

TICKLING PHARAOHS

A history of satire, fear and the securitization of laughter in Egypt: Resistance through political humor is deeply anchored in the country's history.

*A Pasteurized Pharaoh**



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Street Art (2012) showing Bassem Youssef, host of the famous Egyptian satirical news show *el-Bernameg*.

In 2010 Bassem Youssef was a politically apathetic middle-class heart surgeon desperately trying to leave Egypt. Like most of his compatriots, he suffered from the country's deteriorating living conditions, particularly from the increasingly frustrating work environment in the medical sector. Eventually, his ticket for a way out arrived in the form of an opening for a medical position in the United States.

While waiting for his visa papers in early 2011, an extraordinary phenomenon was in the making; hundreds of thousands of people all over Egypt took to the streets demanding “bread, freedom and social

justice”, along with the downfall of the President Hosni Mubarak, and his regime.

While observing the increasingly rapid chain of events, one particular factor angered Youssef: the regime's hypocritical incongruities manifested in the media's intentional refusal to broadcast the protests. He saw how this situation created two parallel realities: a brutally violent one in the streets juxtaposed with the peaceful pictures on TV, a phenomenon he chronicled in his his book *Revolution for Dummies: Laughing Through the Arab Spring*. So Youssef decided to do something. He created a weekly five-minute satirical show on YouTube called ‘B+’.

An eruption of creative forms of protests

Youssef wanted to expose the hypocritical incongruities of the regime and its minions, namely the media and public figures. The first episode was aired on March 8, 2011. In a matter of a few weeks, the show gained an immense popularity, attracting millions of views from all over the region. Youssef was offered a contract by the Egyptian private network *On TV* and his show – that was later called *Al Bernameg*, which means “the show” – became the most watched in the history of Egyptian and Middle Eastern television.

When the revolts erupted across the region in 2011, there was an eruption of creative forms of protests as well, such as graffiti and songs. Repressed under Hosni Mubarak’s regime, the revolt provided a moment of freedom for creative minds to publicly express themselves without fear.

However, while the creative and even highly artistic forms of protest in Egypt have been covered widely in international media, the historical background of these creative protests has received much less journalistic and academic attention than strikes and other traditional forms of resistance. This lack of historical research contributed to the impression in the West that, thanks to the internet, a new generation was able to import a foreign form of resistance into their ‘regressive backward society’ that supposedly had no experience in social protests. Due to this view the revolts and their creative expressions were treated as “unexpected” and “surprising”.

The same happened to Bassem Youssef: When he launched his show, he was quickly called “Egypt’s Jon Stewart”. This was well-intended to some extent – since it is true that Youssef drew inspiration from Stewart. But at the same time, the nickname reflects the orientalist and ahistorical approach with which Youssef was treated by several academics and journalists as Egypt’s first alleged satirist who imported western satire to a fundamentally different, religious, and conservative nation-state.

Egypt’s rich history of creative resistance

Contrary to the view illustrated above, Youssef and many other contemporary Egyptian satirists have a long and rich history of creative resistance to rely on:

Intellectuals as well as ordinary people had long used satire to challenge and expose the incongruities arising from the corruption and oppression inflicted by domestic and foreign ruling regimes. This is arguably a major reason for Youssef’s massive popularity – not his ‘copy-pasting’ of Stewart, as his nickname may imply. A deeper understanding of the history of political humor in Egyptian culture can help us better understand the significance of contemporary satire as a form of creative resistance to authoritarianism in Egypt and elsewhere.

“How do you entertain a bored Pharaoh? You sail a boatload of young women dressed only in fishing nets down the Nile and urge the Pharaoh to go fishing.”

This joke is arguably the earliest documented recording of written satire found in Egypt: an anecdote signifying the cosmic inevitability of the rule of a new dynasty, reflecting its autocratic and carnal tendencies. It is inscribed on a papyrus roll dating back to 2600 B.C., making it possibly the oldest recorded political humor in the world.

As noted by Amr Kamel, an Egyptologist at the American University in Cairo, humor was found everywhere, in literature and arts. Pointing to King Tutankhamun’s tomb, for instance, his enemies are depicted in embarrassing positions, while Queen Hatshepsut ordered the hieroglyphic inscriptions in her temple to satirize the wife of a foreign leader, displaying her as grossly overweight. It is possible to consider these depictions as the ancient origins of what today, in the age of the internet, are called memes.

In fact, according to Egypt’s ancient mythology, the world was created through a series of laughs from the gods. The first laugh created the seven parts of the universe, the second created light, the third created water, and the seventh laugh created the soul. These examples show how deeply ingrained political humor is in Egyptian culture, dating back to its ancient history.

In the 19th century, with the arrival of the printing press, Egyptian intellectuals gradually began to invest in popularizing their thoughts, critiques, and ideologies through the establishment of journals and magazines. These publications used satire as a major form of expression, mainly through the publishing of articles, novels, poetry, and associated caricatures. Many of them have used satire also as a method of creative resistance.

‘Abu Naddara Zarqa’ – the man with the blue glasses

A major innovator of this movement is Yaqub Sanua (1839 – 1912), commonly known by his pen name *Abu Naddara Zarqa*, meaning ‘the man with the blue glasses’. The son of an Egyptian Jewish mother and an Italian father tirelessly worked for political reform through satirical creative resistance. He began by creating a theatre company for which he wrote numerous satirical plays confronting the political and socio-economic issues of his society. In one of his first satirical plays, called *al Zawgatayn*, ‘The Two Wives’, Sanua satirically criticized polygamy, which not only infuriated the powerful Islamic shaykhs, but even more so the *Khedive* Ismail Pasha (1830–1895), also known as Ismail the Magnificent, the grandson of Muhammed Ali Pasha. The *Khedive* invested greatly in the industrial, economic, and urban development of Egypt and expanded the country’s borders. His policies, however, placed Egypt in severe debt, leading to the sale of the country’s shares in the Suez Canal Company to the British government and to his ultimate toppling from power in 1879 under British and French pressure.

The *Khedive* had previously honored Sanua with the title of ‘Egypt’s Molière’, but after his satirical stance against polygamy Sanua was scolded for ‘attacking religion and traditions’. “If your balls cannot satisfy more than one woman”, the Egyptian ruler said, “do not expect others to be like you”.

Sanua continued to satirize the *Khedive*. He also satirized British imperialism, as in his play *al Swa’h wa al ‘Humar*, ‘The Tourist and the Donkey’, which humorously caricatured and ridiculed John Bull, the fictional personification of Britain. The British authorities were infuriated, and complained to the *Khedive*, denouncing Sanua as a ‘dangerous person’. A few months later the *Khedive* acquiesced and ordered the closure of Sanua’s theatre.

To prevent him from giving up, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838 – 1897), an influential political activist and intellectual, encouraged Sanua to find other means to continue satirizing corrupt power and social ills. Supported by al-Afghani, Sanua established what is usually considered as the first widely and regularly published newspaper in Egypt and the region – wholly dedicated to satirical critique of politics and society, called after his own pen name Abu Naddara Zarqa, ‘the man with

the blue glasses’, in 1877. Throughout the journal Sanua brilliantly managed to expose the corruption of the *Khedive*, his domestic affairs, British colonialism as well as the local ruling elites through intelligent satirical journalism, anecdotes, and caricatures.

The *Khedive* tried to co-opt Sanua by offering him large sums of money in exchange for supporting the ruling regime. But Sanua refused. He even satirized the *Khedive*’s attempts, causing a scandal. Following this, the *Khedive* could no longer restrain his anger and ordered his assassins to kill Sanua. This shows how in Egypt a harmless form of expression such as satire has historically been perceived by an authoritarian ruling elite as a security threat, requiring the targeting of non-violent creative protesters and intellectuals and even seeking their murder.

Authoritarian regimes have regarded political humor as a security threat

The *Khedive*’s reaction is no exception. Throughout Egypt’s history consecutive authoritarian regimes – aware of their illegitimate basis for governance – have regarded political humor as a security threat that needs to be oppressed. They knew that humor has the quality of helping someone criticize and overcome the walls of fear that dictators try to build to keep a population submissive and exploited. At the same time, the fact that they are afraid of a mere joke only shows how insecure, scared, and fragile such a leadership must be.

For example, Gamal Abd el Nasser, who is often regarded as the region’s most powerful, courageous and charismatic leader, was afraid of jokes to such an extent that he established an office in the intelligence agency entirely dedicated to monitoring and reporting directly to him on popular satirical anecdotes told in public cafés – called *kahawy* – and elsewhere among ordinary people. That office is usually considered to be the first in the world to be officially and entirely dedicated to that purpose. In a public speech, Nasser once said:

“I know the Egyptian people. This is a nation seven thousand years old. They defeated and destroyed all invaders, from Qambiz to Napoleon. Then they sat and laughed at them ... This is a people who love to



Bassem Youssef

joke. I think this is a privilege, for it implies philosophizing over all matters. But if our enemies come and exploit this nature to achieve their own aims, we must be vigilant. Everyone must be vigilant.”

Nasser’s speech is reflective to a large extent of the regressive mindset through which Egypt’s contemporary ruling elite have governed Egyptian society. A mindset that regards critical creative thinking and forms of expression as a threat instead of an opportunity to build a more prosperous and just nation. Such regressive mindset has caused the country’s deterioration, leading to the revolts of 2011 and the ensuing instability.

Sanua, fortunately, survived. He escaped to Paris, where he continued to publish his satirical magazine and smuggle it to Egypt. Despite his exile, Sanua’s journal continued to be popular among average Egyptians. Peasants and ordinary people who often could neither read nor write filled the *kahawy*, to hear it read aloud by a literate person. It was even rumored that *Shaykhs* used to hide it under their turbans. As reported by a British observer, the journal was “read with the liveliest delight”.

Overcoming the regimes’ efforts to criminalize laughter

I find the similarity with Bassem Youssef to be particularly fascinating. In 2011 people would eagerly fill *kahawy* all over Egypt to watch Youssef’s weekly one hour and half satirical show on TV screens, laughing together while sharing *mezza* and *shisha*. I remember how I used to watch Youssef’s show during my studies abroad in the common hall of the student residence. I was surrounded by friends and classmates from all over the region. Even if sometimes they could not understand local Egyptian slang, I remember how much they laughed and loved the show, how they were also proud and glad that finally someone can go on TV and satirize corrupt power in Egypt and the region. The collective communal feeling of pride and hope was extraordinarily special.

Although Sanua died in his exile in France without seeing his vision of an independent and democratic homeland realized, his immense legacy and influence on succeeding satirists and intellectuals did not cease. Similarly, even though the revolution of 2011

forced then-president Hosni Mubarak to resign, and democratic elections took place, the elected government was toppled in a publicly supported coup two years later. The new regime forced the shutdown of Bassem Youssef's show, despite its phenomenal success. In another parallel to Sanua's fate, it tried to detain Youssef – consequently pushing him to flee the country into exile in the United States, where he lives to this day.

The contributions of Sanua and Youssef are only some examples, among many others, that demonstrate the historical significance and continuity of satire used as a mode of creative protest to oppression and exploitation, while defying and often overcoming the regime's efforts to criminalize laughter.

Sanua did not view himself as a mere comedian who only wants to make people laugh. Rather, he perceived himself as a humorist, a writer, and a caricaturist, with the purpose of reflecting or channeling collective emotions, as well as challenging and exposing the incongruous realities arising from corruption and injustice in his homeland. In other words, he was a satirist.

BIO



**The author writes under a pen name due to security concerns. Throughout the past 10 years, having lived in four countries on four different continents for studies and work, the author's state-approved and traditional pre-held beliefs on politics and life in Egypt and the Middle East have changed dramatically. They have been 'pasteurized' from the powerful state-run propaganda, revealing a controlling and exploitative reality in which even mere laughter may be a serious crime.*

FURTHER READING

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