



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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BASSEM YOUSSEF AND THE POLITICS OF LAUGHTER IN EGYPT

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The debates sparked by the arrest warrant issued for Egyptian television personality Bassem Youssef have come to symbolize for many people the fate of a “democratic transition” trapped in the growing polarization between Islamists and liberal secular voices. Youssef is the host of Egypt’s popular satirical show *al-Bernameg* (The Program). On March 31 he was questioned for five hours by the general prosecutor for defaming the president of Egypt and Islam.

The divide between Islamism and secularism was how the case was presented by U.S. and European media and by the critics of Youssef in Egypt. Yet this dichotomy, which is widely used to describe the thwarted revolution in Egypt as well as in Tunisia, does not reflect the broader tensions that have recently animated Egyptian politics and society, nor does it reflect the fact that the roots of Egyptians’ discontent lie in the failure of political actors to address the demands for social justice and dignity that were at the heart of the 2011 uprising.

By resorting to political satire, a genre that was absent from Egyptian television before 2011, Youssef’s corrosive, humorous style has captured in a refreshing way the frustrations and aspirations of many Egyptians.¹ It has also stretched the boundaries of “respectable” public discourse by mocking public

¹ On Youssef’s satirical style see Yves Gonzales Quijano, “Bassem Youssef, *Mon Qatar chéri* et l’utopie arabe,” *Culture et Politiques Arabes*, 8 April 2013, <http://cpa.hypotheses.org/4287>; Mark Allen Peterson, “News Parody and Social Media: The Rise of Egypt’s Fifth Estate,” Paper given at the panel “All the News? Reporting and Media 2.0” at the International Studies Association meetings in San Diego, California, 2 April 2012, <http://connectedincairo.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/news-parody-and-social-media.pdf>.

figures rather than just criticizing their policies, including figures from the government and the opposition as well as other power holders. Youssef relies on an impertinent and witty style seen by his opponents as justifying their attempts to silence him.

A heart surgeon who volunteered to treat the demonstrators wounded during the mass protests that led to the February 2011 ouster of Hosni Mubarak, Youssef started his program in March 2011. With the help of a team of volunteers he began recording episodes in his Cairo flat and broadcasting them on YouTube. Inspired by Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, Youssef's *B+* program consisted of him commenting on edited footage of Egyptian television programs. He first lampooned the regime's propaganda that had tried to delegitimize the revolutionaries in January and February. The absurdity of the propaganda, which reached its climax during the 18 days of the uprising, involved state television alleging that Iranians, Israelis, and Hamas had suddenly come together against Egypt's national interests. Regime pundits also blamed the "chaos" on deprived youth with low morals who allegedly had sex in Tahrir Square under the auspices of the then illegal Muslim Brotherhood.

As the protests gained momentum, the regime resorted to the media as a last resort to undermine its opponents. On January 27, the government shut down the Internet, not to prevent people from organizing protests—the Internet was certainly not the main channel for mobilization—but rather to give the regime a monopoly over information tools. Only when the balance of power began to tilt against Mubarak did the state media join the ranks of the revolutionaries to acclaim the "will of the people."²

This strategy of misinformation has been the target of Youssef's program since its inception. He not only mocked last-minute "revolutionaries," but, more importantly, pinpointed a legacy of longstanding biased media practices and complacent political discourses that have continued in the post-Mubarak era. *B+* received half a million views on YouTube during the first two weeks. Youssef then received an offer from privately-owned ONTV to host *al-Bernameg* during Ramadan 2011 and for the following season. *Al-Bernameg* then moved to the CBC channel for the second season, in November 2012.³

² Enrique Klaus, "Les journalistes face aux révolutions: Histoire de la presse égyptienne," *La Vie Des Idées*, 21 October 2011, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Les-journalistes-face-aux.html#nb3>.

³ *B+* and *al-Bernameg* are available online: <http://www.youtube.com/user/bassemoussefshow>; <http://www.youtube.com/user/albernameg?feature=watch>.

The success and significance of the weekly program lie not so much in Youssef's criticism of politics, which is not something new in Egypt. Indeed, the last decade of Mubarak's rule was characterized by an increase in private newspapers and media outlets that became a critical voice against the regime's policies. Rather, his satire dissects and challenges the mechanisms through which power is exercised and legitimized, not solely by government officials and the Muslim Brotherhood, but also in the media and in public debates.

As such, Youssef has extended the conventions of "respectable" public discourse by lampooning not only politicians such as Constitution Party leader Mohammed ElBaradei, members of the Salafi al-Nour Party, and President Mohamed Morsi, but clerics, celebrities, and the media. The conflict that opposed Youssef and one of his CBC colleagues in November 2012 shows how much discomfort he creates by breaking the norms of deference toward people holding positions of power, regardless of their political affiliations. The first episode of *al-Bernameg* on CBC parodied the owner of the channel, Mohamed al-Amin, as well as CBC talk show presenters, and mocked the channel's connection with remnants of the Mubarak regime.

In response, Emad al-Din Adeeb, one of the presenters lampooned by Youssef, filed a lawsuit against Youssef for libel and defamation and vehemently denounced his impudent satire of CBC and of its owner.⁴ Adeeb, a veteran journalist and media producer whose career in state-controlled media closely aligned him with the Mubarak regime, invoked the red lines that political satire should not cross, namely that lampooning journalists and the head of a channel is rude and improper because their prestige or economic influence grant them "respectability" and immunity from satire. This stance is reminiscent of the constraints that prevailed under Mubarak; despite enjoying some space to voice criticism against the regime, journalists had to conform to a sacred rule that proscribed direct attacks against the president or his family. Whether the source of authority comes from political, economic, or media power, it is clearly difficult to push the limits of the dominant conventions that have shaped public discourses. Following the conflict

⁴ *Al-Arabiya*, "Jokes Gone Wrong: Egypt Satire Show Sparks Media Clash," 26 November 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2012/11/26/Jokes-gone-wrong-Egypt-satire-show-sparks-media-clash.html>.

between Youssef and Adeeb, CBC did not broadcast the second episode of *al-Bernameg*, though the show was resumed in December.

In January 2013, Youssef faced a new lawsuit. This time the offended victim was not a pro-Mubarak media figure defending his reputation, but a lawyer alarmed by Youssef's "corrupted morals" and his impudence toward Morsi. Since Morsi's election last June, Youssef has regularly parodied him and criticized his power grab, especially since the November 2012 passing of a (later rescinded) decree granting the president wide-ranging legislative and judiciary prerogatives and since the December 2012 rushed adoption of a controversial constitution. For instance, Youssef portrayed Morsi as a superman with superpowers. Salafists and clerics are also a frequent target of Youssef's sarcasm, and he mocks their use of religion for political purposes.

The lawyer, Mahmoud Aboul Enein, filed the lawsuit demanding the withdrawal of CBC's license and the ban of the show for allegedly insulting the president and Islam.⁵ Representatives of the Muslim Brothers and of the president's office distanced themselves from the legal complaint, claiming that Enein acted independently and that Morsi was not involved in the case. After a warrant was issued against Youssef, the public prosecutor questioned him on March 31 and subsequently released him on US\$2,200 bail. The court judged that Enein did not have an interest in the case because Morsi did not intend to file a complaint against Youssef.⁶ Although filed by an individual, the lawsuit is part of several legal complaints against the satirist to attempt to silence him on political grounds. These procedures, along with administrative pressures faced by CBC, raise serious concerns about censorship and freedom of expression that are reminiscent of Mubarak-era practices. Youssef's case is not isolated, but is part of a series of legal complaints filed against journalists for allegedly spreading false information.⁷

These developments also show that the red lines that prevailed under Mubarak continue to be an integral part of the complex relationship between media and politics, and that by going "too far" in his bold criticism of

⁵ *Al-Arabiya*, "No Sense of Humor? Egypt's Jon Stewart 'Wanted' for Insulting President," 30 March 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/03/30/Renounced-Egyptian-satirist-ordered-for-arrest-by-prosecutor.html>.

⁶ Aya Batrawy, "Lawsuit Against Comedian Bassem Youssef, 'Egypt's Jon Stewart' Dismissed By Court," *Huffington Post*, 6 April 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/06/egypt-drops-lawsuit-again_n_3029576.html#slide=more289774.

⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists: <http://www.cpj.org/mideast/egypt/>.

political and clerical actors, Youssef is breaking norms of propriety that even some of his viewers embrace. But it is attempts to legitimize censorship, and ultimately political power, along nationalist or religious lines that are the target of Youssef's satirical project. To dismiss his critics, he recently asserted: "Under Mubarak, the regime told people you are against the nation; now they tell us you are against religion. Nobody is buying into that anymore." It is not entirely clear whether he is right, but by showing the limits of this rhetoric and using it to make people laugh, Youssef will most likely continue to be at the epicenter of debates about the role of the media in Egyptian politics.

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