

Jesters who were jailed for joking get serious for elections

By Min Kyi Thein
The Associated Press

MANDALAY, Myanmar — During Myanmar's (also known as Burma) darkest days of dictatorship, the Mustache Brothers' brazen, sarcastic stabs at military leaders won them nationwide notoriety, and fans. While the feisty comedic duo continues to draw large crowds under the nominally civilian government, there is one subject they refuse to poke fun at: the upcoming general elections.

After all, they say, the country's future is at stake, and it's time to get serious.

As the sun sets on the city of Mandalay, a crowd forms and the two men start stressing the importance of voting for the National League for Democracy (NLD). The opposition party's popularity is tied closely to its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent 15 years under house arrest when the junta ruled as she called for respect for human rights, the rule of law, and national reconciliation.

"Our people have suffered from bad politics since 1962," said the extravagantly mustachioed Lu Maw. "There's been so much damage in the past. That's why it is so important for all of us."

"Everybody wants real change," the 65-year-old added, "so it is so important the NLD wins."

Myanmar started transitioning from a half-century of brutal military rule to democracy five years ago. But it's been a bumpy road. Early reforms implemented by nominally civilian leaders — including the release of junta-era political prisoners and the freeing up of the media — have stalled or started backsliding.

Many believe the country's old military rulers are still pulling the strings, and that they will continue to do so even if the NLD wins the majority of seats in parliament — as most experts predict.

When Myanmar goes to polls on November 8, the Mustache Brothers want people to be out there, exercising their newfound rights to vote. If they do?

"Oh, the NLD will win by a landslide!" says clean-shaven Lu Zaw, 63. "I would say the NLD will win the coming election for sure, as long as it is free and fair."

The Mustache Brothers — they are actually cousins — perform regularly at their house-turned-theater in Mandalay and, these days, on the streets campaigning.

As evening falls, the pair are in full swing. One yells out, "Please don't steal anything. The government does not like competition." The other parades around with a sign that says "Competition."

Though now fixtures on the tourist trail, many years ago they were the jesters who were too edgy for the generals.

That story goes back to 1996. Ired by one particular show, the junta arrested two of the then-three-man team. They served five years in prison with hard labor.

One of those who was jailed has since died. Today the surviving Mustache Brothers still make fun of the current leaders. But the ordeal left its mark. With the prospect of real political change approaching there are some things too serious to joke about.

Three share Nobel medicine prize for tropical disease drugs

By Karl Ritter and Maria Cheng
The Associated Press

STOCKHOLM — The Nobel prize in medicine went to three scientists hailed as "heroes in the truest sense of the word" for saving millions of lives with the creation of the world's leading malaria-fighting drug and another that has nearly wiped out two devastating tropical diseases.

Tu Youyou — the first-ever Chinese medicine laureate — turned to ancient texts to produce artemisinin, a drug that is now the top treatment for malaria. Inspired by traditional Chinese medicine, Tu discovered that a compound from the wormwood plant was highly effective against the malaria parasite, while working on a project for the Chinese military during the Cultural Revolution.

She will share the 8 million Swedish kronor (about \$960,000) award with Japanese microbiologist Satoshi Omura and William Campbell, an Irish-born U.S. scientist.

Omura and Campbell created the drug avermectin, whose derivatives have nearly rid the planet of river blindness and lymphatic filariasis, diseases caused by parasitic worms and spread by mosquitoes and flies. They affect millions of people in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, leaving sufferers blind or disfigured and often unable to work.

The Nobel committee said the winners, who are all in



COMICS FOR CHANGE. Lu Maw (top photo) displays a sign during an evening show of the Mustache Brothers in Mandalay, the second largest city in Myanmar (also known as Burma). During the country's darkest days of dictatorship, the Mustache Brothers' brazen, sarcastic stabs at military leaders won them nationwide notoriety, and fans. While the feisty comedic duo continues to draw large crowds under the nominally civilian government, there is one subject they refuse to poke fun at: the upcoming general elections. Pictured in the bottom photo is Ma Nge, a female member of the Mustache Brothers, dressed as a man, dancing in a Mandalay street during an election campaign for opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party. (AP Photos/Hkun Lat)

"I have no plan to tell jokes about the election because I don't want to cause a disturbance," says Lu Maw, who avoided prison because he didn't perform on the fateful night.

"This is a very important time for us and I'm taking it very seriously. I don't want to detract from the election's meaning by my jokes."

The Mustache Brothers have a special relationship with Suu Kyi. The infamous performance that sent them to prison took place at her home in Yangon, at an Independence Day celebration. She's never forgotten what happened, and they are devoted to her.

"Vote for the NLD!" the men chant as the audience breaks out into a dance. "They are the guiding star of the people!"



LIFE-SAVING SCIENTISTS. Kitasato University professor emeritus Satoshi Omura speaks during a press conference at the university in Tokyo after learning he and two other scientists from Ireland and China won the Nobel Prize in medicine. The Nobel judges in Stockholm awarded the prestigious prize to Omura, Irish-born William Campbell, and Tu Youyou — the first-ever Chinese medicine laureate — for discovering drugs against malaria and other parasitic diseases that affect hundreds of millions of people every year. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

their 80s and made their breakthroughs in the 1970s and '80s, had given humankind powerful tools: "The consequences in terms of improved human health and reduced suffering are immeasurable," the committee said.

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