

Humor as a New Weapon Against Muslim Extremists

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Oppressed societies have long used Political humor as a response to their tyrannical regimes. Humor is a form of peaceful protest to the government in control and an excellent stage to point out the flaws of the ruling authorities. As Social Cultural Anthropologist, Stanley H. Brandes, mentions in his article on effects of political humor in times of crises, “people who live under politically repressive circumstances are more likely to vent their anger and frustration through narrative jokes, riddle jokes or related genres, and thereby create for themselves a temporary escape from omnipresent and severe restrictions on freedom of expression.”

What is very interesting to observe is the emergence of using humor and comedy in dealing with such oppressive ideologies or regimes in Iran.

It has almost been twenty years since the end of the Iran-Iraq War or the Imposed War (*Jang-e-tahmil*) as it is known to Iranians. The Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly used this war as a propaganda tool to enforce its domestic and international policies on the Iranian citizens.

The Islamic regime has frequently used the Martyrs in order to face any opposition to social or political change in Iran. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, widely seen as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's spiritual advisor, and a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts, has been quoted to say, “What did our martyrs die for? So that we can trample on all the sanctities and our youth can have more freedom? If freedoms were desirable, why did we bother to get rid of the Shah? He did give such freedoms.”

Yazdi is not the only cleric who uses the Martyrs of the “Eight Year War” to make a point about the social or political changes that he feels are necessary to be implemented. This is a common practice of the supreme leader all the way down to principals of schools who try to encourage the young minds to study harder. As a young student growing up in Iran, I clearly remember our teachers giving us lectures about how we should not forget the blood that martyrs shed. “They sacrificed their lives so you can sit in peace and study the periodic table of elements” my chemistry teacher would often announce!

These practices have had an ironic backlash. With a booming young population, the Iranian clerics are now faced with an enormous challenge. Young Iranians make up an estimated 70 percent of Iran's population. The generation born largely after the shah's 1979 deposal is increasingly showing frustration with Iran's lack of social freedoms. The high rates of inflation and unemployment, especially among the youth, make it harder to believe that what we have today in Iran is exactly what the Martyrs sacrificed their lives for.

According to Brandes, jokes and narrative jokes act as almost a type of ventilation system for the people of the oppressed country. It is interesting to observe the same pattern among Iranians. Iranians even moved beyond just jokes and riddles and have put their focus on making big box office hits such as *Marmoolak* (Lizard) or *Ekhrajiha* (The Outcasts).

Marmoolak, directed by Kamal Tabrizi, enjoyed an unprecedented popularity so much so that extra screenings were scheduled past midnight. *Marmoolak* is the story of a thief and fugitive known as Reza Marmoolak who by disguising himself as a clergyman (mullah) is able to escape prison.

Ekhrajiha, written and directed by Masoud Dehnamaki, is set during the Iran-Iraq War. The movie depicts Majid, a local thug and his friends who join the army during the last days of war in order to impress Majid's future father in law. The film is one of few Iranian war movies in which the heroes are extremely flawed and shown to commit acts often viewed as "immoral" by authorities in Iran. Majid and his friends don't pray, gamble, use foul language, smoke and use drugs.

The Iranian population has expressed a tremendous amount of interest to such movies and the aforementioned films have broken many box office records. These works do not specifically attack an individual or a certain policy imposed by the regime, but in their own clever way they act as a safety valve which creates a momentary sense of relief.

Many Iranian and Arab stand up comedians in the United States and Europe have also joined this peaceful resistance. Comedians such as Omid Djalili, active in England, and Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-American comedian who is part of the "Axis of Evil" comedy group, have contributed to the fight against the oppressive ruling elites. The "Axis of Evil" comedy tour is a voice from the Middle East directed toward the Western audience. With its members from Palestine, Egypt, and Iran, it provides a unique and unified voice from the region. By using humor, this group of comedians is trying to transform the negative image that has been painted by the media in the West. "a lot of people that are non-Arab and non-Middle Eastern who come to our shows and have never seen us, they're always curious and they want to hear a voice from that region of the world. It's like finally we've been able to have that voice. And Middle Easterners and non-Middle Easterners are laughing with us because it's a breath of fresh air..." Mr. Ahmad, the Egyptian member of the group, has been quoted to say in an interview with the National Public Radio.

The power of humor and comedy should not be taken lightly. Humor is a form of peaceful protest to the current regime and an excellent stage to point out the flaws of the ruling authorities. The names of different saints and Imams, as well as using the name of the martyrs as a propaganda tool are proving to be not as effective as they once were. In the name of humor, rather than in the name martyrs, a new peaceful revolution is on its way.