

Drawing the line: Cartoonists under threat

On January 7, two gunmen burst into the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing eight journalists and bringing into focus the risks cartoonists face. But with the ability of their work to transcend borders and languages, and to simplify complex political situations, the threats faced by cartoonists around the world—who are being imprisoned, forced into hiding, threatened with legal action or killed—far exceed Islamic extremism. **A Committee to Protect Journalists special report by Shawn W. Crispin**

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When Malaysia's government initiated criminal sodomy charges against the country's top opposition politician, the cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Ulhaque, known as Zunar, put his drawing pens to work to satirize what he viewed as a thinly veiled political power play.

First published on *Malaysiakini*, an independent news website, and others published exclusively in a 2014 book, Zunar's cartoons portrayed the high-profile trial as a government plot led by Prime Minister Najib Razak and his United Malays National Organization party to imprison their main political rival, Anwar Ibrahim.

In one critical portrait, Zunar rendered Najib as the presiding judge in the case, with a law book conspicuously placed in a trash bin; in another, the premier was depicted pulling strings above judges drawn as shadow puppets; a third depicted Najib riding a hulking judge who is pointing a gavel at a wide-eyed Anwar.

The cartoons raised not-so-subtle questions about judicial independence, a taboo topic for Malaysia's mainstream media. "Local newspapers and TV are all controlled by the government. They cannot discuss sensitive issues," said Zunar, who has over 100,000 followers on social media. "The government fears my cartoons will turn the people against them."

Authorities have not taken Zunar's satire lightly. He told CPJ that in January police raided his office and seized more than 100 copies of his books, including a new volume entitled *The Conspiracy to Imprison Anwar*. In February, Zunar was

detained for four days for posting [critical tweets](#), including another cartoon of Najib portrayed as a judge, minutes after the announcement of a guilty verdict in Anwar's trial.

The satirist faces a possible 43 years in prison on nine charges of sedition, an anti-state offense that carries mandatory jail time under Malaysian law. Hearings in his case are due to begin on May 20. He is also under investigation for two separate sedition accusations, including for the books seized in January and another volume, *Cartoon-O-Phobia*, published in 2010, Zunar told CPJ. "In a corrupt regime, the truth is seditious," said Zunar, who has had five books banned since 2010. "I will keep drawing until the last drop of my ink."

Publishers of the cartoonist's books have also come under legal threat. Zunar said that authorities raided the premises of three of his previous publishers, threatening to revoke publishing licenses and jail the owners under the Printing Presses and Publication Act and Sedition Act. He now redacts the name of his publisher to protect the company from harassment, even though such anonymity is illegal under the [printing act](#).

Zunar's trial is emblematic of the risks faced by cartoonists worldwide—an issue brought starkly into focus after the attack on French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January. Whether their sketches touch on politics, economics, religion, or national identity, cartoonists face the same grave threats as print and broadcast journalists who report on sensitive subjects. CPJ global research shows that cartoonists have been targeted with censorship, punitive lawsuits, physical assault, imprisonment, disappearance, and murder for their art-form journalism. Some have even fled into exile to escape persecution.

Those threats rise during periods of political, economic, or civil turmoil, according to cartoonists, editors, analysts, and advocates who spoke to CPJ. While cartoonists use humor, hyperbole, and innuendo to make their point, they are often targeted for harassment exactly because their satirical portraits, whether backhanded or overt, are able to communicate complex political ideas in a form that is accessible and resonates with mass audiences.

"There is almost a formula that we can recognize well in advance that tells us when things are getting risky for cartoonists," said Robert Russell, executive director of Cartoonists Rights Network International, an advocacy and monitoring group based in the U.S. "Any failed state or ceramic leader headed toward either an election or

some kind of political transition will always crack down on cartoonists during times of insecurity and strife.”

While social media and other Internet-based platforms that privilege pithy, potent messages have increased the visibility and reach of cartoons, the inherent ability of the medium to transcend borders and languages has simultaneously raised risks for those who draw and disseminate provocative images, CPJ found.

“In many quarters, cartoons are reaching people now more than ever with the advent of social media,” said Aseem Trivedi, an Indian cartoonist who was detained temporarily and faced life in prison for his portrayals of endemic political corruption, including an image depicting India’s parliament as a toilet bowl. Sedition charges against him were dropped in 2012. “If there’s a message that speaks to something greater, its chances of going viral and spreading to the masses are high,” said Trivedi, whose cartoons appear in print and online, and are often shared over social media.

For many cartoonists, that fluidity and reach has been a double-edged sword. Repressive governments and extremist groups have targeted those who parodied or portrayed the Prophet Muhammad, a criminal offense under blasphemy laws in many Muslim countries. Rising Internet penetration rates have allowed enemies of the press everywhere to more easily monitor and respond to cartoons they view as objectionable.

“Both governments and the intolerant monitor social networks very closely, hunting for any sign of adverse commentary,” said Russell, adding that the Internet’s free flow of news and information has mobilized and radicalized vast new audiences. “The world is unfortunately waking up to the power and influence of cartoonists, [responding] through the exercise of violence and murder.”

The killing of 12 people, including eight *Charlie Hebdo* journalists and cartoonists, in Paris on [January 7](#) put those risks into tragic relief. In one of the deadliest attacks on the press ever documented by CPJ, two men gunned down the magazine’s staff, including Editor Stéphane Charbonnier, in apparent retaliation for its satirical portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad. [Press reports](#) citing witnesses said the gunmen shouted “Allahu akbar” (God is great) and referred to the Prophet during the attack.

Divergent global responses to the killings broke down binaries between free speech and religious sanctity, a divide that has tested the fabric of many culturally diverse Western countries and imperiled editorial cartoonists who dared parody religious

issues. In a show of solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* and to support free speech, Russell says his organization published more than 500 cartoons from satirists worldwide. But as the initial outpouring of support waned, debate ensued over whether *Charlie Hebdo* should be upheld as a champion of free speech.

That debate centered largely on the magazine's editorial stance, with some commentators [arguing](#) it breaks with a tenet of political cartooning by "punching down" at the powerless rather than "punching up" at the powerful, and others saying it used racial stereotypes. The PEN American Center, which this month bestowed its Freedom of Expression Courage Award on *Charlie Hebdo*, challenged that reading in an [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*. In defending its decision, the freedom of expression group cited Charbonnier's stated aim to "banalize" all discourses considered too fraught to discuss.

The *Charlie Hebdo* killings have had the opposite effect, witnessed in the spread of measures against "offensive" speech and greater surveillance of media in the name of combating terrorism. A [StoryMap](#) compiled by CPJ showed how reaction to the attack and content of the magazine spread across the globe regardless of language. Some authorities claimed they were trying to preempt a repeat of the furious response to portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad published by Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. The cartoons in that case, circulated widely over the Internet, included an image by Kurt Westergaard that showed the Prophet wearing a lit bomb in his turban.

Angry protesters took to the streets in several Muslim-majority countries, resulting in about 200 deaths, according to [news reports](#). Editors who reprinted the images were sacked, arrested, or imprisoned, and a handful of publications were suspended or shuttered, [CPJ research](#) shows. The Al-Qaeda jihadist online magazine *Inspire* named Westergaard and two of his *Jyllands-Posten* colleagues on a [hit list of "infidels"](#) in 2013, according to reports.

Westergaard continues to face [death threats](#). According to news reports, in 2008 police foiled an assassination plot by local extremists linked to a transnational terror group. In 2010, [an ax-wielding assailant](#) tried to break into a "panic room" Westergaard had built in his home on the advice of Danish authorities after the first plot against him was uncovered. A decade after the divisive cartoon was published, Westergaard continues to live under police protection, according to reports. "It has created very much fear. I am also afraid," Westergaard told the [BBC](#) in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* murders. "Fear from [attacks] will not disappear. It will be for a

very long time. Of course, there will be some type of self-censorship, and that in a way is the worst kind of censorship.”

Jonathan Shapiro, a South African cartoonist known as “Zapiro,” echoed that sentiment in an interview with CPJ. “Cartoonists everywhere are gripped by a fear of copycat events,” Zapiro said. A cartoon he drew for South Africa’s *Mail & Guardian* in 2010 of the Prophet Muhammad lying on a psychologist’s couch lamenting that “Other prophets have followers with a sense of humor” was followed by several death threats, he said. The newspaper issued a [voluntary apology](#) for the cartoon, which was drawn [in response](#) to reaction over a Facebook page calling for everyone to draw the Prophet. “It doesn’t matter where you are, somebody will see [your cartoons] and could react with violence,” he said.

Satirists acknowledge that criticism is a two-way street with the Internet.

“Cartoonists have to take heat, too,” said Signe Wilkinson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist in the U.S. “I’ve been called anti-Catholic, anti-Muslim and ‘feminism’s own Goebbels’—not someone I ever tried to emulate,” Wilkinson, who is best known for her work in the *Philadelphia Daily News*, said. “My readers have the freedom to complain as vigorously and obnoxiously as they choose. They just don’t have the right to shoot me.”

Other cartoonists who came under threat from extremists have fled into exile or gone to ground. Arifur Rahman, an award-winning Bangladeshi cartoonist, was arrested in 2007 under the country’s Special Powers Act after local Muslim clerics perceived that one of his cartoons, published in the weekly *Alpin* magazine, portrayed the Prophet Muhammad as a cat.

After protests in the capital, Dhaka, the paper apologized and sacked its deputy editor, Rahman told CPJ. Held for more than six months in preemptive detention, subjected to fatwas by clerics at the Baitul Mukarram national mosque who called for his death, and facing blasphemy charges filed by [an imam](#), Rahman applied for and received asylum in Norway.

Rahman was tried and sentenced in absentia to two months in prison in 2009 over a caricature he says was grossly misinterpreted. The magazine’s mother paper, *Prothom Alo*, nearly lost its publishing license; Rahman said local papers would no longer publish his cartoons. The unserved jail term and pending death threat, Rahman said, means it will never be safe for him to return to visit family and friends. Even after several years in exile, he maintains a low profile, deleting any online information that could reveal where he works or lives.

“Religious people are looking everywhere for blasphemy, but we cartoonists are just trying to make people laugh,” said Rahman, who works as a freelance cartoonist in Oslo, often pillorying religious extremism and terrorism in the name of Islam. “I didn’t imagine before *Charlie Hebdo* that anyone would kill just for a drawing. ... I fear that someone could still be looking for me.” His fear is well-grounded: This year, three Bangladeshi bloggers who had been critical of religious issues were [hacked to death](#) in separate attacks by assailants believed to be Islamic extremists.

The fear of radical Islamic reprisal drove American cartoonist Molly Norris into hiding after she made a tongue-in-cheek call in 2010 on her Facebook page for an “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day.” Norris’s cartoon did not directly depict the Prophet Muhammad, but included caricatures of a tea cup, thimble, and domino, according to [news reports](#).

Norris received death threats from religious extremists, including the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda cleric Anwar al-Awlaki who, before he was killed in 2011, wrote an article in *Inspire* saying that Norris’s cartoons made her a “prime target” for killing. She was [advised by the FBI](#) to “go ghost,” changing her identity, home, and job to preempt possible reprisals. Her former editor, Mark Baumgarten, said Norris has not been heard from since sending a brief farewell email in the fall of 2010.

“The press is a powerful force—be it an international newspaper or a cartoonist's blog—and we must take great care with that power and be very intentional about what we are doing with it,” said Baumgarten, editor-in-chief of *Seattle Weekly* and former executive editor of *City Arts*, publications to which Norris regularly contributed. “Molly had purpose but, judging by her response to the developing threat, had not understood the risks and ended up in a situation for which she was not prepared.”

Cartoonist rights advocate Russell said: “I don't think very many Americans understand that a cartoonist in our midst has had to enter what is effectively a version of the FBI's witness protection program.” He added: “[Norris] has had to separate herself from her friends, her colleagues, her profession, and her family in order to assure her safety. ... Every country that protects free speech should understand this and begin weighing the costs.”

In countries where free speech is restricted, the gravest threat is often the government. Jonathan Guyer, a Cairo-based researcher and editor who has [written widely](#) on the [role of cartoonists](#) in the Middle East and North Africa, said cartoons

often represent some of the most forceful political commentary when opposition voices and media criticism are stifled.

His research shows that cartoonists use symbols, subtleties, and coded language to dodge censorship, challenge the status quo, and question official narratives in ways print journalists are often not able to under repressive regimes. “A cartoon’s pull is always more visual,” said Guyer. “Cartoonists use all kinds of workarounds and tricks” so that “harsh critiques are often easily missed. ... By definition, cartoonists are risk takers.”

Syrian cartoonist Ali Ferzat’s withering portrayals of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime embodies that audacity, according to Guyer. That editorial courage came at a high personal price: In 2011, Ferzat was kidnapped by unknown assailants who purposefully crushed his hands to prevent him from drawing, before dumping him by a roadside, [CPJ research shows](#). Now living in exile in Kuwait, he told the *Guardian* in 2013 he was initially scared to start drawing again, but, he said, “If I am not prepared to take risks, I have no right to call myself an artist. If there is no mission or message to my work, I might as well be a painter and decorator.”

Prickly national leaders often respond with a vengeance to cartoonists who are overt with their metaphors. South African cartoonist Zapiro raised the ire of President Jacob Zuma over a cartoon that graphically insinuated that the leader had run roughshod over the judiciary to win acquittal in a 2006 rape case.

In a scathing caricature, Zuma was shown loosening his pants while members of the African National Congress (ANC), Congress of South African Trade Unions, and South African Communist Party held down a blindfolded woman wearing a sash slugged “justice system.” An ANC member was portrayed saying: “Go for it, boss.”

“Justice is often represented by a woman, a symbol inherited from the Romans and Greeks. Combined with a political gang rape scene, it made for a very powerful metaphor about what I felt Zuma was doing to the justice system,” Zapiro said about the image, which inspired a series of “Lady Justice” cartoons critical of Zuma and his ANC-led government.

In 2008, Zuma filed defamation charges against Zapiro and the *Sunday Times* newspaper that published the image, seeking 5 million rand (about US\$400,500 today) in damages on claims it had harmed his dignity. Undeterred and defiant, Zapiro produced a follow-up portrait of Zuma with unfastened trousers

approaching a woman wearing a “free speech” banner and struggling in the grip of an ANC member.

After nearly four years of legal proceedings, Zuma dropped the charges on the grounds he was concerned about the precedent a guilty verdict would have on free speech, according to an official statement quoted in [news reports](#). At the time the lawsuit was dropped, Zuma had 12 defamation-related suits pending against the media, according to [news reports](#). “When politicians use lawsuits, it’s a strong form of intimidation, a way to crush journalists,” said Zapiro. “Luckily, we were able to stare him down.”

In other instances, newspapers have seemingly buckled under government pressure. When cartoonist Rayma Suprani juxtaposed a normal electrocardiogram reading under the heading “Health” against another slugged “Health in Venezuela” that merged the signature of the late President Hugo Chávez with a flat-line heartbeat, her *El Universal* newspaper editors sacked her within hours of the image’s publication, she told CPJ.

“What really bothered them was the use of the signature of the late President Chávez in the cartoon, which took apart a whole sacred iconography that the government wants to sell Venezuelans,” said Suprani, referring to President Nicolás Maduro’s incumbent administration. “The use of this signature on public buildings and apartment buildings was taken apart by comparing it to a broken electrocardiogram and patient who was dead, just like the state of the health of Venezuelans.”

Suprani, a 19-year veteran of *El Universal*, said the critical tone of her cartoons started to peeve her editors soon after the Spanish-language publication was purchased in 2014 by an anonymous consortium of private investors whose identities, [according to Bloomberg](#), are protected under contract. Suprani, and others cited in [press reports](#), have claimed the group is in league with Maduro. Since the new owners took control, several reporters have been fired or quit in protest over editors’ perceived pro-government editorial stance, according to [CPJ research](#). (*El Universal* failed to respond to CPJ queries on the allegations of pro-government censorship.)

“Weeks before my firing, I started being censored by my editors, [who asked] questions like, ‘You have no other options to publish tomorrow?’” said Suprani, who now publishes her cartoons on independent websites. “The idea was to try to make you see that you can tone down your work a bit and not lose your job. But in my case

this was impossible because I am someone who is highly committed to freedom and my work.”

El Universal did not respond to a CPJ request for comment on Suprani’s claims that she was fired for her cartoon, or that editors tried to censor her.

Ecuadoran cartoonist Xavier Bonilla, known as Bonil, faced government censorship for his biting caricatures of President Rafael Correa’s administration. CPJ documented how the Superintendency of Information and Communication (SUPERCOM), a state-run media monitoring body created under Correa, [ruled](#) in 2014 that Bonil must “correct” a cartoon depicting a police raid on the home of a journalist who was investigating a government lawsuit against energy company Chevron for alleged environmental degradation in the Amazon. His paper, *El Universo*, was fined a percentage of quarterly revenues, amounting to about US\$95,000.

This year, [SUPERCOM ruled](#) that one of Bonil’s cartoon montages that jabbed at a fumbling speech given by a soccer player-cum-politician in Correa’s ruling party represented “socioeconomic discrimination.” The ruling forced *El Universo* to run an apology for seven consecutive days in the print and online spaces where Bonil’s illustrations usually appear. It also advised Bonil to “correct and improve” his journalistic practices and abide by the Communications Law—ambiguous legislation passed in 2013 that CPJ research shows has been applied to stifle media criticism.

Bonil told CPJ in April that state prosecutors were gathering evidence in pursuit of possible criminal charges over the cartoon. “No matter what, I need to confront the challenge, not give in to fear, and try to be more creative,” said Bonil, while acknowledging that he has shied away from politically sensitive topics to avoid more government harassment. “Humor and satire generally bother those who have a big ego. ... That is why I often say that we, the cartoonists, are the doves that tarnish the glow of the statues of the arrogant who think they were born immortal.”

The freedom to draw also comes under fire in conflict situations, CPJ research shows. The disappearance of [Prageeth Eknelygoda](#), a Sri Lankan cartoonist and journalist who vanished on his way home from work in January 2010, is a case in point. The cartoonist went missing amid then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s military campaign to subdue an ethnic Tamil insurgency in the island nation’s northern region.

In one widely circulated sketch, Eknelygoda portrayed a half-naked woman sitting before a crowd of smiling men with the words “preference of the majority is democracy” written on the wall behind her. The image conflated two taboo topics: the Rajapaksa government’s widely documented human rights abuses, including allegations of the use of rape as a weapon, and the marginalization of minority groups under ethnic Sinhalese majority rule.

According to Eknelygoda’s wife, Sandhya, he was investigating the government’s alleged use of chemical weapons in Tamil areas at the time of his apparent abduction. He was also scheduled to exhibit a collection of cartoons entitled “Cave Art of the 21st Century” in the commercial capital, Colombo, days before an election that Rajapaksa won. Before he went missing, Eknelygoda, who reported for the independent *Lanka E-news* website, had been kidnapped by unknown assailants and received threatening phone calls over his writing, [CPJ research shows](#).

Sandhya said although she cannot pinpoint a particular image that may have led to her husband’s disappearance, she believes his cartooning “triggered a response.” “Going through his collection of cartoons one could understand the political and economic situation of the country in that time,” Sandhya told CPJ by email. “His intention was to wake up the people who were sleeping, afraid of the Rajapaksa regime, through his cartoons since everyone could easily understand them.”

While some political cartoonists deliberately hide their meaning, satirists have also faced persecution when their intentions are misinterpreted. Iranian cartoonist Mana Neyestani was imprisoned and driven into exile in 2007 over a cartoon of a child conversing with a cockroach. Part of a humorous series of images for young readers in the government-run magazine *Iran-e-jomee* on how to repel insects, the cartoon was perceived as an insult to the Azeri minority group because the anthropomorphized roach was portrayed as speaking a word in their dialect, Neyestani said. The reaction led to him being held in detention for “publishing provocative materials and fomenting discord.”

“Protesters considered the cartoon part of a governmental conspiracy against Azeris. The government accused me of disturbing national security. Some people called me a racist; some others called me a social security disturber. My narrative was totally absent,” said Neyestani, adding that the image was taken out of context. “I think the Azeris used my cartoon as a pretext to demonstrate and show their anger to the government over their historical humiliation” through discriminatory laws and behaviors.

At the end of 2014, Neyestani published *An Iranian Metamorphosis*, a book of illustrations retracing, in Kafkaesque detail, his treacherous voyage from three months in an Iranian prison to five years in international limbo while applying for political asylum, followed by life as a cartoonist in exile in France. The turbulence, Neyestani said, has afforded him a unique perspective from his new home, Paris, on the *Charlie Hebdo* killings.

“It showed wherever you live as a cartoonist you would not be safe—even in the heart of democracy and liberty you could be killed because of your job,” said Neyestani, who now draws cartoons for critical Iranian exile-run news sites *IranWire*, *Radio Zamaneh*, and *Tavaana*. “I always say that a cartoonist is like a parachutist: we jump out of a plane even if we have high anxiety. It is our job and love, so we jump and hope that we’ll land safely.”

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