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Pirates against the machine

Pop culture creates global symbols of resistance. But can its borrowed power truly reshape political reality?

Hardly anyone will have missed the images of the protests in Indonesia that have been in the media spotlight over the past weeks. Throughout the country, people are hitting the streets to demonstrate against perceived inequality and the country's backward economy. Yet even before the most recent protests, an unusual symbol was catching the eye.

During preparations for the 80th anniversary of Indonesian independence in mid-August, a celebration at which the country's national flag is traditionally raised, a different flag became increasingly prominent this year, triggering discussions in the government. It is a white skull and crossbones on a black background — a classical pirate flag. But with one important difference: the skull on the flags is wearing a yellow straw hat with a red ribbon.

The flag belongs to the 'Straw Hat Pirates', a gang of pirates from the Japanese manga series *One Piece*. Under its leader Monkey D. Luffy, the gang is looking for treasure while fighting against an overpowering, corrupt and ruthless world government. In the manga story, its flag represents freedom, friendship and resistance in the face of suppression. And it is precisely this flag that has divided the Indonesian government in recent weeks. While some ministers considered the straw hat flag to be legitimate criticism, Sufmi Dasco Ahmad, the deputy speaker at the House of Representatives, regarded it as an attempt to divide the nation. That a pirate flag should cause such an upheaval may initially seem surprising. And yet Indonesia is not an isolated case.

A global language of protest

For many years, demonstrators worldwide have relied on symbols from films and series to draw easily understandable parallels to the real world and to complex concepts such as democracy, solidarity and the struggle for freedom. As a result, symbols of popular culture have now become a global language of protest and function as a universal code across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In a globally connected world, they are

becoming effective tools in protest movements. Surveys do indeed show that allusions to films or series – as well as other symbols of pop culture — increase the performative effect of protests and at the same time foster identity and solidarity within a movement.

The internet, and particularly social media, play a key role here. Symbolic protest messages can be diffused quickly, with a single image communicating the issue involved to an international audience — without the need for any knowledge of the specific context. They also create a lower entry threshold that allows many people to identify with a protest and participate in it. At the same time, as allusions to pop culture are easily recognisable, they help to trigger greater awareness. This, in turn, promotes traditional media reporting and increases social media reach.

Young people in particular are addressed directly in this way and understand intuitively what is at stake. This is also confirmed in an article in *The Guardian*, in which British teenagers explain that they really do grasp realities such as inequality, a self-serving elite and a compliant public in the book and film series *The Hunger Games* –– even if adults consider them to be too young for them. It is specifically this link to familiar pop culture when considering genuine problems that makes it easier to convey complex concepts.

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Their humorous and harmless nature means that allusions to pop culture are well-placed to catch the eye and enable protestors to camouflage the seriousness of their cause in a playful disguise. Particularly in authoritarian states and countries with limited freedom of speech, subtly hiding content in pop culture symbols appeals to demonstrators because they are then relatively free to criticise the regime without censorship or risk to themselves. Even authoritarian governments find it difficult to justify arrests based solely on a harmless motif from a film or a series. And yet the power of such symbols does not only lie in the disguise that they can provide.

A further factor that makes protests even more impactful is the emotional effect created by allusions to popular films and series, which have the unique capacity to allow audiences to immerse themselves in the lives of the characters and build a bond with them. This can, in turn, encourage individuals to take action, thereby making it easier to

mobilise them.

Examples of this are not hard to find. Already in 2014, the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* was first observed at demonstrations in Thailand following the military coup there. In the film series, the salute symbolises solidarity and rebellion and therefore came across as visually powerful and easily understandable at real protests. As a result, the Thai military regime immediately banned the salute. Nevertheless, it spread across borders in Asia, appearing at countless protests in the region. The salute could be seen on the streets of Myanmar in 2021, where – also following a military coup – thousands of people assembled to demonstrate for democracy.

Similarly, thousands of workers gathered in Seoul and other South Korean cities in 2021 to demand better working conditions. To grab attention, some of them disguised themselves in red and black full-body suits including face coverings from the popular series *Squid Game*, in which desperate people compete to the death in a series of brutal games, with the aim of winning large sums of money. The demonstrators' costumes mirrored their economic exploitation, thereby creating a direct link between fiction and reality.

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In the same way, during Trump's first term in office in 2017, groups of women in red cloaks and white bonnets were spotted in American cities. By alluding to Margaret Atwood's book *The Handmaid's Tale,* which was published in 1985, and the series of the same name from 2017, the demonstrators used their costumes to draw striking comparisons between the Republicans' attempts to restrict reproductive rights and the fictitious state of Gilead, where women are violently suppressed and reduced to no more than their ability to give birth. The powerfully symbolic maids spread from the US to Ireland and Argentina, where countless women dressed up to demonstrate for their rights. Even today, they are still visible on the streets of the US, where they are demonstrating against the creeping decline of democratic structures in the country — as was the case, for example, in the recent No Kings protests.

The link between all these examples is that pop culture is becoming the language of protest for people throughout the world. Films and series are

firmly anchored in culture and are enjoyed by many. Allusions to famous works can therefore immediately strike a chord with the public and make complex topics more accessible. Demonstrators throughout the world have long understood that a picture can say more than a thousand words.

While the use of symbols from pop culture cannot replace the political battle, they are capable of driving it forward. In our globally connected world, allusions to well-known series and films are a powerful tool to raise the visibility of protests and encourage solidarity with them.

Ultimately, it is clear that series and films provide a library of common symbols, which are easily comprehensible, emotionally engaging and simple to share, and from which different movements can draw inspiration. Sometimes a straw hat does indeed suffice to make a government nervous — but against the backdrop of the most recent protests in Indonesia, the limits of pop culture symbols are also becoming visible when it comes to political struggle. In contrast to manga, political challenges can unfortunately not be resolved in a few chapters.



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