devices in a single work of cartoon. This is done with clever use of visual hierarchy which directs reader to focus their attention on the primary subject and issue; and not cluttering them. All representational objects used in Zunar's political cartoons are made up by simple familiar objects. However, among Zunar's signature style also can be seen in the juxtaposition of two representational objects to make up spontaneous, humorous, sarcastic, sadistic and surreal in a single punch. Even though not manifested in all his cartoons in this study, the used of irony as rhetorical device in presenting his case seems to be the most impactful. All of these, Zunar achieved by the strength and craftsmanship of both visuals and words alike.

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