

## **Mubarak Framed! Humor and Political Activism before and during the Egyptian Revolution**

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### **Abstract**

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 that lasted 18 days brought to an end President Hosni Mubarak's 30 year reign in Egypt. It brought to fore a variety of protest materials ranging in content from strict condemnation to comedic creativity, and ranging in form from hand-held banners during protests to Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and digital jokes online. However, criticism of Mubarak's character and regime predates the protests of the Arab Spring. The people of Egypt have developed a tradition of expressing their dissent against all political regimes, including Mubarak's, through the use of humor. This study analyzed the use of humor both during the Mubarak regime (including before the protests) and during the protests of the Arab Spring. Although the Egyptian people used humor-based strategies liberally both before and during the protests, it appears that the type of humor used and the functions it served were different. This study analyzed the political climate's influence on using humor as an overt and covert dissent strategy. The functions of different types of humor, both online and offline, and the specific advantages they offer in expressing political dissent are also discussed.

### **Introduction**

Eighteen days of citizen protests brought an end to the thirty-year reign of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. The components of such a revolution deserve attention and analysis for accomplishing the task of ousting a man from office who had stubbornly refused to heed similar calls for decades. When Mubarak's army cracked down heavily on the massive crowd of protestors in Tahrir Square, they retaliated with strategic weapons of their own, including humor, an unconventional weapon that was unmatched by Mubarak's traditional artillery. The incongruity of strategy and counter strategy, peaceful protests using humor and wit by the protestors contrasted sharply with the violent crackdown on the protestors by the authorities', underscored the demand of the protestors: Egypt was tired of a totalitarian regime. However, the Arab Spring, even though historic in its ability to galvanize public support for the overthrow of Mubarak's regime, was not the first expression of dissent among the Egyptian people; humor ridiculing Mubarak pre-dated the Arab Spring. In fact, Mubarak's entire regime had been marked by subversive jokes about him. The Arab Spring protests however moved the jokes and other forms of humor from the private sphere into the public sphere, and 'weaponized' humor in the hands of the protestors to discredit Mubarak who was once again staking his claim to legitimacy. Through the analysis of the humor surrounding Mubarak from the start of his regime to the end, this study analyzed the functions that such humor played both before and during which allowed it to be used as a strategic tool by Egyptian protestors.

### **The Characteristics of Humor and its Role in Political Activism**

The analysis of social movements typically focuses on organizational elements, such as leadership styles, the used strategies, and the development of conflict over a timeline (Hiller, 1983). This analysis is couched in the context of the power relations between the parties in conflict and

typically focuses on the “serious, goal-directed nature of social movements and ignores their lighter side (Hiller, 1983; p. 256). Hiller argued that humor and hostility are intimately connected and that social movements can produce humorous behaviors that warrant attention for the role they play in social movements.

Humor is a complex phenomenon that has evaded a commonly agreed upon definition. It has been referred to as a stimulus, a cognitive process, and as a response to a stimulus (Martin, 2007). Humor has been regarded as a facilitator of communication (Rossel, 1981) and as a predictor of growth in relationships (Graham & Rubin, 1987). It has been associated with academic aptitudes and emotional maturity and intelligence (O’Connell, 1960; Stump, 1939).

Although several theories of humor exist, they mostly fall under one of the following three categories: relief theories, incongruity theories, and superiority theories. Relief or arousal theories treat laughter as an emotional expression of repressed energy (McGhee, 1979, Morreal, 1983). It is often used to diffuse tension in interactions and to reduce dissonance. The laughter that follows this kind of humor allows for the pent up emotion or energy to be expended thereby allowing people to cope with tense situations. If relief theory focuses on emotions, incongruity theories focus on cognitive processes that acknowledge and resolve incongruities in the text or situation. Finally, superiority theorists contend that all humor arises out of a desire to feel superior to another. Mocking the actions of others or openly ridiculing them in an effort to “discipline by laughter” is a function of superior theory (Duncan, 1962; p. 187). This characteristic allows superiority humor to be used for social correction (Bergson, 1911). According to Meyer (2000), the rhetoric of humor can serve four main purposes: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. The identification function of humor is served when the humor brings the communicator closer to the audience by increasing his or her credibility. When humor is used to explain the rhetor’s position on an issue, it demonstrates the clarification function of humor. The enforcement function of humor requires humor to be used to enforce norms and rules. Even though there is something funny about the situation, the goal with the enforcement function is to change the situation. Finally, the differentiation function is established when humor is used to compare and contrast between individuals or groups to differentiate one from another. Meyer (2000; p. 323) also commented on the “paradox of dual humor functions” where humor is made more complex by the interrelatedness of the four functions of humor. Generally speaking, the identification and the clarification functions of humor unite communicators whereas the enforcement and differentiation function tends to be more divisive. However, the divisive kind of humor can also unite people within a group, for example, against a common enemy, by demonstrating ingroup trust and cohesion (Terrian & Ashworth, 2002).

For these very reasons, humor lends itself well to conflict situations. For example, it can convey the absence of malice or threat or sometimes help to cover up existing hostilities (Gruner, 2000). Humor can make an audience more receptive to persuasion (Martin, 2007). But perhaps its most interesting function is that it can also be used as a device to challenge authority by providing the shield of jesting (Meyer, 2000). Responding with serious logic and rationale to criticism delivered with a hint of humor renders the response inappropriate and ineffective. Hiller (1983) argued that humor when used in conflict situations, can be more than a diversionary tactic and can actually make “an instrumental social declaration that is useful in creating and sustaining conflict (p. 257). However, not all humorous strategies are created equal or perform the same functions. According to Hiller’s (1983) two-dimensional model for analyzing conflict humor, humorous strategies can be mapped by whether they are merely expressive (as an alternative form of expression to convey that which cannot be said directly) or instrumental (communication aimed

at changing the status-quo), and whether they are accepting of or resistant to the existing power dynamics. As a result, covert strategies of humor are more common when there is acceptance or resignation to the status-quo. Overt strategies, on the other hand, are employed when there is active resistance to the status-quo with a focus on creating change.

The use of humor in a political context is not a new phenomenon. In the western civilization, political humor has ancient roots and can be traced back to the times of Aristophanes, Plato, and Socrates (Corbeill, 1996; Schutz, 1977). Political humor can take several forms: jokes, witticisms, anecdotes, comedy, caricature, satire, or invective (Schutz, 1977). Humor can perform several social functions depending on the political system prevailing in a country. For example, within a democracy, humor is expected to reflect the principles of a democracy; therefore it is considered all-encompassing, open, unfettered, and egalitarian (Boskin, 1990). Also, within democracies, both politicians and their publics are free to use humor. For example, politicians use humor to outline political philosophies, ease politically tense situations, or help make a point whereas for the political opponent or critic, humor serves the purpose of exposing weakness, oppression, or incompetence (Nilsen, 1990). However, the average person too has the freedom to deride and poke fun at the politician. For example, court jesters and modern day comedians deliver scathing criticism and present undesirable realities and get away with little or no personal consequence. Furthermore, television's political satire or political entertainment programs, such as the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, have demonstrated the ability to influence political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the viewing audience (Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007). Effective political satire has the ability to adjust the power dynamics by giving the average citizen some power over powerful politicians. For this very reason, humor and jokes are considered the "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985: X).

However, in different political contexts such as those provided by dictatorships, humor varies in who uses it and the functions it performs. Here, humor mirrors the social conditions of an autocracy. Compared to the open and egalitarian humor of democracies, humor in authoritarian states is often clandestine and controlled. Because it reflects the unequal positions of power occupied by politicians with respect to the public, humor used in dictatorial states tends to be one-way, used more by the people to secretly ridicule leadership than by leadership for any purpose. As a case in point, Yutang (1937) called attention to the few and far between photographs of smiling dictators! A sense of humor is seen as a protection against all forms of fanaticism, rigidity, and excess, all of which are hallmarks of an authoritarian regime. Where it is used, humor serves as a popular form of protest against oppressive governments (Zlobin, 1996). Typically, social movements are fuelled by anger and fear, which minimize the use of tools such as humor that could be seen as flippant or detract from the cause (t'Hart, 2007). Moreover, the use of humor is known to differ across time and context (Kuipers, 2006). Understanding that humor's functions may lend themselves better to some contexts more than others may help to explain why some protests use humor while others don't. According to t'Hart (2007), humor's use as a serious strategy could depend on (a) the framing of the movement or the narrative that makes sense of the movement for those participating in it, (b) fostering a collective identity of the 'us' versus 'them', and (c) the need to counter negative emotions associated with protest movements and in harnessing the benefits of humor as a mood enhancer among participants of a social movement.

According to Zlobin (1996), political humor in dictatorial states enjoys a curious longevity; just by replacing the name of one dictator with another, the jokes continue to stay valid and relevant. For example, replacing Lenin with Brezhnev, and later Brezhnev with Gorbachev, recreated the same joke in a new light. This feature allowed jokes to travel easily across borders; jokes about

political dictators were imported from other countries and the specifics were changed to make the joke more relevant to a particular country (Pi-Sunyer, 1977).

Humor continues to perform this function to this day. For example, Syrian protestors in their ongoing agitation against the Assad regime have also taken to humor, transitioning from the use of light humor in posters and placards to more blatant and direct humor in the form of online shows and an entire catalogue of songs demanding the end of the regime (Karam, 2012). However, the use of these more overt tactics are not without peril as those seen as spearheading these creative attacks have faced death or dismemberment as punishment for their roles and as a deterrent to future protestors (Karam, 2012; Oritz, 2013). Several scholars have focused on the deployment of social media, or “cyberactivism”, in aiding political transformation (see, for example, Khamis and Vaughn, 2011a), or the potentials and limitations of new media in fostering political mobilization (see, for example, Khamis and Vaughn, 2011b) but few have focused on the use of humor as a dissent strategy in autocratic regimes even though its use continues to grow. It is therefore interesting and imperative to investigate what made humor the weapon of choice for the weak in the Egyptian revolution.

### **Egyptian Political Humor: An Overview**

For Egyptians, jokes have historically marked their relationships with their oppressive rulers since the time of the pharaohs. Ancient Egyptians were so well known for their wit and humor that they were reportedly banned from practicing law under Roman law because the Romans feared that the Egyptian humor would dilute the gravitas of the legal institution (El Amrani, 2011a). Evidence of humor can be found in ancient texts and letters, while visual pharonic humor has been found in tomb and temple decorations (Houlihan, 2001).

Although humor was an integral part of ancient Egyptian society, the practice of the common man ridiculing the pharaohs remained confined to the private sphere. Shaheta (1992) posits that the Free Officers Movement in 1952 led by Nasser and Naguib that ousted King Farouk brought about a change in the form of humor practiced in Egypt. The laws of the land became more closely aligned to democracy and allowed people to organize themselves based on political affiliation and guaranteed freedom of expression. However, while these freedoms were available theoretically, in practice, the leaders that ruled Egypt (Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak) paid scant attention to these rights promised to their citizens. So once again, jokes became a particularly popular way of expressing opinion. In fact, Nasser, the first president of Egypt, is believed to have attempted to collect jokes that were being told about him and his regime through his secret police (Kishtainy, 1985). When Sadat, the second president of Egypt died, Egyptian masses did not mourn his demise as they would a national leader. Instead, after his funeral, jokes that were a mixture of irony, sarcasm, and scorn began to circulate about his presidency (Shehata, 1992). A liberal opposition figure, Hisham Kassem, remarked that Mubarak’s regime had attracted an unparalleled number of jokes when compared to previous regimes. For example, Kassem (as cited in El Amrani, 2011a) says that in Nasser’s regime, it was mostly the rich who had their property nationalized by the regime that told jokes about it. Under Sadat’s rule, it was the poor masses that didn’t experience the benefits of liberalization that told jokes about him. During Mubarak’s regime, it seemed like everyone was telling jokes.

Given Egypt’s more recent history of being ruled by military rulers, Egyptians once again found themselves in a familiar situation where social injustice coupled with restrictions on freedom of expression co-existed with a rich tradition of joke-telling (Harutyunyan, 2012). Humor therefore has remained a critical form of expression in contemporary Egypt with political humor being circulated in professional and personal settings (Schielke, 2008; Shehata, 1992). Egypt’s political

and social climates, both ancient and modern, have provided an abundance of material for jokes about the ruling class in Egypt. Although Egyptians may have been powerless to directly voice their dissent in authoritarian regimes, they have always enjoyed the freedom to mock and ridicule their leaders in private using humor (El Amrani, 2011a).

The revolution that brought an end to Mubarak's regime offered a platform to showcase a broad range of humor that was developed and perfected over his three decade rule. Although political activism, in general, and cyberactivism, in particular, received a lot of scholarly attention for its role in getting Mubarak to step down, not much is mentioned about the role of humor in expressing dissent and paving the way for regime change. Therefore, in order to fill this gap, this study analyzed the humor surrounding Mubarak's image, both before and during the 2011 revolution, specifically focusing on the different purposes it served and the various roles it played during these periods.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study relied on textual analysis to analyze the use of humor, before and during the Egyptian revolution of 2011, in an effort to unveil the functions of humor as a tool for political activism. Textual analysis, which can also be referred to as "interdiscursive analysis," entails "seeing texts in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3)." Conducting textual analysis requires studying the actual text and interpreting the meaning(s) constructed through that text. Meanings in a text can either be explicit (i.e. overtly stated) or implicit (i.e. assumed or implied, Fairclough [2003]). For the purpose of this study, we looked at both the explicit, as well as the implicit, meanings embedded in the analyzed jokes.

According to Fairclough (2003, p. 11), interpretation of meanings in a text is

Partly a matter of understanding...what words or sentences or longer stretches of text mean, understanding what speakers or writers mean (the latter involving problematic attributions of intentions). But it is also partly a matter of judgment and evaluation: for instance, judging whether someone is saying something sincerely or not, or seriously or not; judging whether the claims that are explicitly or implicitly made are true; judging whether people are speaking or writing in ways which accord with the social, institutional etc. relations within which the event takes place, or perhaps in ways which mystify those relations.

Context plays a critical role in textual analysis in the sense that the meanings in a text have to be interpreted with the cultural context in mind (McKee, 2006). Since various cultures have different interpretive approaches, a particular text does not necessarily have to produce one correct interpretation. In other words, there can be multiple interpretations of the same text, and these interpretations may not be the same as the one intended by the creator of that text (McKee, 2006). This post-structuralism or cultural relativism, which is the basic characteristic of textual analysis, means that "different ways of thinking about the world might be equally valid (McKee, 2006, p. 52)."

Furthermore, as Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002, pp. 146-147) pointed out, "Textual analysis recognizes that meaning is a social production. The method is different from content analysis. Whereas the latter is interested in the recurrence of patterns in the manifest content, the goal of textual analysis is the study of the latent content of texts through a study of their signification.

The object of a textual analysis is not the meanings of the texts, but rather the construction of those meanings through the text.”

This complex process requires, according to Stuart Hall (1975, p. 15), three distinctive stages, namely: “a long preliminary soak in the text, which allows the analyst to focus on particular issues while preserving the “big picture”; a close reading of the chosen text and preliminary identification of discursive strategies and themes; and an interpretation of the findings within the larger framework of the study.”

### **The Sample**

The data for this study was gathered by entering key words, such as ‘*Mubarak jokes*,’ ‘*Egypt humor*,’ ‘*Mubarak humor*,’ ‘*Arab Spring jokes*,’ and ‘*Arab Spring humor*,’ into search engines such as Google and Bing. The search revealed a variety of materials, including jokes, visual humor through images, such as those seen on placards and banners used in the protests, and videos of improvisational humor (see Helmy & Frerichs, 2013; Makar, 2011, and Mersel, 2011 for examples of different humorous protest material generated during the Arab Spring revolution). It is important to highlight the fact that we were selective in choosing the examined materials for the purpose of this study. This selectivity was mandatory due to the magnitude of jokes and other types of humorous exchanges that were coined and circulated about Mubarak at different time intervals during his thirty years in office. We also analyzed only the English language jokes, and did not include the Arabic language jokes, due to the online accessibility of English jokes and the fact that both authors are fluent in the English language, but only one is fluent in Arabic.

We used the above mentioned search terms to locate jokes which were relevant to the framing of Mubarak’s image online, and we continued the search process until we were reasonably sure that we reached the “point of saturation,” in other words, that we didn’t leave out any theme that may have been relevant in terms of shaping Mubarak’s image humorously. We printed out all the Mubarak-related jokes which we were able to identify online in the English language. We first read all the jokes once, in an effort to map out what is available online, and then read each one of them again to identify the dominant themes, patterns and narratives, which reflected and framed Mubarak’s image through online humor.

Approximately 40 jokes with non-recurring content were identified from a first read. In keeping with the requirements of textual analysis, the narrative jokes were examined for ways in which they allowed Egyptians to make sense of their social reality using the jokes. The compiled jokes were, therefore, read several times in order to understand: (a) the context or the circumstance in which the jokes were coined; and (b) the underlying image of Mubarak that was communicated through the jokes during his regime. The jokes, while narrating the state of affairs at the time, also seemed to be constructing Mubarak’s image in a certain way. Therefore, the jokes were thematically organized and classified according to the dominant and prevailing images of Mubarak which were reflected through them.

The jokes were then arranged chronologically with substantiation from academic sources that tackled the social conditions prevailing in Egypt over Mubarak’s thirty-year rule. This process allowed for an approximate chronological reconstruction of Mubarak’s regime as chronicled by the jokes in conjunction with other scholarly sources. Each of the analyzed jokes seemed to have only one central idea or dominant theme. We were able to identify approximately 5 to 6 jokes representing each of the dominant themes. Out of these, one or two of the best jokes representing each theme were selected for inclusion in this study to exemplify the dominant images prevailing about Mubarak and the representation and framing of his character and his

rule via online humor. We don't recall one particular theme being more heavily represented or frequently mentioned than others.

We would like to emphasize that the selected jokes in this study provide the reader at best with a “snap shot” or a “flavor” of some of the most important images of Mubarak which were constructed and circulated through the use of humor online. However, they are not meant to provide an exhaustive, inclusive or comprehensive overview, which is beyond the scope of this qualitative study.

## **Analysis of Humor Employed Before and During the Revolution**

### ***The Role of Humor before the Egyptian Revolution***

The prevalence and popularity of jokes in modern Egypt has led to the phrase describing the average Egyptian as *ibn-nukta*, meaning *son of the joke* [Atif (1972) as cited in Shehata (1992)]. True to cultural character, it appears that the humor about Mubarak prior to the revolution was primarily in the form of narrative jokes. These jokes that varied in theme and length weaved stories that framed Mubarak's image in different lights. In the following paragraphs, we first examine some of the jokes that were exchanged during Mubarak's regime and then reflect on the purpose that such humor served. As one will observe, the themes in the jokes were not constant but changed periodically to adapt to different aspects of Mubarak's regime, from the time he assumed power leading up to the revolution.

*Dim-witted.* When Mubarak first came to power, although he was a decorated military hero, not much was known about his political prowess. Early jokes about Mubarak therefore focused on what was known about him: his rural background, his reputation for not being as charismatic as his predecessors Nasser or Sadat, and his dull wit. If jokes about Mubarak's predecessors surrounded their flamboyant personalities, jokes about Mubarak in the early part of regime, alluded to his limited intellect. The primary challenge for Mubarak when he came to power was his own reputation which ranged from awkward to dim-witted (Cook, 2012). This is clearly evident in the following joke:

*When Nasser became president, he wanted a vice president stupider than himself to avoid a challenger, so he chose Sadat. When Sadat became president, he chose Mubarak for the same reason. But Mubarak has no vice president because there is no one in Egypt stupider than he is.*

This frame, however, persisted even after Mubarak settled into his role as the president. With a budget deficit of 8% of the gross domestic product (GDP), debt-GDP ratio of nearly 80%, and double digit inflation, Egypt was in serious economic trouble (Rahn, 2011). When Mubarak's policies did not demonstrate the vision needed to guide Egypt out of the economic slump, people realized that Mubarak lacked the acumen to develop and deliver a comprehensive plan for the country's economic recovery. Some such jokes that captured Mubarak's inadequacies as president are listed below:

*Mubarak and one of his ministers were given a pair of monkeys as a state gift, and they decided to sell them to help with the national deficit. They each went to a different street corner in Cairo to hawk their wares. When the minister succeeded in selling his monkey, he came back to Mubarak, and instead found the monkey counting his money.*

*Unskilled/Non-charismatic.* A variation of the dimwit theme was that Mubarak lacked the needed skills to govern a country. The jokes also alluded that Mubarak lacked the charm and charisma of

his predecessors. By joking that Mubarak was neither smart nor charming, the Egyptians were basically making a statement that Mubarak had no credentials to run Egypt.

*At the gates of paradise, another joke goes, the guardian angel asks [a man] to state his talents and abilities. He answers "None." The guardian angel says, "Ah, you must be Mubarak."*

*Ruthless/Brutal.* When people started to protest Mubarak's inefficient regime, a clear shift in Mubarak's strategy emerged; the early 1990s of Mubarak's regime was marked by his brutal and violent attempts to crush all opposition to his presidency. This is best demonstrated by the fact that Egypt was under emergency law for the entirety of Mubarak's presidency. This meant that the state enjoyed unlimited rights that bypassed constitutional provisions which resulted in people being jailed without trial for indefinite periods of time. Torture and police brutality were common features of the regime; it was not uncommon for people to 'disappear' without a trace (Elshahed, 2011). The death of a young man, Khaled Saeed, allegedly beaten and tortured by the police, was in fact considered one of the triggers for the Arab Spring (El Amrani, 2011b). Jokes that marked this period of his regime likened him to a mafia boss who was feared not only by the masses but also by God and the Devil.

*God summons Azrael and tells him, "It's time to get Hosni Mubarak." "Are you sure?" Azrael asks timidly. God insists: "Yes, his time has come; go and bring me his soul." So Azrael descends from heaven and heads straight for the presidential palace. Once there, he tries to walk in, but he is captured by State Security. They throw him in a cell, beat him up, and torture him. After several months, he is finally set free. Back in heaven, God sees him all bruised and broken and asks, "What happened?" "State Security beat me and tortured me," Azrael tells God. "They only just sent me back." God goes pale and in a frightened voice says, "Did you tell them I sent you?"*

Mubarak also maintained a strict control over information flow. He launched the first Arab satellite to counter the liberalism introduced by Al-Jazeera and kept a tight rein on the programming content. This was in addition to the already existing control of the print media. Any expression of dissent in the media by journalists invited prison sentences for libel against the president and his family or for threatening social peace and national security (Lampridi-Kemou & Azaola, 2013).

*The teacher asks his students whether elephants walk or fly, and a student says they fly. The teacher corrects him, but the student insists. After a short exchange, the teacher asks the student for his name to add it to a detention list, and the student answers: "Ahmed Alaa Mubarak." Recognizing the name of the president's grandson, the teacher says: "Okay, you are right. Elephants do fly, but when they are tired of flying, they go down and walk."*

Another joke captures this frame of ruthlessness by focusing on the outcome of questioning Mubarak's governing style.

*Corrupt and greedy.* Going hand-in-hand with jokes that suggested Mubarak was a ruthless dictator, were jokes that alluded to his corrupt ways that were aimed at rigging elections, amassing private riches, and the willful bending of rules and regulations that favored the ruling minority while blatantly exploiting the vast majority of the country. Elections in Egypt had been a farce for the most part. Even in the first multi-candidate election in 2005, it was a foregone conclusion that Mubarak would win the election (Blaydes, 2011). Both vote-buying by the corrupt regime and spoiled ballots by the dissenting public were common features of the electoral process in Egypt (Blaydes, 2011). The following joke illustrates the state of electoral politics:



*At a meeting between the two presidents, Bill Clinton admires Mubarak's ability to win 99% of the vote. So as a gesture of friendship, Mubarak sends some of his political advisors to Washington to help with Clinton's 1996 reelection campaign. When the results come in, Clinton asks, "Did I win?" And the adviser answers, "I'm afraid not. The new president is Mubarak!"*

Corruption and cronyism also marked business enterprise resulting in more problems for the average citizen. For example, garbage accumulation on the streets had resulted from years of neglect towards urban development. The existing traditional door-door garbage collection method was scrapped in favor of mechanization; hundreds of millions of dollars were awarded in contracts to European companies (Winegar, 2012). These companies in turn, imported machines that did not fit on the narrow streets, underpaid the workers, and did not recycle the garbage. The rich and the politically connected quickly moved into gated communities built on privatized public land leaving the poor to live with the pervasive sight and stench of garbage through the streets of Cairo (Winegar, 2012). The divide between the rich and the poor grew more institutionalized; the wealthy and the politically-connected thrived while the impoverished majority struggled to make ends meet.

The discontentment faced by the Egyptian people was further fuelled by the fact that Mubarak seemed to be grooming his son to succeed him. This, to the Egyptian people, meant perpetuating what Mubarak had espoused for decades. People were aware of the riches stashed away by the first family. Jokes that marked this period of his regime mocked at his corrupt ways in politics, in favoring his sons in profitable business deals, and the overall corruption of his ministers who were looting the country.

*Hosni Mubarak was in a very important meeting with all of his ministers when he got an urgent phone call from Suzanne (his wife). He got up and took the phone call and asked her what the emergency was. Suzanne said, "Oh Hosni, Hosni, our house has been robbed!" Mubarak said, "Impossible, I'm in a meeting with all of the crooks in Egypt right now!"*

*Stubborn grip on power.* Despite having spent three decades in power, Mubarak seemed unwilling to step down. Part of his refusal to resign seemed to be fuelled by a powerful delusion that his policies were actually good for Egypt. He did not seem to understand that the people were fed up and really wanted him to go.

*The Interior Minister asks Hosni Mubarak to write a "Farewell Letter" to the Egyptian people. Mubarak replies: "Why? Where are they going?"*

*Hosni Mubarak, Barack Obama, and Vladimir Putin are at a meeting together when suddenly God appears before them. "I have come to tell you that the end of the world will be in two days," God says. "Tell your people." So each leader goes back to his capital and prepares a television address. In Washington, Obama says, "My fellow Americans, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I can confirm that God exists. The bad news is that he told me the world would end in two days." In Moscow, Putin says, "People of Russia, I regret that I have to inform you of two pieces of bad news. First, God exists, which means everything our country has believed in for most of the last century was false. Second, the world is ending in two days." In Cairo, Mubarak says, "O Egyptians, I come to you today with two pieces of excellent news! First, God and I have just held an important summit. Second, he told me I would be your president until the end of time."*

*Dodging death.* As Mubarak entered his 70s, jokes about his imminent death circulated widely; the entire nation was on a death watch, hoping that only his death would signal the end of his regime (El Amrani, 2011a). With year after year passing, jokes about his death made way for jokes about

his immortality. Despite an alleged six assassination attempts and complicated surgery, year after year passed and the aging Mubarak showed no signs of giving up on life or power prompting jokes about him stubbornly hanging on to life, analogous to his grip on power (El Amrani, 2011a).

*Mubarak was on a plane with his wife and son and wanted to throw a \$100 bill to his people. His wife suggested he split it so two families could use it. His son Gamal (until recently his political heir) suggested he split it in four instead, so four families could benefit. The pilot told him, "Why don't you jump out so all Egyptians can benefit?"*

### ***The Role of Political Humor during the Egyptian Revolution***

Humor was also an integral part of the 2011 Egyptian revolution's machinery, which created a political climate that publicized the dissent that had until then been a private matter for Egyptian people. The revolution moved from the minds and hearts of the people of Egypt, where revolt had resided for thirty years, into the heart of the city, Tahrir Square, and from there it spread to an international audience via the Internet. In other words, the audience for humor thirty years later was no longer just the Egyptian people, rather it became an international, diverse and geographically widespread audience. For the first time, Egypt was protesting, and the whole world was instantly watching and listening. This shift in medium, i.e., the utilization of new venues of communication, such as social media, especially Twitter, in addition to protest posters and banners, coupled with the seriousness and persistence of the protestors' demands, were all reasons behind the shift in humor style, as they did not allow for long, narrative jokes. The new medium and the new audience dictated a new type of humor, which is more public, brief, and direct.

Therefore, day after day protestors came up with new messages, slogans and illustrations that demonstrated the wit and humor that characterized the earlier jokes about Mubarak. The long narrative jokes were now replaced by quick and catchy messages, many of which can be tweeted in no more than 140 characters and the brevity of which captured the serious intent of the protestors that they had had enough. The messages left no doubt in the mind of the reader/viewer what the intent was. Some examples of these messages were the following:

*"Leave, my wife wants to give birth and the baby doesn't want to see your face!"*

*"Why are you not leaving? Are you stuck to the chair?"*

*"Leave! I am eight years old and my hand hurts!"*

*"Leave already, Uncle! My arms are tired!"*

*"The only one who obeyed the curfew was President Hosni Mubarak"*

*"The lesson is over, stupid!"*

*"The only vacuum to worry about is the one inside Mubarak's head".*

*"Game over!"*

*"Get out Mubarak!" (in several languages)*

*"Use Hosni glue. It sticks for 30 years!"*

*"De-Nile Not Only a River in Egypt"*

*"La Vache Qui Rit (The Laughing Cow) MuuhBarak"*

*"Please leave. I want to get a haircut."*

Although the themes during the revolution were not as varied as the ones contained in the narrative jokes before the revolution, two themes resonated with the people: it was time for Mubarak to leave, and he was so stupid that he didn't understand that. Additionally, a whole new genre of Mubarak jokes emerged on Twitter when people were asked to contribute jokes that used the word "Mubarak" as a verb. Some of the entries were:

*"#Mubaraked: To fail to get the hint, regardless of how obvious it may be; to stick something or glue something; to get stuck to a chair when you stand up; and to farcically outstay one's welcome, for example, 'I invited friends for dinner last night, but they didn't leave till 12 midnight, despite my yawns. They really Mubaraked!'; 'You are currently addicted and 'Mubaraked' to Twitter.'"*

The protestors also used technological metaphors in the gatherings at Tahrir Square in keeping with the digital spirit of the revolution. Placards reading "Mubarak is offline", "Mubarak fail", "Mubarak #Fail", and "Delete Mubarak" alongside with the icon for a recycle bin could be seen during the revolution (Zimmer, 2011).

The witty one-liners also inspired visual humor in the form of posters and placards during the revolution. Some posters visually equated Mubarak to a pirate, to the Devil, a donkey, while some others equated him to trash that needed to be taken out. Posters were also displayed that showed Mubarak with a Hitler moustache. Several posters commented on his dim-wit and almost all of them asked him to leave Egypt. As one political cartoonist commented, he no longer had to resort to masking the subject of his humor by changing the appearance; he could now openly ridicule Mubarak. His first cartoon after Mubarak's departure was that of an ordinary citizen pushing aside Mubarak to reveal the warm Egyptian sun and beautiful landscape (Williams, 2012). An art revolution also sprung up with graffiti artists painting the walls that were built to contain the swarming crowd of protestors. The colorful murals captured with poignancy and humor the reality of Egypt.

Vila (2011) reported an informal survey that found that people were using social media to circulate jokes about Mubarak's regime almost as much as they were using it to provide logistical information about the protests. Egyptian political humor showcased by the Arab Spring inspired international cartoonists and comics and created a new outlet for Egypt-based humor overseas. Some examples (Norman, 2011) are listed below:

Conan O'Brien: "Hosni's son Gamal Mubarak says he does not want to become President, which is just as well. If you've seen one Mubarak you've seen Gamal."

"Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said he would resign, but Egypt would then descend into chaos. Then he said, 'Now, I have to go look out a window for the first time in two weeks.'"

Jimmy Fallon: "Egyptian President Mubarak's son Gamal will not run for President. Why would he? An unpopular President is removed from office and his inexperienced son is voted in? That could never happen."

Egyptian officials say that Hosni Mubarak is going through a 'severe psychological condition.' It's called 'getting dumped a week before Valentine's Day.'

Jay Leno: "Now Egyptians are demanding to see President Mubarak's birth certificate. There's a rumor he was born in New Jersey."

Andy Borowitz: "Mubarak is warning Egypt that if he resigns, there will be chaos "worse than the halftime show."

"Mubarak's new plan is to stick around long enough until hipsters start liking him in an ironic way."

"Mubarak remains defiant: 'I will step down when Barbara Walters does.'"

" Mubarak has agreed to depart, but insists on taking JetBlue, so departure will be delayed."

Western humor, in turn, inspired Egyptian comics, such as Bassem Youssef who was inspired by Jon Stewart, and who parodied Mubarak and other government officials both before and during the revolution. Similarly, a fake news website called the *El Koshary Today (EKT)*, similar to the Onion in the U.S.) has surfaced and has attracted a dedicated fan base (Kasinof, 2010).

### **Comparing Functions of Humor used before and during the Revolution**

The humor used during the revolution differed in content and function from the humor used before the revolution. Content wise, the narrative jokes gave way to short and witty slogans. Mubarak jokes had been told for many decades and everyone knew how the story went. So, during the revolution, there was no need or time for elaborate build-up; people went straight for the punch line. More importantly, this also meant that the humor was no longer covert or indirect; relief humor made way for superiority humor. People were done cracking jokes to make light of the situation; the goal now was to openly deride and ridicule Mubarak to get him to leave.

The functions served by the humor before and during the revolution were different too. As Hiller (1983) surmised, pre-revolution humor was expressive in nature and was used to say what could not be said directly. This is an example of the Instrumental-Acceptance form of humor where the humor is accepting of the situation rather than aimed at changing it (Meyer, 2000). It reduces friction and antagonism being experienced by individuals. In a way, it can even be considered a form of conflict avoidance or a conflict diffusion strategy. It was useful in creating a positive identity for the protestors and keeping the morale of the protestors high and banded against the common enemy. One could agree with Davies (2010) assessment that such humor was intended without consequence for the regime. Instead, the jokes served as a safety valve for society, allowing people to vent about their plight. The jokes provided a private platform for the people to express dissent, decimate fear, and de-sanctify Mubarak even though it may not have changed anything in the public domain. Further, the jokes served as a sword that delivered a scathing critique of Mubarak's policies and practices and at the same time provided the shield of jesting that prevented the jokes from being taken too seriously. The advantage associated with this type of dissent is that even if authorities became aware of the jokes, it was hard for them to be taken seriously, which caused them to ignore such humor so long as they perceived it to be restricted in scope and benign.

If the humor before the revolution served the identification function of bonding the teller and the receiver of the joke, the humor during the revolution was more aligned with the enforcement function which is aimed at social change (Meyer 2000). This post-revolution humor is what Hiller (1983) described as Instrumental-Resistance humor. The humor here was assertive, almost aggressive. As part of a revolution that wanted to bring about change, it was direct and confrontational.

It is also important to keep in mind that the jokes that were crafted about Mubarak during his regime were neither generic nor random in nature and performed different functions for people in Egypt, and for those outside it. For the people in Egypt, the jokes served as expressions of their alienation and discontentment with the government. As Mubarak's regime came down heavily on expressions of dissent, joke telling also became a way of testing and achieving interpersonal trust (Davies 2002, 2010). As a testimony to that sense of trust, a joke can almost

never be traced back to its author, allowing people to continue to freely express and share their feelings in the form of jokes (Zlobin, 1996). The oral tradition of telling and retelling jokes offered the advantage of not needing to be documented which was just as well given that the jokes were steeped in anti-government sentiment. Jokes, in oppressive regimes, have been characterized as tiny realms of freedom that allowed the masses to speak their mind and vent their frustration (Davies, 2007). For those on the outside, the jokes served as the lens through which they gained insight into the society; this was more accurate historical evidence than the official reports of the regime. As noted by Conquest (2008), in dictatorial regimes, the ground reality is often in conflict with 'expert' opinions that relied heavily on the misrepresented official statistics. Jokes therefore served as social commentary of a reality as seen by and experienced by the masses.

Finally, the widespread use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, provided new platforms to connect not only people within Egypt, but also served as a looking glass for people on the outside to observe the happenings in Egypt. This highlighted the power of the new phenomenon of citizen journalism in documenting important trends and changes on the ground and sharing them with a widespread international audience (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013). Jokes that told the story of Mubarak's regime, originally in Arabic, were translated into English and found themselves torpedoed across the globe with amazing speed. The whole world could now laugh at Mubarak jokes that previously only Egyptians had laughed at privately. For a brief period of time, the political landscape had transformed, and with it so had the role of humor. During the Arab Spring, Egyptian humor took on the properties of humor in democratic countries; it became open and unrestrained. The revolution created new channels for humorous political activism, reeled in new audiences and disseminated information with stunning speed to all corners of the globe. Strategically, the jokes and slogans were translated into several foreign languages including English to reach a wider audience and gather international support. The shroud of secrecy and anonymity was gone as people attested to these jokes on blogging sites and in person on the streets of Cairo. Although it may not have been the humor that ultimately caused Mubarak to step down, humor provided a platform for people to articulate their opinions about a dictator who had ruled them for almost three decades.

### **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

Humor theorists outlined three broad functions of humor: incongruity, relief, and superiority (Morreal, 1983). In politically repressed states, such as Egypt when its 2011 revolution erupted, humor performed multiple functions both before and during the revolution. Before the Egyptian revolution, all of these functions of humor were facilitated privately, adhering to the characteristics of humor in repressive states. The revolution, however, created an atmosphere that transformed the use of humor from the private to the public sphere. It took the protest out of Egypt through virtual pathways into the rest of the world and emboldened Egyptians to own their humor. For a brief period, the revolution created a climate of democratic humor, which was both unrestrained and egalitarian. It may not be inaccurate to suggest that even though the Egyptian revolution with its enormous public demand for Mubarak's resignation was unprecedented, the people of Egypt had always been engaging in an undercurrent of opposition to Mubarak's rule, albeit through the strategic use of humor (Sorensen, 2008).

The crafty jokes offered a scathing commentary on the state of affairs, couching such criticism between layers of humor, and daring to articulate what the people really thought of Mubarak: 'lazy', 'stupid', 'greedy', and 'corrupt'. Without the shield of humor, such criticism would have been impossible in authoritarian regimes, where lesser transgressions have invited the death penalty. Before the revolution, humor, therefore, helped maintain a delicate balance in the

passive social activism of the Egyptian people; it performed a “safety valve” function for protestors, by giving them an outlet for their complex amalgam of experienced emotions, while at the same time protecting them from the consequences of expressing such emotions. During the revolution, humor clearly reversed the status of the players; the powerless public became powerful by openly ridiculing Mubarak. Although his regime cracked down heavily on protestors, perhaps the fact that Egyptians had been joking about Mubarak for 30 years gave them the strength to endure the final stretch of the revolution without care for the possible punishments that awaited them.

It is important to point out some of the limitations of this study, such as the possibility that some of the narrative joke themes may have co-existed and overlapped. For example, the theme of corruption may have overlapped with the theme of ruthlessness, or the theme of clinging to power may have overlapped with the theme of being dim-witted. By organizing the themes as if they are occurring sequentially, we may have unintentionally (over)simplified the complex political reality of Egypt at the time. However, this does not undermine the findings of this study or its implications. One additional limitation of the study is that it analyzed only specific forms of humor generated during Mubarak’s regime, even though the Arab Spring gave rise to other humorous protest materials. Including other forms of humor may have allowed for a more comprehensive analysis and conclusion. Furthermore, the jokes that were analyzed were English translations of Arabic jokes. As with all translated texts, the validity of the analysis here is dependent on the accuracy of the translation, and there is always a risk that the original meaning could get lost in translation. Nevertheless, this study offers important insights into the phenomenon of using humor as a dissent strategy against dictatorial regimes.

In conclusion, humor is a paradoxical, yet powerful, tool for political activism, as the findings of this study clearly revealed. It embodies the unique advantage of offering a relatively “safe” platform for articulating dissent against authoritarian regimes, while keeping this dissent from being taken too seriously. Future research in this area should explore the different ways through which humor has manifested in the post revolution stage in the Arab world, in general, and in Egypt in particular, especially given the crackdowns on those in art, comedy, and media in the midst of the currently restrictive political and media environment, as witnessed in the intimidation faced by comedian Bassem Youssef, which eventually prompted the cancellation of his televised comedy show. Furthermore, future work should continue to investigate the value of using humor as a significant expression of social activism and as a valuable tool for political revolt, which is capable of exposing the reality of totalitarian regimes and criticizing dictators in unprecedented ways, thus, paving the way for socio-political transformation and regime change, as witnessed before and during the Egyptian revolution of 2011.

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