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The Politics of Humour in Iran

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"One day, Ahmadinejad found lice crawling on his head. He took a comb and made a neat middle parting in his hair. Someone asked him why he had done that. He replied, 'One side is for male lice and the other for females.'"

"Do you know what caused cholera in Tehran? Yes, Ahmadinejad finally took a bath and washed his socks in river Karaj."

One of the more entertaining aspects of Iranian politics is the burgeoning repertoire of jokes and satire it has produced in the public domain. It is not unusual to find young people – alone or in groups – hunched over their mobile phones in public parks, streets, restaurants, and shopping centres dexterously circulating and receiving funny text messages. That a new funny joke has just made an appearance is duly noted with a burst of laughter and shared smiles. While a wide variety of jokes – ethnic and regional stereotypes, sexual proclivities of individuals and communities – are available for popular consumption, it is the jokes aimed at political developments and personalities that evoke most attention among the youth population as well as the state authorities. The Ahmadinejad jokes, for example, have struck a particular cord with the youths who form a sizeable proportion of the population and whose techno-savvy ensures instant circulation and mass availability of these jokes.¹ The under-thirty year population reportedly accounts for the largest consumer share of a rapidly growing telecom market in Iran that records traffic of twenty million text messages per day.² This has spawned an electronic humour loop that, unlike the oral traditions of joke-telling, instantly amplifies, archives, and makes available the contents in transnational locations.

That jokes are not just innocuous entertainment became clear when in 2005 the telecommunications department tried to disrupt the short messaging service (SMS). The story goes that one of the jokes ridicul-

Though the genre of political humour is popular across different societies, it is commonly seen as a product of repressive regimes – a mild substitute for free speech and public critique denied to people therein. Moving away from the binary of totalitarian vs. democratic states, this article reads the recent spurt in Ahmadinejad jokes in Iran as a middle class response to fears of a return to the conservative agenda that Ahmadinejad's victory symbolized.

ing Ahmadinejad's sense of hygiene actually reached him. He did not find the joke as funny as many others had found it and ordered disruption of the mobile text services. The disruption of mobile services, in fact, became a frequent occurrence, as is the practice of blocking access to particular Internet websites considered harmful. Moreover, the young men and women who were traditionally stopped and searched for *badhijabi*, or un-Islamic dressing by the *Basij* (auxiliary police) were now searched for jokes on sensitive matters on their mobile phones. The chief prosecutor of Tehran, Saeed Mortazavi, was reported to have warned those who spread jokes and rumours against political leaders with prosecution and confiscation of their phones.³ It is not clear how far the threat was carried out, but there were widespread rumours of individuals who were being prosecuted for blogging seditious jokes. Though there is no law against jokes per se, the sixth article of the Iranian constitution forbids anyone from insulting and "instigating individuals and groups to act against the security, dignity, and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran" and "offending the Leader of the Revolution and recognized religious authorities." The political/religious leadership as well as "sensitive" government policies, thus, constitute the sacred sphere that may not be subjected to ridicule. Yet, jokes, cartoons and satires on such "sensitive" political subjects continue to appear unceasingly in the Iranian public sphere. The obvious question is: how to read humour that is at once popular and perilous?

"Reading" political humour in Iran

A particular view gaining ground in the western media is that these jokes are evidence of ordinary people's resistance to the Iranian state power.⁴ The frame of "political humour" is frequently borrowed from the former Soviet and Eastern European experience to explain the jokes as subversive response to "totalitarian regimes" like that in Iran. This is partly due to the popular discourse on "conformism" in communist societies and partly because the western gaze on revolutionary Iran is largely framed through the binary of hegemony/resistance. Even before President Bush labelled Iran as part of the "axis of evil" in 2002, the Islamic revolution of 1979 was already viewed suspiciously in the West as the harbinger of totalitarianism. Thus, any government post-1979 is a priori assumed to be in contravention to the will of the Iranian people who could only be in opposition to it. This binary neatly split the good "people" from the evil "regime," thereby laying ground for a possible military intervention to "liberate" the Iranian people. The appearance of jokes soon after the election of Ahmadinejad conveniently fed into this discourse of people vs. regime. This article challenges such narrow readings of Iranian political humour, locating it instead in those

Students in a Tehran park



PHOTO BY NICK HANNES / © AP/REPORTERS, 2007

aspects of state power that invoke fear, loathing, and uncertainty in a given context. Humour is situated here as a fresh vantage point from where to view the complicated field of interaction with the state power in everyday life.

A central concern, therefore, to our understanding of political humour is its “commonsense” association with totalitarian states. I suggest that the production and circulation of political humour be located outside the binary of totalitarian vs. democratic states, and more specifically in those aspects that invoke fear, loathing, and uncertainty in a given context. The genre of political humour – jokes, satires, and cartoons offering a commentary on political developments – is a familiar one in most societies and not restricted to those labelled “totalitarian” alone. For example, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror,” at once, inhabit an emotive, fearful, and perilous domain within the American domestic politics. While serious political critique was sparse until more recently, the Internet has long been abuzz with “Bush jokes” that ridiculed critical intelligence failures leading up to 9/11, Iraq war as Bush’s personal revenge on Saddam Hussein for plotting to kill his father, and Bush’s ill-informed and ill-prepared military advisors who committed strategic blunders among others. These jokes make possible airing of uncensored opinions, conspiracy theories, rumours, and other unacknowledged, albeit highly potent, forms of information about a theme that remains “sensitive” in American politics.

Politics of humour

Since 2005, one of the most visible symbols of state power within Iran and outside has been the persona of President Ahmadinejad. He is, on the one hand, spectacularly associated with the escalation of international conflicts over nuclear energy, involvement in Iraq, and rivalry with Israel, and on the other, his personification of his government’s inability to fulfil election promises to the poorest, rising inflation, fears of US military strikes, and internal dissatisfaction. His ascent to power also coincides with the marked increase in production and circulation of political jokes. While most political leaders are subjected to ridicule, it is Ahmadinejad who has emerged as the favourite figure of utter derision and lampoon in the production of jokes. For example, a popular joke connects his personality with the attributes of filth:

“If you want to see Ahmadinejad in your dreams, do not take a shower for forty days. Then, for forty nights, right at nine, put the garbage bin in the middle of the room. You will see him in your dream on the fortieth night.”

This joke takes on a popular tradition of seeking the blessings of revered saints or deceased family members in dreams. To invoke the spirits from the other world, many rituals and prayers involving objects and practices associated with the desired person’s earthly life are required. In this joke, Ahmadinejad is inextricably linked with unclean bodies and refuse collection, both undesired objects and expendable therefore. The joke bears a double-edged transgressive quality that not only dislocates Ahmadinejad from his familiar political habitus into the realm of bare and vulnerable, but also allows personal ridicule to shape the political field.

The Ahmadinejad jokes are primarily of two kinds – about his person and the governmental policies he espouses. A good example of the latter is the recent petrol rationing policy that became a source of discontent in Iran. In 2007, Ahmadinejad announced a small price hike of five pence and placed limits on fuel consumption. This was a politically volatile occurrence in a country that reportedly is the world’s fourth largest oil exporter and where consumers take cheap fuel for granted. The rationing system allowed each consumer coupons worth three litres each with a limit of 100 litres for private cars and 800 litres for registered taxis per month. A major source of livelihood in big cities like Tehran is taxi services and often, private cars double up as taxis during peak hours. The announcement caused widespread unrest and violence especially in Tehran where ten petrol stations were burnt overnight. This mix of resentment, frustration, and anxiety over consequences of fuel rationing soon became inspiration for popular jokes. For example:

“A passerby asked a man standing in a mile long queue outside a Tehran petrol station, ‘what is this queue for?’ The man replied, ‘a gang of thugs has kidnapped Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad and they are threatening to burn them alive if we do not pay \$30 million before midnight.’ The passerby said, ‘Oh, so you are contributing to the ransom amount to free them.’ ‘No,’ said the man, ‘we are collecting petrol to burn them before the kidnappers do.’”

Another joke along the same line is:

“If anybody needs more transportation than their three-litre coupon affords them, they can ride one of those seventeen million asses who voted for me two years ago.”

While the first joke displaces the political leadership from its position of comfort to the perils of violent contestation over precious resources in everyday life, the second locates the source of frustration within the people for having brought Ahmadinejad to power. The joke tellers often laughingly apologise for causing offence to those seventeen million people, yet the message is clear – these voters had brought in a President who had falsely vowed to bring the country’s oil wealth to the ordinary people. In other words, it is as much a self-critique for bringing the country to the brink of disaster as a critique of the leadership.

A two-fold interlinked conclusion follows. Firstly, the object of ridicule in the Ahmadinejad jokes presented above is not necessarily the state power in revolutionary Iran, rather the representatives of state who are found unworthy of the exalted office they occupy. Of all the political leaders of the Islamic republic, Ahmadinejad has been a particularly popular figure of lampoon among the youths and the upper classes. His street level polemics, ill-fitting clothes, unkempt beard, and slight frame offer a study in contrast compared to Ahmadinejad’s predecessor, the elegant and erudite former President Khatami. While Khatami’s term is not necessarily remembered in glowing terms, he has seldom been subjected to ridicule in the same ways. A frequent sentiment expressed is that Khatami with his striking appearance, flowing robes, and learned disposition was a suitable and respectable representative of modern Iran to the outside world. Whereas Ahmadinejad in comparison is more a rabble-rouser from the congested, less prosperous, lower-middle class South Tehran districts than a distinguished statesman. The ridicule that he is subjected to is also of a more intimate nature, for example, his lacking sense of hygiene, simple-mindedness, and feeble logic. The popularity of these jokes, particularly among the urban middle classes, testify to the social class distinctions at subtle play in the way Ahmadinejad is identified as the object of mockery and consequently unfit to represent the Iranian state.

Secondly, the wide popularity of Ahmadinejad jokes signifies both the continued disenchantment with the state power and unintended corrosion of its visage. These dual processes enable the subjects to refigure their own position in relation to the state power through humour. The ascendancy of Ahmadinejad to the state power was a shocking event, representing fear and uncertainty, particularly for the elite and urbane upper-middle classes. The depth and intensity of humorous ridicule and the extreme response of Ahmadinejad in closing down the mobile networks are indicators of this ongoing political refiguration in Iran.

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Notes

1. The 15–24 years old youth population is estimated at 25% of a total of ca. 70 million. The under-15 years population was estimated in 2005 at 29% (according to the UN Human Development Report 2007).
2. The number of mobile phone users was reported at 21,300,000 in December 2007 (nearly one third of the population) and is projected to reach 36,000,000 by 2009. The Internet connections are pegged at 12,500,000 though it may be significantly higher because of the Internet cards sold in open market. Performance Report, Telecommunication Company of Iran, December 2007, at www.irantecom.ir.
3. See <http://www.isna.ir/Main/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-544160>.
4. See for example, Robert Tait, “Heard the One about the President?” *The Guardian*, 14 April 2006.

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