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Author(s): Samer S. Shehata
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The Politics of Laughter: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak in Egyptian Political Jokes

SAMER S. SHEHATA

Many familiar with post 1952 Egypt will already know of the tremendous popularity of Egyptian political jokes and the frequency with which they are told. Political jokes are an integral part of Egyptian life and can be heard in government offices by bureaucrats passing the time, in local coffee houses, among friends, and in the homes of millions of urban Egyptians. The political joke became particularly important beginning in 1952, when a group of military officers led by Mohammed Naguib and Jamal Abdel Nasser (The Free Officers) overthrew the corrupt monarchy of King Farouk and replaced it with a military regime. With the new regime came the end of parliamentary politics and political freedoms, including the right to organize political parties, and freedoms of speech and the press. When open political expression became dangerous in Egypt, the political joke emerged as a vehicle for the criticism of political leaders, their policies, and government.

What is true of Egypt is true of many societies in which political freedoms are repressed. In the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Rumania, Poland, Hungary, Cuba, and China, the political joke has been alive and well for some time. In Greece, the political joke became an important form of criticism when a military dictatorship suspended freedoms of speech and the press. In both Spain, particularly under Francisco Franco, and Mexico, political jokes have thrived in a climate not conducive to other forms of political expression. Historically, therefore, when political dissent and criticism have not been tolerated, the political joke has become a vehicle for such criticism; a vehicle which replaces, at least partially, other forms of expression and protest.

TheorY And Method

Of all that has been written on humour and the joke, arguably the most informative and enlightening contribution to the study of jokes has been by Sigmund Freud. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud deals specifically with the motives of jokes and postulates two types of jokes: jokes that have a purpose (tendentious), and those that do not have a purpose and are an end in themselves (innocent). ‘Where a joke is not an aim in itself ... there are only two purposes that it may serve ... It is either a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure).’

Although Freud did not classify or specifically write about political jokes, they would seem to fall in his category of hostile or aggressive jokes. Political regimes, leaders, and their policies, are the objects of the inherent aggression of these jokes. Freud writes that ‘by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him.’ When ‘external circumstances’ do not permit political criticism, jokes become ‘especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against authority, a liberation from its pressure.’

Political leaders are ‘persons in exalted positions’ and do exercise such authority. Thus,
the joke, when directed against such leaders, becomes a weapon at the disposal of the people in the terribly unequal power relations that characterize the relationship of the rulers and the ruled, the political leaders and the people. While the rulers have almost unlimited power, to arrest, imprison, torture, and even execute, the people maintain the power to ridicule and laugh.

The power to laugh is quite considerable, however, as it is a 'rebellion against authority, a liberation from its pressures.' Political laughter is, in this respect, cathartic as it allows people to temporarily overcome their oppressors, to momentarily triumph by ridiculing and criticizing those whom they otherwise would not have been able to ridicule and criticize. Thus, the political joke functions as a 'safety-valve'; relieving, at least temporarily, the pressures and anxiety of political oppression. Political jokes might not be able to topple dictatorial regimes, but they do provide solace from their oppression.

There are a number of reasons why the joke is particularly suited to environments of political repression. First, because political jokes are oral, censorship proves to be extremely difficult if not impossible. Second, by its very nature the joke is impersonal and the joke teller, in this way, is distanced from the content of the joke; the joke teller merely serves the purpose of transmission. Alan Dundes, a prominent folklorist, makes both points in an essay on Romanian political jokes:

In folklore, which is passed on primarily by word of mouth, from person to person, there is little opportunity for official censorship to be exercised. The mouth of the folk cannot be closed, as it were, and in the various manifestations of oral literature, the folk invariably have their say. ... Jokes are by definition impersonal and they provide a socially sanctioned frame which normally absolves individuals from any guilt which might otherwise result from conversational(= nontraditional) articulations of the same content.

The political joke, therefore, by its very nature, proves to be a well suited mechanism for the otherwise unacceptable or impossible transmission of political expression and criticism.

Unfortunately, Egyptian political jokes, and Arab political jokes more generally, have received very little scholarly attention. The dearth of literature on this subject, however, only belies the subject's importance. For the Egyptian people, the political joke is of great importance, and so too must it be for those interested in Egypt. The importance of the political joke in Egypt is reflected in the sheer number of jokes told and the frequency with which they circulate. It is even rumoured that Jamil Abdel Nasser, the first president of Egypt, attempted to collect the jokes told about him by way of his secret police. Anwar Al-Sadat, the second president of Egypt, was also conscious of the importance of political jokes and it is rumoured that he, in a public speech, told a popular joke which circulated in the 1960s in criticism of Nasser and his regime. The love Egyptians have for joke-telling is also illustrated in a common phrase, ibn nukta (literally meaning 'son of the joke'), used by other Arabs to describe Egyptians. The seriousness of Egyptian political jokes makes them, in one sense, no laughing matter.

For the student of Egyptian politics and history, folklore, in the form of political jokes, provides an infinitely rich and largely untapped resource for the study of Egyptian popular attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and views on politics. One can get at the Egyptian people's views on politics through their jokes and in this way, the study of folklore becomes an important approach to the study of politics and society. The presidents of Egypt are
not the only ones who have recognized the importance of the joke and some Egyptians have gone so far as to state that a compilation of all joke texts for any political period in Egypt’s history would serve as a true historical annal of that period.  

Social scientists and historians are likely to benefit by examining the folklore of the society which they are studying. Folklore provides several advantages for the social observer. First, lore, coming from the mouths of people, provides ‘an unselfconscious reflection of culture’:  

To the extent that folklore constitutes an autobiographical ethnography of a people, it provides an outsider, e.g., the visiting ethnographer, with a view of the culture from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in. Not only is folklore a people’s own description of themselves and hence possibly less subject to the influence of the ethnographic reporter’s unavoidable ethnographic bias than other kinds of data, but it is frequently the case that in folklore implicit world-view principles and themes are made explicit.  

In other words, folklore provides the social observer with the people’s own construction of reality, their own categories of thought, concerns, problems, opinions, and beliefs as participants in society. The social observer’s interpretation of folklore does not negate the fact that, because it comes from people’s mouths and of their own initiation, it provides the social observer with the perspective of the participant. This is particularly important because much of traditional social science has relied almost exclusively, and to a large part deliberately, on the ‘perspective of the observer’, viewing society from the ‘outside-in’ and treating participants as if they were unaware or incapable of knowing what goes on ‘behind their backs’ or ‘above their heads’. These social scientists have been busy ‘rising above’ the viewpoints of participants and in the process have reified social phenomena, robbing them of their essential human character.  

Folklore also provides an invaluable resource for those especially interested in the ‘masses’ in certain lands and periods, the vast majority of people in a society coming from the middle or lower classes. For unlike political elites and intellectuals who leave behind memoirs and other written records, the ‘masses’, who often can neither read nor write, leave behind few, if any, written indications of their attitudes and beliefs. Hardly inarticulate, however, their oral tradition provides an avenue for the exploration of their views.  

A few social historians have used both oral tradition and popular mass culture as an approach to the study of history and society. In a fascinating study of early twentieth century Germany, Robert Eben Sackett uses the humour of a popular middle-class Munich entertainer to study the attitudes of the entertainer’s audience towards Jews. Specifically, Sackett analyzes the anti-Semitic jokes which were an integral part of the entertainer’s repertoire to document the anti-Semitism of his audience, middle and lower class Germans in pre-World War I Munich. Sackett successfully employs popular culture to study the ‘popular values and attitudes’ of a specific sector of German society.  

Although Sackett’s approach is similar to the one used in this essay, there is one noteworthy difference. The anti-Semitic jokes Sackett documents were told by only one man, the professional entertainer. And although we do know that the entertainer was genuinely popular, it has not been documented that the jokes circulated orally outside the performance hall. By contrast, Egyptian political jokes, because they are told by and among the Egyptian people, are more representative of their ‘popular values and attitudes’ and are thus an even better reflection of the Egyptian people’s views toward their leaders and their policies. In essence, the difference between Sackett’s approach and the one used
in this paper highlights one significant difference between popular culture and folklore. Because the jokes Sackett analyzes came from one professional entertainer and not the folk, they represent popular culture. Popular culture is, in this sense, only 'consumed' by the folk while lore is both 'produced' and 'consumed' by the folk and is thus more representative of their views.24

Political jokes provide yet another advantage for those interested in countries similar to Egypt. As noted earlier, Egyptian parliamentary life came to an abrupt end in the early 1950s and with the decline of political liberties also came considerable limitations to the freedom and scope of social research. Simply put, the new authoritarian regime scrutinized academic and social research and officially permitted only those studies they believed to be politically harmless. One could not conduct Gallop polls or random surveys about political matters in Nasser's and, to a lesser extent, Sadat's Egypt without the consent of the government. Although somewhat more freedom exists under Husni Mubarek, the process of democratization and political liberalization is by no means complete.25 Even today, government clearance is needed before any kind of social research can legally be done. Folklore, and the political joke specifically, allows us to circumvent government censorship and restrictions upon research and get at the people and their views directly.

The use of folklore as a method to document and analyze popular attitudes does have important limitations, however. Political jokes, for example, do not provide us with exact measurements of beliefs and attitudes. In other words, we can never know exactly how popular the ideas or criticisms expressed in a particular joke are. For Egypt, however, accurate measurements of people's attitudes and feelings towards Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarek and their policies do not exist. In the absence of such data, jokelore's importance is heightened as one of the few ways to approach this subject. In fact, it is precisely in those states, like Egypt, that restrict both their citizens' freedoms and the ability to conduct research on popular opinions and attitudes, that the study of political jokes becomes of the utmost importance.

Another possible limitation faced by those employing folklore for the study of society concerns the make-up of populations (the make-up of the 'folk'). Because the folk are (defined as) all the members of a society it becomes difficult to differentiate among the population and isolate the feelings and opinions of specific groups within the total population. In other words, what effect, if any, does class, ethnicity, and religion have on the lore of particular classes, ethnic and religious groups within a society? Do the members of the working class tell 'working-class' jokes and do the members of the bourgeoisie tell 'bourgeois' jokes? Do Muslims tell 'Muslim' jokes and Christians tell 'Christian' jokes? A relationship could very well exist between the interests, economic and otherwise, of groups in a society and the contents of the jokes those groups tell; the content of jokes could always be in line with the interests of the joke-teller, for example. Although I doubt very much that entire (and completely separate) lores could exist among groups in a society, the possibility of some exclusivity in lore is realistic. The Egyptian bourgeoisie, for instance, do not often sing workers' songs. The point that needs to be made, however, is that differences exist among populations (the folk) and for the historian and social scientist it becomes important to determine whether these differences are manifest in lore. Only empirical research will be able to give conclusive answers to these questions.

While it is worthwhile noting the limitations of folklore studies as a method or approach to history and social science, the relevance of such limitations is lessened because we
are not proposing folklore studies as a replacement to traditional historiography and social science, but rather as a complementary approach to be employed when applicable and alongside more traditional methods.

In what follows, I present and analyze samples of the more than seventy political jokes I collected in Alexandria and Cairo in the summer of 1989. I heard many jokes more than once and several proved to be extremely popular. I believe the jokes that I have selected for presentation and analysis are representative in subject matter, themes, motifs and most importantly content, of the majority of the jokes I collected. My informants, all of whom were Egyptians living in Egypt, will remain, for obvious reasons, anonymous. Their composition, in terms of age, sex, class, education and occupation, varied greatly. They included engineers, doctors, lawyers, university professors, businessmen, students, housewives, government officials, bureaucrats, and military officers. Several methodological points, however, are worth noting at the outset.

Because the average urban Egyptian is likely to know at least a few political jokes, collecting jokes did not prove particularly difficult. Political jokes are so pervasive that one need only know Egyptians or, even better, be a member of Egyptian society to hear jokes. To collect jokes, therefore, I used the standard tool of anthropology, participant-observation, and also actively sought out possible informants and raconteurs. I made my intentions clear among people I thought I could trust or who I thought would not be put off by my research. Some of these people were instrumental in introducing me to their friends or colleagues who they thought were particularly adept at telling jokes. Raconteurs, those especially gifted in the art of joke-telling, proved particularly helpful, often telling more than ten jokes at a time and remembering older and out-of-date jokes told about previous leaders and their policies. At other times, however, usually at dinners and informal gatherings among friends, I did not make my research objectives known. In these instances I tried to memorize the jokes that were told until I got to a place where I could safely record them in my journal. This type of participant-observation proved best suited for collecting the most current jokes and joke cycles.

Whereas being an Egyptian was certainly an advantage when it came to collecting political jokes, being a Muslim proved disadvantageous for collecting jokes from Coptic (Christian) Egyptians. Although I am certain that the Copts, who live mainly in upper Egypt and make up between eight and fifteen percent of Egyptian society, tell jokes, not one of my informants was Coptic. The jokes I collected, however, are not in any way anti-Coptic and could have easily been told by Copts.

Three other groups which are under-represented as informants in my study are women, the working class, and members of the urban poor. As for the last two groups, I have no reason to believe, as in the case of the Copts, that they refrain from telling political jokes. As for the first group, several informants were women, but the overwhelming majority were men and, in general, collecting jokes from women proved more difficult. In fact, I did not hear any sexual political jokes from women, or from men while women were present. On several occasions, particularly when women were present, I heard jokes, which I had heard sexual versions of earlier, told with their sexual elements removed. In general, sexual jokes were only told in low voices or behind closed doors.

One last point is worth noting before moving on to the analysis of joke texts. I received, broadly speaking, three types of reactions from people when my research objectives became
The first reaction, the least interesting, consisted in a kind of apathy. The members of this group either didn’t care or did not exhibit strong feelings in favour or against my research objectives. The second reaction I received was one of disbelief and sarcasm. The people who reacted this way thought the topic was trivial and not suited for academic or university research. Several people sarcastically suggested that I go to a coffee house, a place suited for my research, to collect jokes. The third and by far the most troubling reaction to my research was quite negative, often calling my patriotism to Egypt into question. The people who reacted this way believed that recording and publishing Egyptian political jokes was somehow disrespectful and insulting to Egypt and the Egyptian people. It was alright to tell jokes to Egyptians but not to foreigners, who would no doubt laugh at Egypt’s expense. Publishing Egyptian jokes would be like taking the country’s internal problems and exhibiting them publicly for the whole world to see. This group saw my research as tantamount to a criticism of Egyptian society. One person, trying to explain why he felt that publishing jokes would be wrong, said, quite oblivious to the importance of his comment, that the jokes reflected the lack of democracy in the country and the inability of the Egyptian people to be democratic. Quite differently, I do not believe the jokes signify the inability of Egyptians to be democratic. Rather, I interpret the jokes to reflect the Egyptian people’s continuous yearning and desire for democracy.

In what follows, I will present and analyze a number of jokes and several rhymes; the analysis will be one of content. The overwhelming majority of the jokes presented, unless otherwise stated, are from among those I collected in the summer of 1989. I have separated the jokes based on their subject: four jokes are about Jamal Abdel Nasser, six are about Anwar Al-Sadat, five are about Husni Mubarek, and two concern all three presidents. The jokes will be presented chronologically with the jokes about Nasser coming first and those about Mubarek coming last. I have also noted, whenever possible, the sources in which variations of a particular joke appear.

The assumption behind the analysis is quite straightforward: that Egyptian political jokes reflect the popular feelings and opinions of the Egyptian people and that through an analysis of their jokes we can derive some understanding of their views. From a content analysis of the jokes I hope to make some of these implicit views explicit.

The first two political jokes run as follows:

A fox in the Western Desert escaped to Libya and the Libyans asked, ‘Why do you come here?’ The fox said, ‘Because in Egypt they arrest camels.’ The Libyans said, ‘But you are not a camel.’ The fox then said, ‘Of course not, but try telling that to the police!"

A little ancient Egyptian statue was found, but no one could find out anything about it. They summoned experts from abroad, and still they couldn’t find out a single thing about it. The secret police heard about the statue, and they said, ‘Give it to us for twenty-four hours.’

‘Twenty-four hours! What can you do in twenty four hours?’

‘None of your business. Just give it to us.’

They took it, and before the day was over, they came back with it and said, ‘This is King So-and-so, son of So-and-so; he ruled at such and such a time and place, and ..., and ..., and!’

They told them everything.

‘How did you find all that out? Did you locate his tomb?’

‘No sir! He confessed!’

The first joke has an impressively long history, both in Egypt and abroad. Different versions of the joke have been documented in communist Eastern Europe, Nazi Germany, Czarist Russia, and in 12th and 13th century Iranian sources. The oldest version,
however, remarkably similar to the one presented above, is found in 11th century Arabic sources. The joke, which my informant claimed was told by Sadat in criticism of Nasser and his regime, attacks the police and other government authorities' utter disregard of truth in Nasser's Egypt. Exactly the opposite of the popular adage, in Nasser's Egypt one was presumed guilty unless proven otherwise. The second joke sharply criticizes the methods of obtaining information used by Nasser's secret police. Torture was widely used by the secret police to extract confessions from those opposed to Nasser and his regime. The Ikhwan Al-Muslimin (The Muslim Brotherhood), bitterly opposed to Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, was a favourite target of attack and many of its more vociferous members were imprisoned and tortured and some were even executed. The absurdity of the statue's confession poignantly highlights the extent to which torture was used by the secret police.

As stated earlier, freedom of speech was not permitted during Nasser's presidency. But, as in the joke that follows, this in itself made for an interesting subject for jokes.

Once someone saw a man with his nose bandaged and asked him, 'Why is your nose bandaged?' The man said, 'I had a tooth removed.' The first man said, 'Why didn't you have it removed from your mouth?' whereupon the reply was, 'Can anyone in this country open his mouth?’

In another version of this joke, an Egyptian goes to Europe to check on a recently extracted tooth. When the dentist asks the man to open his mouth, the man reveals a fresh surgical scar on his stomach. The dentist says that he doesn't want to see the man's stomach and again asks him to open his mouth. The Egyptian then says, 'But you know we are not allowed to open our mouths in Egypt.' Absurdity again proves comic. Because Egyptians cannot open their mouths, not even for dental work, they must have their teeth removed through their noses and stomachs. In yet another joke criticizing the lack of freedom of speech in Egypt, a dog runs all the way to the Libyan border to bark because he is not allowed to 'open his mouth' in Egypt. The point is clear enough; not even dogs could open their mouths in Nasser’s Egypt!

The last joke about Nasser and his regime to be presented here is filled with criticism, making its significance even greater.

When Nasser was ushered into hell, Satan gave him the preferential treatment accorded big men by allowing him to choose his room of torture. The choice offered involved a Socialist torture room and a Capitalist one. Nasser inquired what each meant: ‘Well the Capitalist room means you burn for five days and rest for two. The Socialist, you burn in hot oil for seven days consecutively.’ Nasser promptly discarded his socialist ethics and decided on the Capitalist room, with no further hesitation. After a couple of weeks of torture he decided to go see how Ammer [Abd Al-Hakim Ammer was General of the Armed Forces and mysteriously 'committed suicide' after the war] was doing in the Socialist room. So with all his body covered in painful sores he struggled down to the other room and there he found Ammer smugly sitting back puffing hard on his hubbly-bubbly [a device used to smoke hashish] laden with hashish. He immediately demanded an explanation, and Ammer calmly replied: 'Well we keep sending a chap over to the Co-op for oil and he comes back with the answer that they have not as yet received it.’

Several points about the joke need to be made. In the joke, Nasser, much like the decision he faced for Egypt in the 1950s, must decide for himself which room (the capitalist or socialist) he will enter. Unlike the path he chose for Egypt, however, 'Nasser promptly discarded his socialist ethics and decided on the Capitalist room.' Nasser's commitment to socialism is explicitly mocked. Socialism, however, is what is central to the joke and
is itself comically criticized. Like real life in Egypt from the 1950s until today, the socialist ‘room’ and the co-operatives, which are so fundamental to Egyptian life, cannot even provide basic staples such as oil. Finally, Abdel Al-Hakim Ammer, the General of the Armed Forces who mysteriously ‘committed suicide’, is explicitly chastised for his notorious hashish smoking. It is also worth noting how often political leaders, Egyptian and non-Egyptian, end up in hell in political jokes. This is by no means purely coincidental!

The jokes told about Nasser and his regime contain several recurrent and discernible themes: the denial of freedom of speech, the abuses, including torture, of the police and authorities, and the failure of socialism in Egypt. Another theme which emerged after the 1967 War was the tremendous incompetence and bumbling of the Egyptian Army during the fighting. Many of the Egyptian people’s criticisms were voiced in their jokes and their perceptions and image of the Nasser regime are to be found in the popular jokes of the period.

Nasser’s death in 1970 and Anwar Al-Sadat’s uneasy ascendency to the position of president ushered in a new period in Egyptian political history and political jokelore. This is not to say that some of the jokes previously told about Nasser were never heard in connection with Sadat. This could hardly be the case as most political jokes are not completely new but, rather, are updated versions of old jokes told about past leaders. Nevertheless, Sadat brought with him a new personality and new policies which would ultimately be both reflected and criticized through political jokes.

Sadat’s wife, Jihan, is a common subject for this new generation of Egyptian jokes. Many of the jokes that involve Jihan, like the one that follows, are openly sexual. These jokes, like others found in Egypt and elsewhere, combine both sex and politics and are therefore relevant for the student of Egyptian politics.

Once, when Sadat was leaving Egypt to go to America, he became afraid of what could happen to Jihan in his absence. He decided to put a chastity belt on her which was constructed in such a way that whatever would go into it would immediately be cut off. Sadat then left and went to America. When he returned to Egypt he called all his ministers into a room and made them take their pants off. Everyone of them had his dick cut off except Husni Mubarek. Sadat went to Mubarek and said to him, ‘You are a very good man Husni, I knew I could count on you.’ Mubarek said, [speaking in a mumble], ‘Thank you very much Mr. President.’

The joke teller utters Mubarek’s last line in such a way as to indicate to the audience that Mubarek’s tongue had been cut off by the chastity belt! Although Sadat, Mubarek and Jihan are all central figures in the joke, it is clearly Jihan’s promiscuity that is called into question. In Sadat’s absence, the whole of his cabinet, including Mubarek, attempted to have sex with Jihan. What is particularly funny about this joke is that at first Sadat mistakenly believes Mubarek to be a loyal and faithful colleague, the only high ranking Egyptian official who did not have sex with Jihan in his (Sadat’s) absence. When Mubarek utters his line, however, it becomes painfully clear (to Sadat and the audience) that Mubarek also had sex with Jihan. The fact that it is Mubarek’s tongue and not his penis that is castrated allows Sadat to at first mistakenly believe that Mubarek did not have sex with his wife and is thus crucial for the joke’s humour. Sex and Jihan Al-Sadat are regular themes in the political jokes of this period.

Sadat, when speaking in parliament once said, ‘Just as I have taught you honesty I will tell you now that Jihan, my wife, is pregnant.’ Someone exclaimed, ‘Mubarek!’ [congratulations!] Sadat said, ‘No, my son, Carter.’
The joke is made possible by the double meaning of the word 'mubarek', possibly referring to either Husni Mubarek, or a word of congratulations. Sadat misunderstands the word 'mubarek' believing it to be a question meaning, 'Is Mubarek the father of the child?' or 'Is Mubarek responsible for Jihan's pregnancy?' Sadat's answer is that it is not Mubarek but Jimmy Carter who is the father of the child. Again Jihan's sexuality is the object of the joke's criticism, and there is an allusion to the 'scandal' caused when President Carter kissed her (see below).

Jihan's importance in the politics of the period is reflected in a popular rhyme which circulated after Sadat's death; 'Sadat lived for peace and died for the madame (Jihan)' (aesh min agl il-salaam wa mat min agl al-madaam); the implication is that those who assassinated Sadat were in part motivated by anger at Jihan's influence, for reasons discussed below. Even today, in the jokes that are told about Mubarek, Jihan still occasionally appears. Although she is a peripheral figure in the following joke, the extent of her political involvement and public visibility in the 1970s, I believe, partially explains why she appears so often in the jokes of the Sadat period.

Suzanne [Mubarek's wife] asked Mubarek why it was that in the days of Sadat Egypt would get much more money from the Americans. Mubarek said, 'Because Jihan would go to America and Carter would kiss her here and here [pointing to both cheeks] and give Egypt two billion dollars.' Mubarek said, 'You should go to America to help Egypt' [and be kissed by Bush]. Suzanne said, 'Isn't it forbidden?' [in Islam or social practice]. Mubarek said, 'No it isn't, but when you come back to Egypt go to the Nile and wipe both cheeks [making a wiping motion on both sides of the face] with Nile water immediately.' Suzanne went to America and Bush kissed her twice and gave Egypt a check for two billion dollars. When she came back to Egypt she went to the Nile and washed her cheeks, whereupon she saw Zaki Badr [minister of the interior] washing his arse. She asked, 'Where did you come from?' He said, 'Saudi Arabia.'

The joke is certainly about the believed widespread homosexuality in Saudi Arabia (and the Arab Gulf) and, secondly, what Egypt 'has to do' to get aid from both the Saudis and the Americans. Jihan's role in the joke, however, is what is important for our purposes. In the joke, Jimmy Carter is said to have kissed Jihan on both cheeks and given Egypt two billion dollars. The joke, however, does reflect reality as Carter did actually kiss Jihan while the Carters were visiting Egypt. For many in conservative Egypt, this was completely unacceptable behaviour. It was even rumoured that Colonel Qaddafi of Libya, who had terrible political relations with Sadat, erected a huge picture of Carter kissing Jihan in the centre of Tripoli airport. Qaddafi was not the only one who was offended by Jihan, however. Her outspoken feminism made her many enemies inside Egypt. Unlike Nasser's wife, Jihan became a vocal part of Egyptian politics in the 1970s, arguing in favour of women's rights, particularly in cases of divorce, and pushed Sadat to legally restrict the conditions under which a man could marry more than one wife. The rhyme mentioned above refers to what was often called 'Jihan's law', law number 44/1979 on personal status, which required all men who were married to inform their first wives if they choose to marry a second time, as the reason for Sadat's death. In fact, many in Egypt, including the groups that assassinated Sadat, were not the least receptive to the changes Jihan envisioned for Egypt. Jihan Al-Sadat's overwhelming presence on the Egyptian political stage in the 1970s, therefore, made her a favourite target of jokes and criticism.

The strained relations between President Sadat and the Coptic Church of Egypt is another popular theme in the jokes of the period. Throughout the 1970s, Sadat struggled
with the leader of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda III, as sectarian violence, particularly in Upper Egypt, increased. The conflict between Sadat and Pope Shenouda was also quite personal, and Sadat publically criticized Shenouda on several occasions. The personal animosity between the two men is vividly depicted in the following joke.

Anwar Al-Sadat, Pope Shenouda and the Sheikh of Al-Azhar are on a plane and it is about to crash yet there are only two parachutes. Sadat says, ‘I am Anwar Al-Sadat, president of Egypt, and I must have one parachute.’ Sadat told the two men that he would give them a quiz and the one that passed would get the remaining parachute. He asked Sheikh Al-Azhar what Arab country had ‘the revolution of the million martyrs.’ Sheikh Al-Azhar responded correctly and said, ‘Algeria.’ Sadat then asked Pope Shenouda, ‘What were the names of the million martyrs?’

In this popular joke, Sadat purposely asks the Sheikh of Al-Azhar an easy question, knowing he can answer it. Sadat then turns to Pope Shenouda, asking him an impossible question—to name all those that died in the Algerian revolution—knowing he will never be able to answer correctly. Due to Sadat’s favouritism, the Sheikh gets the remaining parachute and survives while the Pope is left behind to go down with the plane.

In the following joke, Sadat suggests a solution to Egypt’s religious problems.

Sadat wanted to end the religious disputes between the Copts and the Muslims. So he called the leaders of both communities, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar and the Pope of the Coptic Church. He said that the religious disputes must end and to facilitate this he would replace both leaders with new ones which he would personally pick. Both the Pope and Sheikh Al-Azhar said, ‘Whatever you see fit, Mr. President.’ Sadat said to the Pope that he would replace him with Mamdough Salem [former Prime Minister]. The Pope said, ‘But he is Muslim.’ Sadat then said, ‘Are we going back to the days of petty religious quibbling?’ [or ‘Are we going back to the days when we would say “he is Christian and he is Muslim?”’]

Sadat’s solution to Egypt’s religious problems turns out to be the replacement of the Pope with a Muslim. In fact, at the very end of Sadat’s presidency, during the mass imprisonments of September 1981, Sadat confined Pope Shenouda to an isolated monastery and transferred his authority to a patriarchal committee of five. The bitter relations between the two men are accurately and humorously depicted in the popular jokes of the period.

Sadat’s relations with the Copts and their religious leader was no doubt worsened by the image Sadat constantly attempted to present of himself: the image of the religious president. Sadat differentiated himself from Nasser by emphasizing his firm belief in Islam and Egyptian television regularly showed Sadat attending Friday prayers. The following joke, however, although short, casts doubt on his religious sincerity. ‘Before Sadat would leave the house he would say, “Jiji, go get my stick and al-zibeeba.” ’ Al-zibeeba is a colloquial reference to the small dark spot which appears on a man’s forehead after many years of praying. During prayer, a Muslim prostrates himself, touching his forehead to the ground. After years of this a dark spot on the man’s forehead often appears. The joke insinuates that the dark spot on Sadat’s forehead was artificial: ‘worn’ publicly and not the true mark of a sincere religious man. More generally, the message in the joke is that Sadat used religion as a political tool to win favour and that his outwardly religious display was merely political posturing.

The last joke to be presented about Sadat concerns governmental corruption and is also told today about the Mubarek regime. It runs as follows:
Anwar Al-Sadat was in a very important meeting with all of his ministers when he got an urgent phone call from Jihan. He got up and took the phone call and asked Jihan what the emergency was. Jihan said, 'Oh Anwar, Anwar, our house has been robbed!' Sadat said, 'Impossible, I've been sitting here with all the crooks in Egypt!'

In this popular joke, Sadat tells his wife (Jihan) that she must be mistaken about the robbery of their home as all the thieves in Egypt—Sadat's cabinet ministers—have been with him the entire time. The joke denounces the high-level government corruption which was a persistent feature of the Sadat regime. Although corruption in Egypt existed before Sadat, it increased in both frequency and scale under his leadership. In particular, Sadat's policy of Infitah (the open-door economic policy), which aimed at a revitalization of the Egyptian economy by encouraging foreign investment and promoting Egyptian exports, led to increased corruption at all levels of society, including military generals, cabinet ministers and even among Sadat's close family and friends.46

Husni Mubarek, Sadat's successor to the presidency, has been more tolerant of political criticism than his predecessors. A number of opposition parties have been allowed to publish their own newspapers and restrictions on political organization have lessened. The Wafd, the official daily of the New Wafd—the right-of-centre political party—has the largest circulation of all opposition papers and fiercely criticizes the members and policies of the Mubarek regime regularly. Egypt is still not a democracy, however, and political jokes continue to be extremely popular.

Like his predecessors, Husni Mubarek has found his way into many of the political jokes which have circulated during his tenure as president. Unlike the jokes of the Nasser and Sadat period, however, the overwhelming majority of jokes about Mubarek seem to have a single and very discernible message. The jokes about Mubarek, of which there are an abundance, call his intelligence and capabilities as a leader into question as he is ridiculed and often compared to animals.

There was an international conference on surgical operations and representatives of many of the countries of the world attended. The French surgeon told about a man who was in a serious accident and was hurt badly and had to have his heart and kidneys replaced. 'Today,' the French surgeon said, 'he is a professional wrestler.' The English surgeon spoke about a man who was a marathon runner and was hurt badly and had both of his legs replaced and today was still a champion marathon runner. All the representatives, in turn, told about the best operations performed in their countries. Finally, the Egyptian surgeon got up and told of a man who had a brain that didn't work and had it replaced with the brain of a monkey and was now president of Egypt.47

In the previous joke, Mubarek is said to have had 'a brain that didn't work' before the surgeons replaced it with a monkey's brain. The monkey motif is again present in the following joke.

Abu Ghazala [former Minister of War] went to Zaire and as a souvenir the government of Zaire gave him two monkeys: one for himself and one for Mubarek. When he returned to Egypt, Mubarek and Abu Ghazala decided to sell the monkeys in order to raise money for the Egyptian national debt. They each went to a different street corner in Cairo, and after Abu Ghazala had sold his monkey he went to see how Mubarek was doing with his monkey, but found the monkey counting the money.

Mubarek is depicted as being so thoroughly incompetent that the monkey, which he was supposed to sell, sold him instead. Thus, Mubarek is depicted as being less intelligent...
than a monkey, a lower form of life, and his incompetence is contrasted with the severe economic problems that face Egypt, including the debt crisis.

The most common animal compared to Mubarek in Egyptian political jokes, however, is the donkey or ass (*humar*).

Whenever Mubarek goes anywhere an ambulance and a donkey follow his car. Once a man asked Mubarek’s doctor why the ambulance and the donkey follow Mubarek. The doctor said, ‘The ambulance is in case Mubarek gets into an accident and the donkey is in case the president needs a blood transfusion.’

Because Mubarek has the same blood as an ass, the implication is that he is very similar to, if not entirely, an ass. In the following two jokes Mubarek is depicted as being dumber than an ass.

Atif Sidqi (Prime Minister) went in to talk with Husni Mubarek but Mubarek’s assistant said that he was very busy and that Sidqi couldn’t come in. Atif Sidqi said it was very important and that he must see him. He went into Mubarek’s office and found him playing chess with a donkey. He said, ‘You’re playing chess with a donkey?’ Mubarek immediately said, ‘Don’t call him a donkey [ass], he’s beaten me four times already.’

Mubarek can’t even beat a donkey at a game of chess!

When Husni Mubarek came to America to meet with Reagan he asked him why he allowed a teacher to go up in the space shuttle and didn’t ask him [Mubarek] if he wanted to go. Reagan said not to worry and that the next time there would be a space trip he would call Mubarek so he could go. ‘But be sure to bring a donkey,’ Reagan said. Next time there was a space shuttle launch, Mubarek was allowed to go. The scientists told Mubarek and the donkey that there were two phones on the space shuttle: a green one and a blue one. When the blue one rang Mubarek was supposed to answer and when the green one rang the donkey was supposed to answer. They went up into space and the green phone rang. The scientists proceeded to ask the donkey many questions about what it saw from the window, etc... The second day the green phone rang again and the same thing happened. The third day the green phone rang and the same thing happened. The fourth day, when the green phone rang, Mubarek answered and asked the scientists why they hadn’t called him. The scientists said not to worry and promised to call Mubarek the next day. Sure enough, on the fifth day the blue phone rang and Mubarek answered it. The scientists asked him if they could speak to the donkey.

Mubarek, like a child, is disappointed that Ronald Reagan would choose a simple teacher over him, the President of Egypt, to go to space in the shuttle. After he is in space, Mubarek becomes disgruntled when the scientists choose to question the donkey instead of him. Finally, when the scientists do call Mubarek it is only to ask if they can speak to the donkey. The meaning of the joke is perfectly clear; Mubarek is dumber than an ass and the scientists would rather speak with the ass than Mubarek!

The donkey, or ass, is a recurring motif in the jokes told about Mubarek. In a largely agricultural society, where donkeys, horses, and other animals are visible, even in the streets of large cities like Cairo and Alexandria, the motif has special significance. In Egypt, donkeys are believed to have little intelligence and are used for the most menial physical tasks. By continually comparing Mubarek to a donkey, the Egyptian people are saying that he has little intelligence and should not be ruling Egypt. For an animal to be ruling humans is absurd, whether he is a monkey or a donkey.

Those jokes that contain all three presidents, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarek, provide a particularly good opportunity to compare the general public’s opinions of their leaders.
The contents of these jokes also reinforce the contention that the Egyptian people have very little confidence in Mubarek’s abilities.

They asked the presidents of Egypt what was the most difficult year in their lives. Jamal Abdel Nasser thought a little bit and said, ‘The year of the naksa [setback], 1967.’ Sadat thought a little and said, ‘The year of the Ramadan War, 1973.’ Mubarek immediately said, ‘My second year in high school.’

Unlike Nasser and Sadat who respond to the question with truly difficult years in their lives and important years in modern Egyptian history, 1967 and 1973, Mubarek believes the hardest year of his life to have been his ‘second year in high school’. Compared to Nasser and Sadat, Mubarek seems silly, almost pitiful. The second year of high school is believed to be one of the easiest years in the Egyptian educational system, making Mubarek even more of an idiot.

Another popular joke comically ‘explains’ why there is at present no vice-president of Egypt. Ever since Mubarek became president in 1981, the position of vice-president has remained vacant.

When Nasser became president he wanted a vice-president who was dumber than he was, so as not to cause him trouble or pose a threat to his power, so he choose Sadat. When Sadat became president he too wanted a vice-president dumber than he was and picked Mubarek. Mubarek has not yet found anyone in Egypt dumber than himself.

The final joke to be presented, which in fact is a rhyme, brilliantly and succinctly reveals some of the opinions and perceptions of Egyptians towards their three presidents. Translated, it is as follows: ‘Nasser taught us how to live on cheese, Sadat taught us how to cheat, and Mubarek doesn’t do anything.’ (Nasser alimna akl al-mish, Sadat alimna al-ghish, Mubarek wa la bi hish wa la bi nish.)

The joke is critical of Nasser’s failed socialism which is said to have impoverished the Egyptian people, forcing them to live on a cheap kind of cheese (mish). Sadat is said to have taught the people, by example, how to cheat (al-ghish), while Mubarek has done absolutely nothing. Again, the failure of Nasser’s socialism, the corruption of Sadat and his regime, and the incompetence and ineffectiveness of Mubarek are the salient features of this joke.

CONCLUSION

Political jokes are a form of folklore which has existed in societies as seemingly different as 12th century Persia, Czarist Russia, Communist Eastern Europe and modern Egypt. What all of these societies have in common is the repression of their people’s political freedoms. And when political freedoms are repressed and open political expression is not tolerated, the political joke becomes a vehicle for the criticism of political leaders, their policies, and government. The joke becomes a form of political protest.

People express themselves politically in their jokes and through an analysis of political jokes we can derive some understanding of their views. As we have seen in Egypt, the Egyptian people are quite eloquent in their criticism. Under Nasser, Egyptians criticized the absence of freedom of expression, police methods, including torture, the Egyptian Army’s performance in the 1967 War and the failure of (Nasser’s) socialism in Egypt. During Sadat’s presidency, Egyptians were highly critical of Jihan Al-Sadat’s role in politics, Sadat’s harsh relations with the Coptic Church and Pope Shenouda III, the
corruption of the Sadat regime, and the facade of ‘the religious president’. Finally, the criticisms of Mubarek have been quite personal and ridicule his intelligence, competence and worthiness as a leader.

Egypt, however, is not the only society in the Middle East where political jokes are important. In Iran, for example, political jokes flourished in the years before (and probably after) the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and in Syria jokes told about Hafez Al-Assad and his regime are both popular and dangerous. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, like so much of the world, political repression is the rule rather than the exception and so long as this is the case political jokes will continue to be important for both the folk and for those who study them.

Department of Politics, Corwin Hall
Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544, U.S.A.

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2. See Ethelyn G. Orso, Modern Greek Humor (Bloomington, 1979). The first chapter is entirely devoted to political jokes.


4. See Egon Larsen, Wit as a Weapon: The Political Joke in History (London, 1980) and C. Banc and A. Dundes, First Prize: Fifteen Years! Although political jokes do exist in ‘open’ or ‘free’ societies (i.e. United States, Britain, etc...), these jokes do not nearly have the same importance, popularity or function as in authoritarian or totalitarian societies. See Alan Dundes, ‘Six Inches from the Presidency: The Gary Hart Jokes as Public Opinion,’ Western Folklore, 48 (January, 1989), 43-51.
6. Ibid., p. 96-97.
7. Ibid., p. 103.
9. Ibid., p. 105.
10. Egon Larsen writes that ‘the political joke is a safety valve ... a way in which an oppressed people preserves its sanity’ in *Wit as a Weapon: The Political Joke in History*, p. 3.
13. The literature on Egyptian political jokes is truly sparse. Nadia Izzeldin Atif’s unpublished PhD thesis entitled *Awlad Al-Nokta: Urban Egyptian Humor* (Univ. of Calif., Berkeley) includes one chapter on Egyptian political jokes. This is also the subject of Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot’s presidential address entitled ‘Humor: The Two-Edged Sword,’ printed in the *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 14,1 (July, 1980), 1-9. Marsot also includes four political jokes in ‘Popular Attitudes Towards Authority in Egypt,’ *Journal of Arab Affairs*, 7,2 (1988), 174-198. Khalid Kishainy’s *Arab Political Humour* (London, 1985) includes only one chapter on Egyptian political humour and one chapter on the humour of the 1967 War. Hasan M. El-Shamy includes four political jokes in his *Folktales of Egypt* (Chicago, 1980), pp. 227-230. One political joke is included in Sabra J. Webber’s article entitled, ‘The Social Significance of the Cairene Nukta: Preliminary Observations,’ *Newsletter of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 138 (Summer 1987), 1-10. Webber implicitly argues, I believe mistakenly, that there is a Cairene joke which is somehow different from other jokes. I doubt very much that any joke told in Cairo is not told in other Egyptian cities, particularly Alexandria. In fact, most jokes which are not linguistic in nature, that is jokes that do not involve plays on language, can be found in many different countries. For obvious reasons, the literature in Arabic on Egyptian political jokes is, to my knowledge, almost non-existent.
15. Ibid., p. 147, and Nadia Izzeldin Atif, *Awlad Al-Nukta*, p. 162.
16. Alan Dundes says that ‘the people’s attitudes towards politics and politicians are also important and there is probably no better source material for the study of such attitudes than folklore in general and jokelore in particular.’ Alan Dundes, ‘Laughter behind the Iron Curtain,’ *The Ukrainian Quarterly*, 27,1 (Spring, 1971), p. 59.
17. Nadia Izzeldin Atif, *Awlad Al-Nukta*, p. 177. Atif says that many of her informants felt this way and I also have heard this said on a number of occasions. One of her informants is recorded as writing that ‘the importance of jokes in our society is that they have become—since July 23rd, 1952—the safest medium of criticism and freedom of expression for the Egyptian People.’ p. 166.

24. See C.W.E. Bigsby, 'The Politics of Popular Culture,' in *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, 1976), p. 18. Bigsby, differentiating folk from popular culture, says that the former is 'rooted in daily experience, a product of *gemeinschaft*, in which the distinction between audience and performer is imprecise.' Popular culture, by contrast, is 'an entertainment, a product of *gesellschaft*, in which that distinction (between audience and performer) becomes vital.'


26. What seems to be more fascinating, as stated earlier in the body of the paper, is whether the content of the jokes told by these groups differs from the content of jokes told by members of other social classes. The same question could, of course, be asked of the Copts.

27. This version appears in Hasan M. El-Shamy, ed., *Folktales of Egypt*, pp. 228-229. I have also heard the joke from several different sources. For foreign versions of the same joke see C. Banc and A. Dundes, *First Prize: Fifteen Years!* p. 38. This contains an excellent annotated bibliography listing foreign versions of all the jokes recorded.


30. A few members of the Ikhwan, including Sayyid Qutb, were even executed. For a good history of the movement see Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers* (London, 1969).

31. I was told that an American version of this joke circulated in the South in which one black man asks another why his nose is bandaged.


33. I collected this version of the joke. It was also recorded by Nadia Izzeldin Atif, *Awlad Al-Nokta*, p. 167.

34. This joke was collected by Nadia Izzeldin Atif, *Awlad Al-Nokta*, pp. 187-188.


37. See Alan Dundes, 'Six Inches from the Presidency: The Gary Hart Jokes as Public Opinion,' *Western Folklore*, 48 (January, 1989), 43-51. In this article Dundes explores political jokes associated with the political demise of Senator Gary Hart, a one-time U.S. presidential hopeful who lost all hope of election due to a sex scandal.

38. Of course, it goes without saying, as stated earlier in the body of the paper, is whether the content of the jokes told by these groups differs from the content of jokes told by members of other social classes. The same question could, of course, be asked of the Copts.

39. It was also rumoured that Jihan objected to the popular title informally conferred upon the famous Egyptian singer Om Kalthum. Om Kalthum, truly a phenomenon in her own right, was known by many as 'Egypt's first lady.' Jihan, it was said, thought the title officially belonged to her as the president's wife.


44. Another version of this joke is included in Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'Popular Attitudes Toward Authority in Egypt,' *Journal of Arab Affairs*, 7, 2 (1988), p. 193.


47. This joke was also told about a previous governor of California, George Dekmejian.


49. It has been brought to my attention that a similar joke circulated in the U.S. about a black astronaut and a monkey. The space shuttle (Challenger) disaster launched a cycle of popular jokes in the United States. Two good articles on the space shuttle jokes are Elizabeth Radin Simons, 'The Nasa Joke Cycle: The Astronauts and the Teacher,' *Western Folklore*, 45 (1986), 261-277, and Willie Smyth, 'Challenger Jokes and the Humor of Disaster,' *Western Folklore*, 45 (1986), 243-260.


51. For a Polish version of the same joke see William M. Clements, *The Types of the Polack Joke*, 1969.

52. It is said that this joke was originally told by an Egyptian performer in a popular theatrical production. It is also said that the performer was imprisoned for telling it.