

Militarism and Authoritarian Rule: Visualising Desire for Social and Political Change in The Philippines and Indonesia through The Comics of Nonoy Marcelo and Sapto Raharjo (Athonk)

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ABSTRACT

This article looks into the use of comics as a means to visualise desire for social and political change in societies under authoritarian rule and militarism. Specifically, this study will focus on Bad Times Stories 1 and 2, created by the artist Athonk during the New Order of Indonesian President Suharto, and Ikabod Bubwit, produced by Nonoy Marcelo in the New Society of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos. Let it be pointed out that the works chosen in this study are symbolic in nature and presuppose an indirect attack on the state. The comics here are witty, humorous, reflective of the pop culture of the time and set in a simulacra world of constant battle between good and evil.

Keywords: *semiotics, comics, militarism, authoritarian rule, social and political change, Indonesia, Philippines, Nonoy Marcelo, Athonk*

INTRODUCTION

The visual arts is an effective medium for social and political communication in societies under authoritarian rule. With the use of various modes of representation – from the academic easel-type of painting to popular forms such as comics and posters – the objective to communicate easily and freely is achieved because of the orientation of most societies towards a visual culture, and the fluidity of art to explore the symbolic language as an expression within an environment of strict social control. This medium cuts across all sectors of society – the rich and poor, educated and uneducated, urban and rural dwellers alike. The visual arts also has the capability to dramatise sentiments that may heighten the sensibilities of both the artist and the public, and to elude the authoritarian suppression of freedom of speech.

Benedict Anderson, in his study of Indonesian cartoons, posits that comics represents a microcosm of a social order, with visual images and text reflective of the society in a specific period of time (Anderson 1990: 162). The medium is understood of its context both within the comics and the real world by way of the intertextuality of the images and text. The various forms of comics – whether editorial cartoons, comic strips, or comic books – open many possibilities of interpretation from the perspective of both the artist and the reader. Comics is also an alternative form of political communication reflective of the populist perspective, especially for people without the means to use other established venues of expression. As Anderson said – "cartoons were a way of creating a collective consciousness by people without access to bureaucratic or other institutionalised forms of political muscle" (Anderson 1990: 163).

It is therefore the aim of this article to look into the use of comics as a means to visualise desire for social and political change in societies under authoritarian rule and militarism. Specifically, this study will focus on *Bad Times Stories 1* and *2*, created by the artist Athonk

during the New Order of Indonesian President Suharto, and *Ikabod Bubwit*, produced by Nonoy Marcelo in the New Society of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos. Let it be pointed out that the works chosen in this study are symbolic in nature and presuppose an indirect attack on the state. The comics here are witty, humorous, and reflective of the pop culture of the time and set in a simulacra world of constant battle between good and evil. This article excludes the activist comics produced by nationalist groups which are direct, very intense and used as collateral for information dissemination among the grassroots.

The theory of semiotics shall be used in the reading and analysis of the comics. Since art is seen as signifying practice in this framework, the medium, its elements, and images will be viewed as signs. Hence, the art works will be read beyond the formalist mode and will focus on how objects are woven to the plurality of meanings and nuances within the political, cultural, economic and social spheres of a society.

SUHARTO'S NEW ORDER: ANTHONK AND HIS *BAD TIMES STORIES 1 AND 2*

The ascendancy to power of Suharto and his New Order platform in 1966 marked another authoritarian rule for the people of Indonesia. Lasting 30 years, Suharto's administration was characterised by central control and long-term personal rule. Suharto used the military to pursue his agenda of a stronghold over Indonesia's social, political, economic and cultural affairs. The military played a vital role in running the government by limiting civilians from participating in the affairs of the state in the regional and local levels, by controlling the national economy through the management of enterprises, and by suppressing the rights of the common people.

In the early years of his power, Suharto vowed to eliminate communism in the country to reduce the threat to his government. With the Communist Party of Indonesia as the focus of his attention, he ordered the detention, even the execution of people behind the party. Under his operating principle of *alon alon asal kelakon* (slow but sure), he eliminated all pro-Sukarno officials in the military and in the government and gained total control of the state.

Suharto's regime was marked by economic development and relative peace from the communists and Islamic extremists but the process was not peaceful, since militarism was his key to effect such changes. He relinquished power in 1998 when Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Sukarno and leader of the opposition group Indonesian Democratic Party, won the elections.

The Indonesians were under strict social control during Suharto's entire rule. In the arts, works depicting protest were suppressed. Suharto allowed Western art to flourish by permitting the importation of materials such as Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and Japanese comics which he considered politically sterile as compared to the emerging peoples' art that protested against his rule. Particularly, he denounced the local artists for using comics as a subversive material and ordered its confiscation in schools and comics stands (Berman 2001: 18).

It is in this social, cultural and political turmoil that Sapto Raharjo or Athonk became the artist who worked on posters and comics to express his sentiments against the social ills and mismanagement of the state. Born in 1971 from an Adventist Christian family, his father was a military man who reared him and his siblings in a very strict manner. He grew up in Semarang, in the Kailiungu area and at an early age, was exposed to the Kokkang caricature artists' community (Komunitas Karikaturias Kaliungo). Athonk studied at the Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesia Art Institute) in Yogyakarta in 1990 where, going against the norms of

society, he adopted the punk subculture. It is said that his alternative lifestyle was already a protest against the social and political situation in Indonesia (Imanda 2002: 74).

It was also during this period in Yogyakarta that Athonk joined student activism against Suharto's New Order. He became active in demonstrations and advocacy work through his protest posters and comics, which eventually led to his detention by the military in Jakarta in 1996. This, however, became a turning point in Athonk's life as he continued his fight against the New Order through his politically-loaded works. Rejected by the mainstream art community for his strong convictions, he nonetheless pursued his art through various exhibitions, leading him to explore the public space as a venue to display his protest posters. He also continued to depart from the conventional mode¹ of producing of his comics.

Bad Times Stories 1 and 2

Athonk's comic book series entitled *Bad Times Stories 1 and 2* was published independently in 1994. Considered as one of his significant works, the series expressed strong sentiments against Suharto's authoritarian rule.

Athonk's choice of medium is symbolic of his protest art. His use of popular art forms such as posters and comics was in itself a protest against the canons of the art academy. He produced the book unconventionally, using only bond paper and ball pens, and photocopying 50 copies which were circulated through pass-on readership. He initially gave the copies free of charge but later sold them to collectors abroad. In terms of content, Athonk took a different path from the Indonesian artists. Then, comics were heavily influenced by the West and Japan. His work was therefore labelled as "underground comics" because of the alternative mode of production, distribution and thematic choice (Imanda 2002: 75).

A reading of Athonk's work does not end in the literal meaning of the text and images but rather, encourages the audience to go beyond and explore the plurality of meanings that each frame, dialogue, quotation and expression may lead to in the context of Indonesian culture. Laine Berman, an American scholar on Indonesia culture, wrote in the introduction of the comics:

Closer inspection however, reveals there is an awful lot more going on within these frames than viewers would initially recognise. Each contorted frame within the jumbled mass depicts actual and symbolic events in Indonesian history as well as the artist's own history as a citizen of Indonesia. The idealism of youth mixes right in with some rather biting social and political commentary (Athonk 1994: 1).

The language of the comics should also be understood within the bounds of Indonesian culture since Athonk adopted the Sosro English used by the locals in the town of Jalan Sosrowijayan to communicate with tourists. English here is used in phrases and is grammatically erroneous.

The readers must also contextualise Athonk's style of comics – from the writing to the visual rendering – in a postmodernist framework. The work does not follow a strict structure of storytelling and visualisation as Athonk digresses a lot from the main story by incorporating lyrics from his favourite rock and roll music, local expressions, jokes and side comments within the frame but outside of the bubble dialogue. Most of the time, the additional texts are out of context in the picture plane but are related to the social and political convictions of the artist (Imanda 2002: 75).

Athok situates his main characters, the three black demons, in a world of "endless warfare" in search of "who is good and evil" (Athok 1994: 1). The artist departs from the usual meaning of demons and angels by switching their roles in the comics. The angels now are the forces of evil and the devils the advocates of good. Athok, in his visual representation of the devil, used the stereotyped symbols of black, tails, long hair and horns but added a twist by giving them halos and making them look funny and meek. On the other hand, the angels are represented in white, with a heart-shaped symbol of love on their chests, but with sharp-looking eyes and an uptight stance (resembling soldiers). In the story, we see how the devils, tagged as public enemies, struggle to escape from the dominant angels whose mission is to destroy them.

PRESIDENT MARCOS' NEW SOCIETY: NONOY MARCELO AND *IKABOD BUBWIT* SERIES

The declaration of Martial Law by President Ferdinand E. Marcos on 21 September 1972 under Proclamation No. 1081 signalled his dictatorial rule of the Philippines for over 25 years. Many believed this was a well orchestrated act of Marcos to perpetuate his stay in power over and above the provision in the 1935 Constitution, which prevented him to run for office for a third term.² The declaration was made on the basis of the severe political and social unrest caused by the tension of the government with the leftist and rightist groups and the need to reform the society.

Under the Martial Law rule, power was centralised to Marcos, who used the military as his right hand to take command of the political, social, economic, and cultural affairs of the country. Marcos increased the powers of the armed forces greatly and created the Civilian Home Defense Forces to fight the communists in the rural areas. He violated the Bill of Rights by ordering, upon his sole discretion, the arrest of thousands of Filipinos suspected of

subversion, most of whom were his critics and political opponents. Freedom of speech was suppressed with Marcos' control of the media and Filipinos were prevented from expressing their political sentiments. Charging the capitalists of perpetuating poverty in country, Marcos ordered the government take over of major corporations, but the move only sought to advance the agenda of amassing wealth for him and his cronies. The whole country was under strict social control and people were living dangerously under the watchful eye of the strong and powerful force of the military.

Marcos envisioned a new society for the Philippines under his Martial Law rule. His framework for a new Philippines was based on the reformation of social and political values that impeded the development of the nation. These values, he said, were caused by the many years of colonisation under the Spanish and the Americans. He warned that the process would be difficult, like what other neighbouring Asian countries were going through, and stressed the need for sacrifice to attain a better nation. Marcos' social, economic and political policies were geared towards nationalism and equality to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich. Unfortunately, what seemed a laudable program was only in paper as this was just a disguise for Marcos to remain in power.

The Marcos dictatorship was a turbulent period for the nation with the common people suffering the most. Protests of various forms abounded the streets, with students in the frontline risking their lives to call for a change of leadership. Under his rule, many civilians were killed and tortured by the military. In 1986, the People Power Revolution finally ousted Marcos and his family from power.

It is in this kind of history that Nonoy Marcelo created his comics to protest against the Marcos dictatorship and to express his desire for social and political change. Known as an eccentric man who takes on life in spontaneity, Marcelo was a genius in his witty yet acerbic

commentary of Philippine politics and the Filipino pop culture in his numerous cartoons such as *Tisoy* (1960s), *Aling Otik* (1970s) and *Ikabod* (1970s).

Marcelo started his witty and humorous representation of the sensibilities of the youth in the 1960s in *Tisoy*, a cutting edge comic strip on the popular culture of the Filipino youth published in *Manila Times* for a long time. He was inspired to create Tisoy, the main character, from a male college classmate – a stupid, good-looking mestizo popular among girls. After his stint in the US, he returned to Manila soon after the declaration of Martial Law. Initially impressed with the relative peace and order and the positive changes during the early years of the New Society, he created a comic strip and introduced another character, Aling Otik, a street cleaner, in another newspaper. He first saw the city cleaners, called Metro Manila Aides, at the airport. Through his new character in this comic strip, he focused on the contradictions and made commentaries on the Filipino values in the light of changes happening in the nation.

Ikabod Bubwit

This article will look into Marcelo's *Ikabod* series as a medium of his social and political sentiments against the Marcos dictatorship. His comics were first published in the newspaper *Bulletin Today* in the late 1970s and in the 1980s as comic books. The series became so popular that he had a great following from people of all walks of life. Although his comics are regarded as mainstream in terms of production and distribution, it is a very significant contribution in the study of protest art in the Philippines. His *Ikabod* series is one of the most popular comics and showed his talent in creating a material that takes glimpses of the resiliency of the Filipinos in adapting to the social world built within the confines of intense fear, oppression from the state and heightened militarism.

Marcelo used pen and ink in his comics. His characters resemble Mickey Mouse, having big ears, slightly slender bodies and wide shoes. However, their faces were rounder and they had sharper eyes. He used the combination of Tagalog and English or Taglish as his text medium. He wittingly incorporated the sensibility of the youth through various expressions and slang that were commonly used in the 1970s and early 1980s. As such, a foreign reader would need to understand the nuances of the Filipino culture in order to grasp the meaning of the lines of the characters.

Marcelo's comics revolve around a funny character of a mouse called *Ikabod Bubwit* (mouse in Filipino) as he takes on the challenges of life in the world of mice called Dagalandia. Ikabod's family plays an important role in society: his high strung-father, Peter, is mayor of Dagalandia. Ikabod is joined in the story by other mice (of different personalities depicting the Filipinos in the New Society) in their adventures and misadventures in coping with the hardships of living in a world of constant fear. Here, Dagalandia is headed by a big boss, the lazy fat cat called Myawok, who coexists with the mice but becomes a threat anytime it gets annoyed.

READING THE IMAGES AND TEXTS

The dictatorship of Marcos and Suharto and how they employ the use of military in the affairs of the state are clearly signified in the works of Athonk and Marcelo. The works are likewise expressive of the changes that the artists desire for their respective societies. To illustrate my point, I will first discuss *Bad Times Stories 1* and *2*, followed by *Ikabod Bubwit*.

In *Bad Times Stories 1* and *2*, the force of the military is signified by three images – the angels, bombs and the stone heads in the Daliland. As discussed earlier in the content of the

work, the angels act as the guardians of the so-called good in the world by continuously suppressing the devils. The visual representation of the angel – in uniform white with a heart-shaped symbol in the centre, and bulging eyes that seem to always be on the lookout – further highlight the impression of a militaristic rule.

The troops are under the command of a top angel called "the Boss" whose image is similar to the angels but is depicted wearing a military cap with a star at the centre. Here, the representation of a leader can be viewed as a reference to the authoritarian rule of Suharto. We see in the frame below how the troop of the angels confers with "the Boss" in planning their attack on Daliland to exterminate the devils:



Figure 1 "The Boss"

Militarisation is further signified by numerous frames containing heavy armed attack, ammunitions such as the huge bombs and the use of text outside the dialogue of the characters such as "Sometimes we use a bomb to end up something troubled, right?"

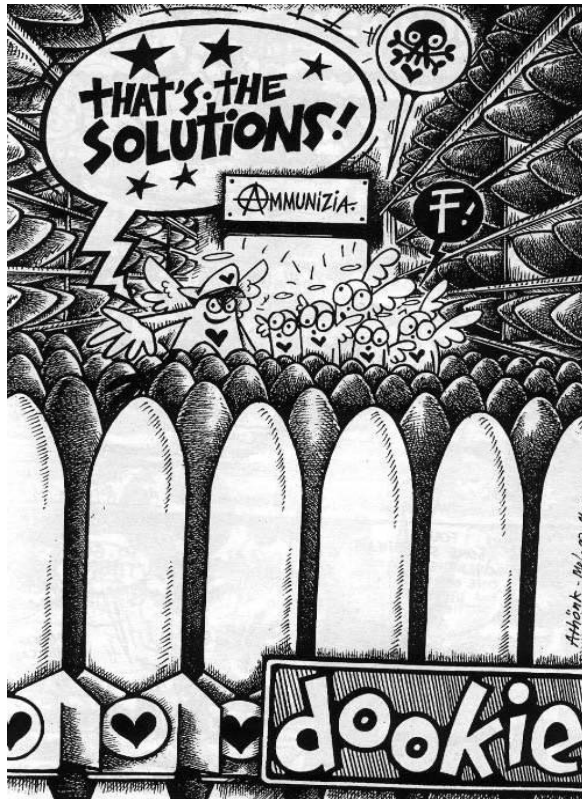


Figure 2 The bomb



Figure 3 Attack of the angels

Furthermore, the many stone heads in Daliland symbolise a militaristic rule. One can read the image as people whose actions and freedom are guarded by the power of the dominant force. The hundreds of stone heads – frozen, immobile and gagged – dot the tiny paradise and signify the lost or "captured dreams" of the masses. The images can be seen in the following portions of the comics:

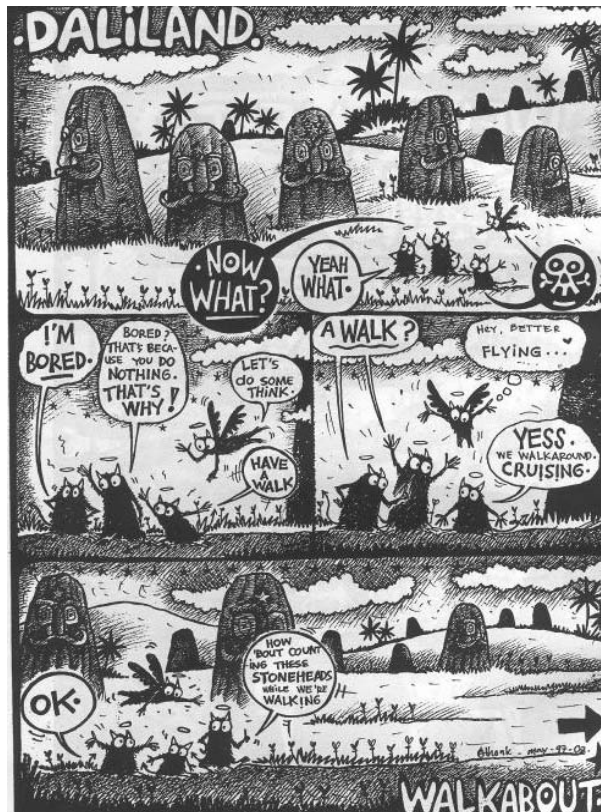


Figure 4 The stone heads

Athonk's use of angels to signify the military personnel's oppression of the masses is both witty and ironic. Where in authoritarian regimes the military is often viewed in the negative light, Athonk chose to use angels, who are traditionally considered "good," to portray the soldiers. Conversely, civilians or dissenters, usually considered the "victims" under military rule, are signified as devils, or public enemies. Thus, while the good (angels) battle the bad (devils), their roles have been reversed.



Figure 5 The "double strapped" stone

On the other hand, Marcelo's *Ikabod Bubwit* represented the military might in a less pronounced way as compared to Athonk's work. Here, what is seen as the militaristic rule of the society is the very strong undercurrent of fear running through the *bubwit* (mice in Filipino) population, who are in constant threat of being exterminated by Boss Myawok. Under such a repressive environment, the mice are ever alert and have developed various mechanisms to cope, subvert even, the cat's tyrannical rule. In terms of images, size of the evil-looking cat dominates the small mice in Dagalandia.

In the earlier discussion of the comics of Marcelo, we see how Boss Myawok continuously and whimsically throws his weight around Dagalandia to oppress the mice, who he treats as his slaves. In this frame, Boss Myawok orders a mouse to file his nails then comments that with its sharpness, these can be used as a tool to attack the mice population. The mice, upon hearing this, immediately run away, hailing the cat as: "*Boss Boss Myawok hari ng teritorya!*" (Boss Myawok is the King of Land).



Figure 6 Boss Myawok as the leader

Another strip which magnifies the authoritarian rule of Boss Myawok is seen in the frame below, which depicts him as furious with the mice for playing a trick on him. We see in the image the powering size of Boss Myawok as he confronts the mice.



Figure 7 Boss Myawok confronting the mice

The alter ego of Boss Myawok, a mouse named Boss Peter who acts as mayor, reinforces the tyrannical rule of the cat. Various images and texts likewise signify authoritarian rule, a sample of which are the following strips:



Figure 8 Boss Peter as the alter ego

Marcelo's use of a mouse as the main character (and a mice population on the whole) with the cat as the oppressor basically signifies the structure of Philippine society, where the millions of poor Filipinos are exploited by the powerful forces in the society such as the state, military and a handful of rich capitalists. In the Philippines, mice are often alluded to in terms of one's financial or economic status: "*mahirap pa sa daga*," which, translated, is "poorer than a mouse."

DESIRE FOR CHANGE

In the aspect of the desire for social and political change, Athonk and Marcelo shared the same sentiments of a change of leadership and freedom from oppression. Athonk signified his desire for change in leadership with the conversion of a captured angel into one of the black devils, and his anti-militarism sentiments through the devils' slogans of "*make love not war*." Interestingly, Athonk also depicted his idea of attaining peace through a compromise: to enter heaven, the devils were amenable to painting themselves in white stripes just to gain the angels' acceptance.

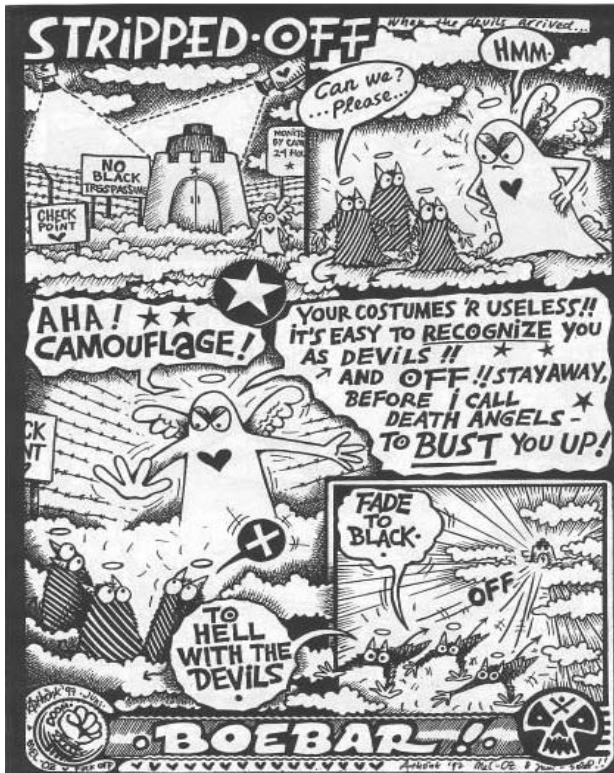


Figure 9 The devils in stripes

More pronounced representation of Athonk's desire for a change of leadership can be found in the opening text of *Bad Times Stories 2* where he quoted Psalm 69 of the Book of David which states:

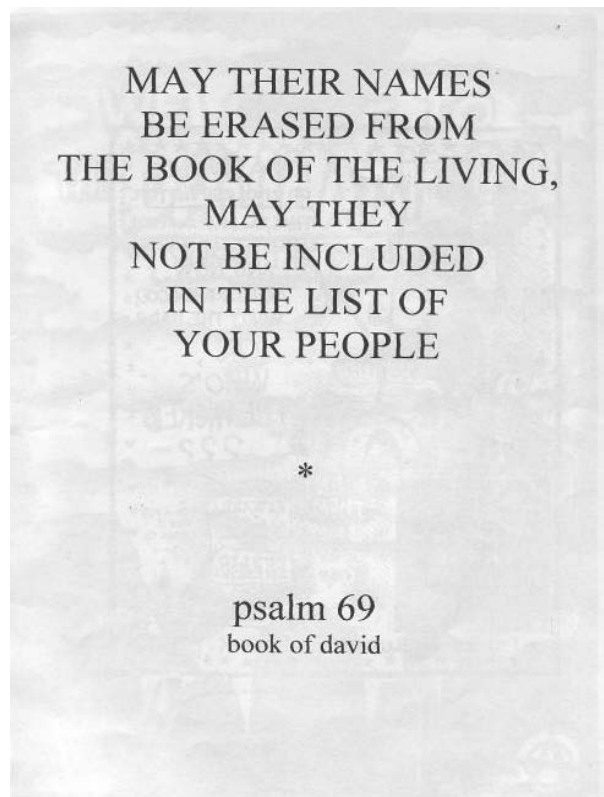


Figure 10 Text signifying change

Another act of the devils in calling for change is in *Bad Times Stories 1* where they capture an angel and convert him as one of the devils.



Figure 11 Converting the angel into a devil

In Dagalandia, Marcelo portrayed the mice as constantly coming up with ingenious ways to get even with the despotic Boss Myawok. In this particular portion of the comics, the call for change was raised by the mice population by protesting against the many issues in Dagalandia including the rule of Boss Peter as mayor – "*Imperialismo, Pyudalismo, Kolonialismo...misis Mo...Ikaw Mismo*" (imperialism, feudalism, colonialism...your wife...and you):



Figure 12 Protest against imperialism, feudalism, colonialism, Boss Peter's wife and Boss Peter himself

In another strip, an angry Boss Peter asks the ants, who are holding a demonstration, why they are not tired of doing so...The ants answer back "Si Boss Peter naman – bakit kami magsasawa sa kakademo...eh ikaw mismo hindi nagasasawa sa pagka mayor mo" (We will not get tired of protesting because you yourself are not tired of being mayor). The ants' response show that the issue is actually the mayor's leadership, which can only be settled when he is removed from office or when he steps down.



Figure 13 Protest of the ants

As earlier discussed in the content of some of his comics strips, we also see how the mice outwit and challenge the cat despite great danger to their lives. This symbolises the mice's resentment against the rule of a leader who abuses his powers. We see in this strip how they try to help Boss Myawok retrieve the meat he dropped in the water. To recover the meat, the cat asks the mice to hold on to his tail to keep him from falling in the canal himself. The mice comply but at the point where Boss Myawok is about to reach the meat, the mice let go of his tail and he falls. In the last frame, the cat accuses the mice: "*Kung hindi n'yo sinasadya, bakit sabay-sabay nyong nabitawan ang buntot koh?*" (If it was not intentional, why did you let go of my tail together at the same time?)



Figure 14 Getting even with Boss Myawok

More obvious representation of the desire of Marcelo for change of leadership is seen in this comic strip where Boss Myawok is lying sick and asking who among the mice population are concerned about his health. When Mayor Peter tells him that they are thinking about the book on "101 Uses for a Dead Cat by Simon Bond," Boss Myawok immediately stood and pretended not to be sick.



Figure 15 101 uses for a dead cat

In another strip, Marcelo showed his desire for change by the showing the lack of support by the mice population when Mayor Peter asked them to help Boss Myawok get his chunk of meat which fell in the canal. He mice said they will not help unless they will be asked to throw Boss Myawok in the canal.



Both works express the desire to be free from oppression, with the material itself a symbol of the suppressed voice against the state. Under the leadership of Suharto and Marcos, the people could not freely voice out their sentiments against the state. Thus, Athonk and Macelo's use of the popular medium of comics is a symbolic attack of the state and a representation of their views on the social ills and mismanagement of their respective rulers. Both authors used their characters to express sentiments that would otherwise be considered seditious given their milieu.

Figure 16 Support Boss Myawok

CONCLUSION

Bad Times Stories 1 and 2 and *Ikabod Bubwit* are reflective of the social and political conditions under the authoritarian rule of Suharto in Indonesia and Marcos in the Philippines. The artists used their art to express their sentiments in a symbolic way to elude arrest from the state. Although different in the mode of production – Athonk being the "underground comics" and Marcelo going to the mainstream through publication in a newspaper – both dealt with the issues of militarism and authoritarian rule that oppress the common people. The artists, as citizens of their respective nations, speak of change of leadership and freedom from oppression. Interestingly, they do not only address the issues at hand but also visualise how their own people subvert and cope with the difficulties of life under a tyrannical rule.

Athonk and Marcelo created their imagined world of Dagalandia and Dalilandia where fantastic characters representative of their own peoples live a constant battle between the good and evil. As to who eventually won, the histories of the Philippines and Indonesia tell us that in the end, good does prevail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Athonk's comics are classified as "underground" because of its independent publication, "pass around" mode of distribution and storyline of his comics.
2. 1965–1969 first term, 1969–1972 second term.

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