



HuMENA For Human Rights and Civic Engagement
HuMENA pour les Droits de l'Homme et l'Engagement Civique
هيومنينا لحقوق الإنسان والمشاركة المدنية

Political Satire in Egypt: A Tool for Peaceful Protest Against Repression



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Joint report by

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement

and

RedWord for Human Rights and Freedom of Expression



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General Introduction:

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the concept of freedom of expression, particularly as it relates to various forms of political satire as a tool for peaceful resistance and protest under oppressive regimes, with a specific emphasis on the modern Egyptian Republic. It is based on publicly available information and includes a brief survey of prominent examples of political satire that emerged during this period. We aim to understand the forms it has taken and the evolution of satirical political discourse over time.

We briefly address the eras of former Presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak while placing particular emphasis on the period following the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the subsequent rapid political changes. This includes the current security crackdown on any form of opposition or political satire.

In this report, we also attempt to understand the Egyptian character, deeply infused with satire, which has become an integral part of the nation's historical methods of peaceful resistance. Furthermore, we highlight domestic laws and international conventions regulating freedom of speech, defamation, and the penalties for defaming public officials through publication. We discuss whether insulting officials and leaders constitutes a punishable offense or falls under the umbrella of free speech and how governments use ambiguous legal provisions to restrict freedom of expression through punitive measures for broadly defined offenses.

The report opens by highlighting recent incidents where Egyptian authorities targeted writers, journalists, and even ordinary citizens for issues related to freedom of expression and political satire. It then moves to a rapid chronological overview of other illustrative cases, helping us understand the current political reality. This analysis offers insight into whether any political regime, no matter how powerful or authoritarian, can fully suppress opposing voices and eliminate political satire as a means of peaceful protest.

Introduction

At dawn on Monday, July 22, 2024, security forces raided the home of cartoonist Ashraf Omar¹, arresting and forcibly disappearing him for days before he reappeared before the Supreme State Security Prosecution on Thursday, July 25, 2024, in Case No. 1968 of 2024.² Omar shares his satirical cartoons on the platform Al-Manassa³ (which is blocked in Egypt). However, the authorities deemed it necessary to crack down on satire and suppress humor, charging him with joining a terrorist organization, publishing false news and information, and misusing social media.

When discussing the significance of satire among the Egyptian people, its historical roots, and its deep connection to Egyptian identity, the words of French novelist Gilbert Sinoué⁴ often come to mind: “An Egyptian is born with a papyrus in his heart inscribed in golden letters: Satire is the only salvation from despair.”

Sinoué’s connection between Egyptian sarcasm and its deep historical roots, dating back to the Pharaonic era and referencing papyrus, suggests that sarcasm is embedded in the Egyptian psyche from birth—almost like it is in their genetic makeup. He concludes that without sarcasm, Egyptians would not have survived their despair, as though they were destined to live under governments and regimes that drive them to hopelessness, which they combat with their only savior: the weapon of sarcasm. But did Sinoué truly make an accurate observation, or did he overstate his case?

In this report, we seek to clarify some features of political sarcasm and its development within Egyptian society during the Egyptian Republic, which began with the military coup organized by the Free Officers Movement in July 1952, led by General Mohamed Naguib, declaring Egypt’s transformation into a republic, replacing the monarchy, and up to the current presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

1 BBC Arabic, [Ashraf Omar. “Did the ‘Monorail’ Cartoon Lead to the Arrest of an Egyptian Cartoonist?”](#) July 23, 2024.

2 Mada Masr. [“State Security Orders 15 Days Detention for Cartoonist Ashraf Omar.”](#) July 25, 2024.

3 Al-Manassa. [“Charged with Joining a Terrorist Group: The Public Prosecutor Orders the Detention of Cartoonist Ashraf Omar for 15 Days.”](#) July 25, 2024.

4 [Goodreads](#). Gilbert Sinoué.

First: The Historical Background of Political Sarcasm in Egypt

Sarcasm as a Core Element of the Egyptian Personality: The Art of Wit and Repartee

There are numerous videos of tourists from various Arab nationalities in Egypt that capture the quick wit, humor, and sarcasm of Egyptians in everyday situations. One such video⁵ shows Saudi tourists being driven by an elderly taxi driver. They attempt to engage him in conversation by asking which Gulf nationals he thinks are the best visitors to Egypt. The driver, assuming from their accent that they were Kuwaiti, responded, “Kuwaitis are generous and hospitable.” When they informed him they were from Saudi Arabia, the driver paused momentarily before replying: “And I was wondering where that heavenly scent was coming from.”

With this witty and clever response that combined humor, flattery, and quick thinking, the driver managed to defuse the situation and evoke laughter, likely expecting a generous tip from his passengers.

Another video⁶ shows a similar encounter with a taxi driver and Saudi tourists near the Pyramids at night. This video clearly reflects the widespread rejection of the idea that Egypt is politically subordinate to Saudi Arabia or of Saudi attempts to dominate the political, cultural, and artistic landscape of the Arab world. When the tourist claimed that the Pyramids were originally Saudi and that there are similar structures in Riyadh, the driver sarcastically agreed, saying, “Yes, indeed, the Pyramids are Saudi, and even the Sphinx—it’s not really named Abu al-Hol (Father of Terror); its real name is Abu Nawaf.”

These incidents are but a few among countless daily interactions that go unrecorded. Through such wit and sarcasm, Egyptians not only alleviate the pressures of daily life or secure benefits in their work from potential clients, but they also use these skills as a form of peaceful resistance against oppressive governments and regimes when all other avenues are closed.

5 [YouTube Video.](#)

6 [YouTube Video.](#)

Political Sarcasm in Modern Egypt

Political sarcasm has long been expressed by the elite through journalism, cartoons, and literature and has also been reflected in Egyptian art, including films, songs, plays, and performances. Equally, it can be found in the everyday conversations of ordinary Egyptians. There is often a clear correlation between the rise of sarcasm in certain periods and difficult political and economic conditions. This is why, in recent years, we have seen a growth in implicit sarcasm aimed at the Egyptian regime, as illustrated in later sections. This affirms Sinuhe's assertion that sarcasm may indeed be the Egyptians' sole defense in times of despair.

Gamal Abdel Nasser and State Censorship

One of the most famous jokes during the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser was that Egyptians only opened their mouths to the dentist.⁷ This simple phrase encapsulated the dictatorship of an era in which Egyptians' speech was closely monitored. In contrast, Ahmed Fouad Negm's poem "Shuqaq Buqaq" was a direct and biting critique, later turned into a song. In the poem, Negm accused the Free Officers Movement and referred to the president as "the herd of defeat," blaming him for the 1967 defeat. Negm wrote: "O people rise, calamity befalls you / Carry the roots of your sorrow / A gang is sucking your blood / And they're called Free Officers / Remove the herd of defeat / That neither wants nor intends / To leave and save us from calamities / From beneath whose leadership came humiliation and disgrace."⁸

Anwar Sadat and Radical Changes

During the era of President Sadat, marked by significant political and economic changes from his predecessor, fierce criticism emerged from Nasserists and left-wing factions in Egypt. A sarcastic and derogatory chant gained popularity: "What did Nasser's death bring you, O girl? / It brought me a dog from Monufia named Anwar Sadat."⁹ This was a clever parody of Aida El Shair's song, written by Abdel Rahim Mansour: "What did your lover bring you when he returned? / He brought me a necklace and a galabiya and said the separation was enough."¹⁰

7 Al Jazeera. "[The Revolution Talk | Political Satire in Egypt: Has Reality Become Comedic Enough?](#)" December 5, 2015.

8 YouTube. "[Shuqa' Buqa'](#)" | Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fouad Negm.

9 Al Jazeera. "[The Revolution Talk | Political Satire in Egypt: Has Reality Become Comedic Enough?](#)" December 5, 2015.

10 YouTube. "[Gab Lik Eih Ya Sabiya](#)" by Aida Al-Sha'er.

Hosni Mubarak and the Rise of Political Satire

Under Hosni Mubarak, political sarcasm and jokes flourished, with one of the most famous being the comparison of Mubarak to “La Vache Qui Rit,” which means “The Laughing Cow,” reflecting his perceived ineptitude¹¹. The name, borrowed from a French cheese brand, became a popular nickname for Mubarak.¹²

Mubarak’s era saw a wide variety and expansion in political satire, especially with the increased availability of television and growth in cinematic and theatrical productions. Writers and creators were given some latitude for satirical expression, as evidenced by politically charged comedies such as “The Leader” (1993)¹³, starring Adel Imam, or the collaboration between writer Lenin El-Ramly and actor Mohamed Sobhi in plays such as “A Point of View” (1988)¹⁴ and “Takhareef” (1989)¹⁵. There was also a notable rise in politically themed films during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

During the last decade of Mubarak’s rule, from 2000 to 2010, the Egyptian regime attempted to promote a narrative of transformation towards a democratic state, particularly with the first multi-candidate presidential election in 2005. This decade witnessed what could be described as a cultural uprising among writers and journalists who took advantage of the regime’s need for opposition and the tools to help promote the state’s democratic narrative. Independent or semi-independent opposition newspapers, such as Al-Shorouk¹⁶ and Al-Masry Al-Youm¹⁷, emerged alongside Al-Dostour¹⁸. These publications provided a platform for satirical political writing and the publication of political cartoons.

11 Wilson Center. “[Hosni Mubarak’s Dramatic Rise and Fall from Power](#).” February 25, 2020.

12 [Sign carried by a protester during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution](#).

13 [Cinemascope.com](#).

14 [Previous Source](#).

15 [Previous Source](#).

16 [Al-Shorouk Newspaper Website](#).

17 [Al-Masry Al-Youm Newspaper Website](#).

18 [Al-Dustour Newspaper Website](#).

Literary Creativity and State Repression

When linking literary creativity with state repression, one cannot ignore a joke that originated during Nasser's era but remains relevant today. After the Egyptian Nobel laureate, Naguib Mahfouz published his novel *Children of the Alley*, which sparked significant backlash and accusations of blasphemy¹⁹ due to its central character, "Gabalawi," being interpreted or symbolized as a representation of God, Salah Nasr summoned Mahfouz, the head of the General Intelligence Directorate during Nasser's rule, later convicted of torture. It is said that Nasr read and interpreted the novel differently, thinking that "Gabalawi" was a metaphor for Nasser himself.²⁰

The joke goes that during the interrogation, Salah Nasr asked Mahfouz, "Who did you mean by Gabalawi... Nasser?" Startled, Mahfouz responded, "Gabalawi is God, sir." This is pure political sarcasm—while accusations of blasphemy were what Mahfouz sought to avoid, they were trivial compared to the danger of state repression if he had been perceived as insulting the president. Through this joke, Egyptians encapsulate the years of military rule in the Egyptian Republic, where blasphemy or engaging with divine matters was seen as less grave than insulting the president. The security apparatus might forgive intellectual blasphemy towards the Creator but would not tolerate an offense towards the regime.

¹⁹ Al-Mal Newspaper. "[On the Anniversary of Naguib Mahfouz: He Did Not Disclose the Symbolism of 'Al-Gebelawi,' and His Novel 'Children of Gebelawi' Exposed Him to Assassination.](#)" August 29, 2023.

²⁰ Al Jazeera. "[Salah Nasr: From the Intelligence Monster to the Scapegoat for Nasserism's Sins.](#)" March 6, 2019.

Second: Sarcasm as a Tool of Resistance and Peaceful Protest

Political Sarcasm in the Egyptian Revolution

Tahrir Square witnessed the emergence of young talents, satirical images, and improvised scenes captured on camera. The months following the revolution saw a youthful artistic revival, often with a satirical touch, particularly in exposing the falsehoods propagated by state-aligned or regime-friendly media, which spread misinformation and incitement.

An example of this is the song “Hidden Minority” by artist Yasser El-Manawahly²¹, who mocked the term “hidden minority,” a phrase used by regime-friendly media to describe the protesters in Tahrir Square. The revolution also led to the rise and popularity of satirical media figure Bassem Youssef²², who launched his show during the 2011 revolution on YouTube before moving to television, where he attracted millions of viewers across the Arab world.²³

The Impact of Sarcasm on the Political Scene Post-Revolution

The revolution opened doors to creativity, giving many the opportunity to express themselves freely. However, this creative space and the resulting freedom lasted only a short time, particularly with the rise of political Islamist factions, their growing influence on Egyptian society, their intensified media presence, and the increasing rhetoric of hatred and incitement. This culminated in the Muslim Brotherhood’s success in Egypt’s first democratic elections, leading to the late President Mohamed Morsi becoming the first civilian to lead the Egyptian Republic. Even before Morsi took office, a segment of the Egyptian public ridiculed him, dubbing him “the spare tire” (in Arabic, “El-Esteebn”) due to his status as the Brotherhood’s backup candidate after Khairat Al-Shater was disqualified from running.

21 YouTube. “[A Minority of Troublemakers – Yasser El-Mannawhly](#).” December 21, 2012.

22 [Harvard Kennedy School](#). “Bassem Youssef.” Spring 2015.

23 BBC. “[Egypt’s Political Satire Show ‘El-Bernameg’ Entertains Millions](#).” May 25, 2012.

Despite the fact that the three years following the Egyptian revolution witnessed a peak in freedom of expression—reflected in the boldness of the topics Bassem Youssef addressed in his show, the heightened tone of discourse, and the choice of subject matter—this did not prevent attempts to target creative figures. Chief among them was Bassem Youssef, who was investigated by the Public Prosecutor in January 2013 for allegedly insulting President Mohamed Morsi²⁴. However, due to the prevailing climate of freedom at the time, Bassem was neither imprisoned nor was his show banned. On the contrary, he continued to mock the Egyptian president and the Muslim Brotherhood regime, to the extent that some considered him complicit in the military coup led by the current President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in July 2013, as he escalated his criticism and satire, seemingly promoting the coup and even dedicating an episode to mocking the Brotherhood after the Rabaa massacre.²⁵

Bassem tried to continue his show in the same manner²⁶, but it became clear that the new regime had little tolerance for humor or satire²⁷. What the Muslim Brotherhood regime did not do, the Sisi regime did early on²⁸. Bassem Youssef's show was banned²⁹, and the Public Prosecutor ordered an investigation into allegations that he was spreading false news and information that could disturb public order, harm the public interest, and create chaos in the country.³⁰

²⁴ France 24. "[Investigation into 'El-Bernameg' Host Bassem Youssef on Charges of Insulting President Morsi.](#)" January 1, 2013.

²⁵ Al-Araby Al-Jadeed. "[The Bassem Youssef Crisis: Deeper Than Just a Song Clip.](#)" May 18, 2016.

²⁶ Time. "[Bassem Youssef Abruptly Cancels Egyptian Satire Show Before Sisi Declared President.](#)" June 3, 2013.

²⁷ BBC Arabic. "[The Observer: Bassem Youssef's Dilemma Between Morsi and Sisi.](#)" January 26, 2014.

²⁸ Columbia Journalism Review. "[In Egypt, Bassem Youssef is Off Air Again.](#)" November 8, 2013.

²⁹ Al Jazeera. "[Bassem Youssef Battles Egypt's Censors.](#)" November 24, 2013.

³⁰ Al-Shorouk. "[Complaint Accusing Bassem Youssef of Broadcasting False News and Information Referred to the Public Prosecutor.](#)" October 29, 2013.

Third: Legal Framework for Political Satire: Domestic and International Laws on Freedom of Expression

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”³¹ This right to freedom of expression encompasses the right to criticize public figures, politicians, officials, and public servants.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

However, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) does not provide an absolute right to freedom of expression. It does not explicitly address satire or insult, and allows for restrictions “as provided by law and necessary” to respect the rights and reputations of others, or to protect national security, public order, public health, or morals.³²

In light of this, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern over the misuse of such laws to suppress legitimate criticism. In General Comment No. 34 on Article 19 of the ICCPR, issued in July 2011, the Committee emphasized the importance of safeguarding unrestricted expression. It stressed that public figures and officials must tolerate a greater degree of criticism than private individuals, and the mere fact that expressions may be considered offensive to public figures is insufficient to justify penalties. Thus, “all public figures, including those holding the highest political offices such as heads of state and government, are subject to legitimate criticism and political opposition.”

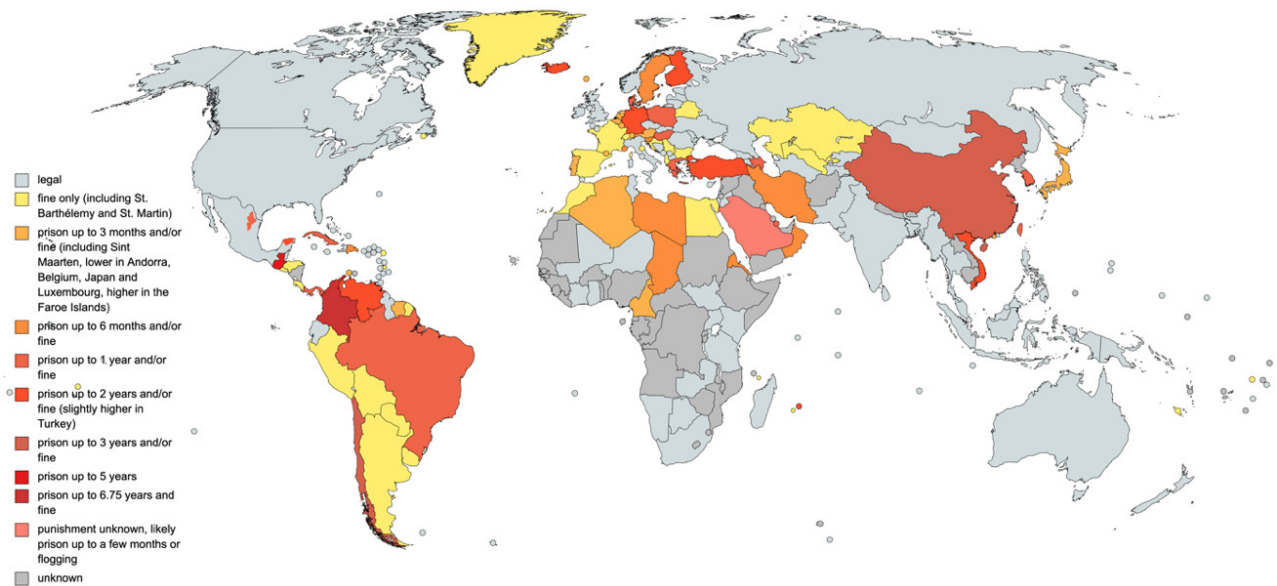
The Committee also raised concerns about laws related to offenses such as “lese-majesty, insult to public officials, disrespect for authority, disrespect for the flag and

³¹ United Nations, [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

³² United Nations, [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

symbols, defamation of the head of state, and protection of the honor of public officials.”³³

Many countries continue to exploit these vague terms to target freedom of opinion and expression, undermining political satire, insult, and peaceful protest by incorporating them into domestic laws under the pretexts of defamation, insult to national symbols, protecting public morals, or safeguarding national security—terms that are often broad and open to interpretation.³⁴



Egyptian Laws Pertaining to Defamation and Slander: The Egyptian Constitution and Penal Code

At the local level, the amended Egyptian Constitution of 2019 guarantees freedom of thought and opinion in Article 16, stating, “Every person has the right to express their opinion verbally, in writing, through photography, or by other means of expression and publication.”³⁵ However, Article 303 of the Penal Code criminalizes slander with a fine ranging from five thousand to fifteen thousand Egyptian pounds. This fine increases if the slander is directed at a public employee in connection with their duties or public service.³⁶

33 United Nations, [General Comment No. 34 on Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression](#), July 29, 2011.

34 Mapchart, [Legal Status of Insult](#), February 19, 2021.

35 [Amended Egyptian Constitution of 2019](#).

36 [Penal Code No. 58 of 1937, amended on August 15, 2021, by Law No. 141 of 2021](#).

Position of the Supreme Constitutional Court

In July 2024, the Supreme Constitutional Court rejected a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Articles 303 and 307 concerning penalties for slander and defamation against public employees through publication.³⁷ However, it simultaneously prohibited imposing custodial sentences for crimes committed through publication or in public, except for crimes related to incitement to violence, discrimination among citizens, or defamation of individuals.³⁸

This situation highlights that the very concept of insult is not well-defined, and there is a disparity in the levels of punishment for slander and defamation across different countries. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between international covenants and recommendations from the United Nations Human Rights Committee and Egyptian laws that penalize slander, particularly with harsher penalties if directed at public employees. This contradicts the recommendations of the Human Rights Committee, which suggests that public figures and officials should endure a higher degree of criticism compared to ordinary individuals.

Is satire and insult a crime or a form of free expression?

We highlight these legal nuances before addressing satire under the current presidency of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, as some examples may include language that some might find offensive or insulting. Despite this, we have chosen to present these examples as they are, without euphemism or omission, in the belief that individuals have the right to exercise freedom of opinion and political satire as a legitimate form of peaceful protest. Insult, particularly when directed at public figures, government officials, or the highest political authorities such as heads of state, falls under the protection of free expression.

³⁷ Youm7, [Rejection of the Unconstitutionality Claim on Penalties and Trial Procedures for Libel and Defamation by Publication](#), July 13, 2024.

³⁸ Al-Masry Al-Youm, [By Order of the Constitutional Court: Ban on Imposing Prison Sentences for Defamation of Public Officials through Publication](#), July 6, 2024.

Fourth: Political Satire During Sisi's Era:

The Faisal Street Screen and Confusion within the Egyptian Security Forces

Satire has long been an effective means for Egyptians to critique rulers, monarchs, and leaders through clever wordplay and linguistic manipulation. They create jokes that can be interpreted in multiple ways to avoid the risks of security persecution, understood by the populace in indirect manners.

At times, satire is direct and biting, featuring vulgar language and examples that tarnish the dignity of government officials. Often, this criticism emerges from writers, journalists, poets, and influential members of society. In such cases, individuals inadvertently facilitate the regime's task of suppressing and targeting them, as was the case with poet and playwright Najib Surour during President Gamal Abdel Nasser's era, or poet Ahmed Fouad Negm throughout his lifetime.

In mid-July 2024, one of the commercial advertising screens on Faisal Street in Giza displayed mocking images of President Sisi³⁹, depicting him in the infamous attire of thieves—wearing a vertically striped black and white shirt and a mask covering his eyes. In another image, the caption read, "Don't you know I'm a thief?"—a satirical twist on Sisi's previous remark, "Don't you know that you are the light of my eyes?"

How Did Egyptian Security Respond to the Faisal Screen Incident?

This individual act of protest was sufficient to unsettle the entire security apparatus, which fears any dissenting voices and is intolerant of criticism and satire. The Egyptian Ministry of Interior quickly announced the arrest of the perpetrator, an electronic screen technician, claiming that he confessed to the act under the influence of members of the Muslim Brotherhood who are in exile abroad.⁴⁰

In a security move to control advertising screens and prevent a recurrence of the incident, officers from the National Security Agency met with advertising company owners to outline specific regulations for using commercial advertising screens in Giza. These regulations included the requirement for the business owner to provide

³⁹ Monte Carlo Doualiya, [The Faisal Street Screens that Troubled Egyptian Security Forces and Set Social Media Ablaze](#), July 16, 2024.

⁴⁰ Zawya 3, [The Hacked Faisal Screen: A Case Without Information and a Suspect Who Wasn't Presented to the Prosecution](#), July 18, 2024.

a criminal record and obtain security clearance from the National Security Agency. Additionally, the screens were mandated to operate through USB flash drives and not be connected to the internet to prevent hacking. Advertising companies were also required to provide a list of their screen installation technicians.⁴¹

Public Display Screens Requiring Security Clearance and Criminal Records!

Systematic Targeting of Satirists

Just as Egyptians referred to the late President Morsi as “the spare tire,” they coined the term “Balaha” for Sisi in his early days. The insults escalated when he decided to run for president in 2014, with derogatory names like “the buffoon” circulating, and some individuals even posted on social media under the hashtag “Vote for the buffoon.” This label later evolved into a satirical song by Ramy Essam, with lyrics penned by poet Galal Al-Buheiri, who has been detained since 2018.⁴²

Galal Al-Bahiri was arrested in 2018 in connection with another satirical song titled “Balaha,” which implicitly rejected President Sisi’s bid for a second presidential term after completing his first⁴³. Bahiri was tried in a military court, convicted of insulting the military and contempt of religion, and sentenced to three years in prison. However, he was not released after serving his sentence and remains in pretrial detention, with new fabricated charges linked to terrorism.⁴⁴

Sisi’s rule since 2013 has been filled with volumes of satire, as Egyptians have always found ways to express humor. However, certain notable and influential incidents demonstrate how the regime perceives and deals with satire, or rather, its fear of it.

⁴¹ Monte Carlo Doualiya, [The Faisal Screen Incident: What Are the New Security Requirements for Using Advertising Screens in Egypt?](#) July 21, 2024.

⁴² YouTube, [Ramy Essam – “Ehad Al-Ars,”](#) December 1, 2014.

⁴³ YouTube, [Ramy Essam – “Balah,”](#) February 26, 2018.

⁴⁴ Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, [Egypt: Statement of Solidarity with Poet Galal El-Behairy on the Fifth Anniversary of His Arbitrary Detention and His Announcement of a Hunger Strike,](#) March 13, 2023.

First Presidential Term: Laughter Forbidden!

In early 2014, the new regime was still unsettled, attempting to solidify its authority and gain popular support. It did so by deluding the people with hope and promises of a better future, including promoting falsehoods and myths like a scientific invention that would supposedly transform Egypt, attract investments, and cure diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C. Because this invention was, in fact, a hoax, it was quickly exposed, and the public mockingly referred to it as the “Kofta Device”⁴⁵ and its inventor, Major General Abdel Aaty, as “Abdel Aaty Kofta.”⁴⁶

In 2015, a military court sentenced activist Amr Nohan to three years in prison for posting a satirical image on his personal page showing Sisi with Mickey Mouse ears, a meme dubbed “Sisi Mouse.”⁴⁷ The Spanish newspaper El Mundo reported that the situation in Egypt had become hostile to satire and freedom of political expression.⁴⁸

In 2016, Egyptian security forces arrested members of the “Street Children” group, a theater troupe of six individuals who created satirical sketches about the political situation, filmed them in the streets of Cairo, and shared them on social media.⁴⁹ The prosecution charged the group with inciting terrorism, encouraging illegal assembly, and calling for violent acts against state institutions.⁵⁰

In 2017, a particularly notable incident occurred when a children’s toy called “Pendulum” became widely popular, but Egyptians distorted its name, turning it into a vulgar insult referring to Sisi’s genitals, calling it “Sisi’s Balls.” The term “balls” in Egyptian slang refers to a man’s testicles, and the toy’s name was transformed into a form of mockery. As a result, security forces arrested dozens of traders who had imported the toy.⁵¹

45 Sada El-Balad, [Exclusive Interview with General Ibrahim Abdel-Aty, Inventor of the AIDS and Hepatitis C Treatment Device](#), February 24, 2014.

46 Al-Hurra, [Death of General Abdel-Aty, the Creator of the Alleged AIDS and Hepatitis C Treatment](#), February 5, 2015.

47 Al-Modon, [Imprisonment of the “Sisi Mouse” Cartoonist](#), October 21, 2015.

48 Arabi 21, [El Mundo: No Room for Satire in Egypt... Proof: “Mickey Mouse,”](#) December 12, 2015.

49 BBC Arabic, [Egypt: Arrest of Members of the Satirical “Street Children” Group on Charges Including “Insulting the President,”](#) May 10, 2016.

50 Al-Masry Al-Youm, [Detention of Members of the “Street Children” Group for 15 Days on Charges of “Offensive Songs Against the State,”](#) May 10, 2016

51 Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, [“Egyptian Security Forces Declare War on Sellers of a ‘Game Offensive to Sisi’,”](#) November 8,

As the 2018 presidential election approached, the crackdown on journalists, writers, and creatives intensified. Several journalists, including the author of this report, were implicated in cases 977 of 2017 and 441 of 2018. This also extended to the “Balaha” song case, in which others were arrested alongside its author, Jalal Al-Bahiri, including the song’s director, Shady Habash, who tragically died in detention due to medical negligence, after having been held beyond the maximum legal limit for pretrial detention.⁵²

During the same period, security forces also arrested the cast of the play “Soliman Khater,”⁵³ days after it was performed at the Egyptian Shooting Club. The casting was charged with insulting the military.⁵⁴ Soliman Khater was an Egyptian soldier who, during his military service in Sinai in 1985, opened fire on a group of Israelis at his guard post. He was tried by a military court and sentenced to life imprisonment but was found hanged in his cell in January 1986.

Fifth: Satire as a Tool for Social and Political Change: How Satire Can Be a Catalyst for Change

Second Presidential Term: Sisi, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

As Sisi’s second presidential term began (2018–2022, later extended to 2024), and with the intensifying security grip, Egyptians became acutely aware of the risks and consequences of political satire. The current regime would not tolerate criticism or mockery, and thus new forms of satire began to emerge. One of these methods involved an implicit agreement not to mention Sisi by name, instead referring to him in the third person. This allowed for people to curse, mock, or criticize him without directly exposing themselves to liability. As a result, it became common to hear citizens in the streets and on public transportation making veiled references,

2017.

52 BBC Arabic, [“Shady Habash: Egyptian Filmmaker Dies in Prison Over Song Criticizing Sisi,”](#) May 3, 2020.

53 BBC Arabic, [“Egypt: Theater Director and Playwright Held in Pretrial Detention on Charges of ‘Insulting the Military’,”](#) March 6, 2018.

54 Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, [“Egyptian Authorities Imprison Lead Actor and Playwright of the Play ‘Suleiman Khater’,”](#) March 7, 2018.

or see social media posts filled with curses and insults aimed at an unnamed individual. However, everyone implicitly understood who was being referenced. When someone said, “May God take revenge on him,” it was clear who they meant. Despite the widespread despair, Egyptians continued to resist oppression through political satire directed at the regime, its figures, and its supporters. Journalist Bilal Fadl coined the nickname “the Nodding Man” for Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, referring to his habit of agreeing with everything the president says by nodding his head. As for Sisi, a new nickname emerged: “the Mexican.” One of the regime’s most prominent supporters, Saudi advisor Turki Al-Sheikh, was mockingly referred to by Egyptians as “the Bag of Rice,” referencing a previously leaked recording in which Sisi allegedly described Gulf nations as having money as plentiful as rice.⁵⁵

The Long-Term Impact of Satire: The System Is Weaker Than Its Mockers

In response to sharp satire, the regime has had to re-promote its narrative and restore its dignity. This is exemplified by the television series *Al-Ikhtiyar*,⁵⁶ which debuted its first season in 2020⁵⁷ and reached its third in 2022.⁵⁸ Actor Yasser Jalal portrayed President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, an endeavor that inevitably invited ridicule due to the significant physical disparity between the tall Galal and the shorter Sisi.⁵⁹

Given the regime’s intolerance of criticism, this satire led to the arrest of lawyer Nabil Abu Shikha for mocking the *Al-Ikhtiyar* series on social media. He was accused of belonging to a terrorist organization and disseminating false news.⁶⁰

Due to the impossibility of critiquing or satirizing the political system in new artistic works, Egyptians found a novel way to insult the regime and reprimand those in power. Some managed to access older artistic pieces featuring characters named Sisi, and fortunately for the people—and unfortunately for the authorities—these characters consistently embodied negative concepts of poverty, oppression, and tyranny. A clip from the series *Ragel wa Set Setat* (a man and 6 women) went viral,

⁵⁵ YouTube, “[Leaked Phone Call Between Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Major General Abbas Kamel, Head of Egyptian General Intelligence.](#)”

⁵⁶ [Elcinema.com.](#)

⁵⁷ Al-Quds Al-Arabi, “[Harsh Criticism of the Series ‘The Choice’ as Ridicule of Ahmed El-Awady Tops Twitter Trends,](#)” May 6, 2020.

⁵⁸ [Elcinema.com.](#)

⁵⁹ Arabic Post, “[‘The Choice 3’: As Sisi Spends Large Sums to Glorify Himself, Laughter and Ridicule Grow,](#)” April 10, 2022.

⁶⁰ Al Jazeera, “[Egyptian Lawyer Imprisoned: Is the Series ‘The Choice’ the Cause?](#)” April 16, 2022.

featuring actor Samah Hussein insulting a character named “Sisi,” stating: “God knows, Sisi, whether you are present or absent, I curse you endlessly.”⁶¹ In another scene, upon opening an empty bag, he exclaimed: “There’s nothing... this poverty bag is just like Sisi’s face.”⁶²

Moreover, someone discovered a clip from an obscure 1980 play titled *You Are the Wanted One*, which gained traction as a prophetic vision from an earlier era. In this clip, actor Wahid Seif portrays an evil security officer named Sisi, who yells at the other characters: “Even if the regime changes, Sisi will never change. No country can exist without Sisi.”⁶³

Egyptians’ continued political satire, whether direct or implied, constantly keeps the regime in a state of crisis and defensiveness. The cumulative effect of this peaceful struggle over the years has led to the exposure and weakening of the regime, opening new avenues for criticism and influence, which ultimately leads to inevitable change.

While change may be slow, many question the significance of political satire and its long-term impact. However, a simple comparison of the volume of ridicule and mockery directed at the Egyptian regime now versus the early days of its rule 11 years ago reveals a substantial qualitative and quantitative difference in the published content. Today, we see bolder criticism that has contributed to diminishing the regime’s stature. Although the regime has entrenched itself and gained enhanced security control over most channels of expression, political satire, in its innovative forms, continues to challenge the regime.

61 [YouTube Video.](#)

62 [YouTube Video.](#)

63 YouTube, [Clip from the Play You Are the Wanted One.](#)

Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations

1. Immediate release of individuals held in pretrial detention and prisoners of conscience detained for political criticism or satire.
2. Cessation of the security pursuit and targeting of writers, journalists, creatives, content creators, and bloggers on social media.
3. Reform local laws to align with international standards.
4. Strengthen freedom of expression and protect the right to peaceful criticism and political satire.
5. Abolish any prison sentences in publishing cases.
6. End the misuse of local laws and manipulation of vague legal terms to suppress and imprison satirists.

Instead of a Conclusion

The current Egyptian regime meets creativity and satire with increased repression and security targeting, with no signs of improvement in freedom of expression. Recently, security forces have launched campaigns targeting journalists, writers, and poets. Journalist Khaled Mamdouh was arrested on July 16, 2024,⁶⁴ followed days later by cartoonist Ashraf Omar on July 22, 2024. At the same time, political activist and former detainee Ahmed Douma was harassed, being barred from holding book signings for his poetry collection *Curly*. Several religious leaders close to the regime accused him of apostasy.⁶⁵

On July 27, 2024, security forces raided Dar Al-Miraya for Culture and Arts following

⁶⁴ The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, "[Journalist Khaled Mamdouh's Detention Renewed Following the Raid on His Home and His Enforced Disappearance](#)," July 21, 2024.

⁶⁵ Zawya 3, "[Ahmed Douma on His Poetry Collection Curly: Written in Prison as an Escape from Defeat or Explosion](#)," July 23, 2023.

a cultural seminar on the book Talat Setat, seizing documents, files, books, and computers, and arresting the administrative assistant present at the time.⁶⁶ Dar Al-Miraya is also responsible for publishing Douma's poetry collection.

This ongoing cat-and-mouse game between the regime and its opponents, between the authorities and the people, shows no signs of ending. There are no optimistic indicators of positive steps toward improving freedom of expression or reopening channels for writers and creatives. Instead, the trend seems to persist along the same path of security tightening and targeting cultural and literary institutions, as well as any platforms that may allow political satire to thrive.

The essence of political satire in Egypt is to undermine the dictator's image, thereby breaking the barrier of fear. To this end, Egyptians continuously find new ways to express themselves peacefully. The more the security apparatus tightens its grip, the more Egyptians invent clever methods of satire and mockery. Whether through jokes, songs, poetry, theatrical performances, online blogging, public displays, derogatory terms for state officials, uncovering old artistic works, or subtle references easily understood by the discerning, such as referring to the president in the third person, these methods reflect Egyptians' resilience.

Perhaps this approach is the only way Egyptians resist despair, as noted by Gilbert Sinoué. His assertion does not seem exaggerated; satire serves as an effective and powerful tool for peaceful resistance aimed at achieving social or political change. While it may not deliver immediate results, it accumulates over time and fosters long-term change.

Joint report by

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and

RedWord for Human Rights and Freedom of Expression



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