

Last Thoughts on Al-Bernameg

Bassem Youssef and the Egyptian struggle for Freedom of Speech

Since the summer of 2011, Bassem Youssef's satirical news show "Al-Bernameg" - which literally translates as "The Show" - was an institution on Egyptian television. The show ventured to test the limits of freedom of speech in the post revolutionary state, and its public struggle with state authorities and censorship were as much a part of its appeal as its comical hats and satirical songs.

Since the 2nd of June, 2014, this struggle is over. "The show" has ceased to be. In an extended press conference in his studio in Cairo's Radio Cinema Theatre, the comedian announced that MBC, the channel that had carried the show's brief final season, had been pressured to drop the programme, and that he would not seek to resurrect it on a different channel, as he had done before.

"The present climate in Egypt", Youssef concluded, "is not suitable for a political satire program." "I'm tired of struggling and fearing and worrying about my safety and that of my family," he explained, and in the Egyptian political climate of the day, in which charges of treason are spoken quickly and persecuted harshly, his fear is not unjustified. Asked about who had ordered the cancellation of "Al-Bernameg", the comedian remained quiet, referring only to unnamed higher powers which made it impossible to for a show like his to be produced in Egypt. He had also turned down offers from foreign channels, as he believed running his show from abroad would give even more ammunition to those who claim his show to be a foreign conspiracy: "Al-Bernameg belongs to Egypt". Rumours that the figures in the political leadership of Saudi Arabia, where MBC had its headquarters, were putting pressure on the channel had become common on the internet in the days leading up to the cancellation. While it is impossible to comment on their validity, no foreign explanation is needed to explain the end of "Al-Bernameg". In the three years since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, the media landscape in Egypt has undergone multiple shifts, and, as this brief article aims to show, "Al-Bernameg" has been at the centre of many of them. It was born as part of an explosion of free expression, political debate and humour in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution. It broadcast hundreds of episodes under the regime of the Muslim

Brotherhood, mocking the regime and its president Mohammed Mursi, despite repeated attempts to shut down the show. And in the year between Mursi's ouster and the inauguration of Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi, it has seen the space in which it could operate decrease, and close down completely. And while Bassem Youssef insisted that the end of "Al-Bernameg" was a victory for the show which would rather declare its end than adjust its views, it is clear that as Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi begins his tenure as Egypt's president, the country's media landscape has suffered heavy losses, and become completely incapable of criticising or challenging his regime.

In a question and answer session after his press conference, a reporter pressed Youssef to disclose more information about those behind the cancellation of his show. The comedian grinned and replied "I want to give it to you, but I cannot", echoing a statement made by Al-Sissi in a recent interview, that was frequently mocked online for the sexual undertones that the phrase has in Egyptian Arabic. It may have been the last joke he got to make about the man who one week later was inaugurated as the sixth president of Egypt.

From Youtube to Radio Cinema Theatre

Bassem Youssef had not been a political man prior to 2011. As a young heart surgeon, his involvement in the revolution began as a part of a team of volunteers that provided medical assistance to the protesters in the square. He had however been a long-time viewer of "The Daily Show", an American political comedy show in which its host, Jon Stewart, blended humour with sometimes serious political commentary, and relied heavily on clips from other TV shows to expose the hypocrisy of politicians and pundits. In the early days after the Egyptian revolution, when Egyptian news programmes were full of conspiracy theories and wild accusations against the protesters, Youssef saw a need for a similar programme in his own country.

And so he began broadcasting "The B+ Show" in March 2011, with a single camera from his laundry room straight onto Youtube. Within three months, Youssef had acquired five million viewers, and was offered a contract with ONTV, a channel owned by the Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris. "Al-Bernameg", which literally translated means "The Show", premiered during

Ramadan 2011, and grew exponentially throughout the following two years, drawing over 30 million viewers.

Unter Brotherhood Rule

Youssef's rise coincided with that of another key figure in Egypt's political development.

Mohammed Mursi, Egypt's first democratically elected President and leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood, became Youssef's favourite target throughout the 12 months of his rule. The jokes ranged from mocking the President's shaky English to increasingly open critiques of what was perceived as the Brotherhood's authoritarian style of governance.

With Youssef's rise as a vocal, popular, and persuasive critic, the Brotherhood regime and many of its supporters increasingly began to view the comedian as a fundamental threat. Civilian lawsuits against Youssef began piling up, with accusations ranging from 'defaming Islam', to 'disturbing public peace' and 'promoting homosexuality'. In March 2013, an arrest warrant was issued, but Youssef remained free and on air against a bail of 15 000 Egyptian Pounds. It appears likely that most members of the Brotherhood regime would have preferred to see Youssef and some of the more violently anti-Brotherhood programmes of the days gone from their TV screens. That they failed entirely in this enterprise can most plausibly be explained through their limited influence on the media sector, which for some months resulted in an unprecedented variety of political opinions in the nation's newspapers and talk shows. This variety however, was short lived.

After the Coup

After Mursi was deposed by the military in the summer of 2013, Al-Bernameg remained off the air for months, citing Youssef's mother's death as the reason for the show's hiatus. On October 25th 2013 however, the comedian returned with a tour-de-force in which he looked back at the events of that summer, but also moved on to a new target for his ridicule: the media frenzy around Abdel

Fattah Al-Sissi, the very popular head of Egypt's armed forces. The episode featured a skit with a baker selling cupcakes with Al-Sissi's image, which have become common in Egypt since 2013, as well as one in which a woman, representing Egypt, talks to a late-night radio host describing, through countless sexual innuendos, her new love for her 'cousin', the military officer. Youssef ends, again, on a serious note, explaining his show's position towards the old and the new regime, and expressing worry about increasing infringements on freedom of expression in Egypt.

The response to the episode was mixed. While some were happy to see that Youssef was willing to criticise the new regime, many of his old fans felt that he had overstepped a line when he mocked the immensely popular Al-Sissi. Protesters gathered in front of his studio in downtown Cairo.

One week later, shortly before the planned airing of a new episode, CBC, which had carried the show since 2012, announced the suspension of Al-Bernameg. The channel, which had taken a firm stand in support of Al-Sissi, claimed that Youssef had violated its editorial policy, while many commentators suspected political motives behind the cancellation. Quickly thereafter, Youssef left Egypt for the United Arab Emirates.

What at first appeared like the end of Al-Bernameg however only turned out to be another temporary hiatus. In February 2014, Youssef returned again, this time on the Egyptian affiliate of the Saudi channel MBC. And in the weeks that followed he managed to still make jokes about Al-Sissi, while refraining from attacking the general directly, often by mocking the media's treatment of the general instead. In one skit, his assistants help him to choose a new topic to talk about on air, in order to avoid talking about him who must not be named. The enterprise fails: when they try to talk about medicine, a clip is played showing a woman claiming that watching Sissi on television will make people lose weight and live healthier. When they try to talk about fashion, a street vendor is shown who claims that his jeans have been signed by the general. When they finally switch to a foreign channel, a Spanish song is played. Its lyrics: "Si, si, si..." Not being able to criticise the general directly had become a joke in itself. After the resignation of the Beblawi cabinet in February 2014, Youssef shows a clip of another TV personality, Tamir Amin, complaining that

there are “no real men in this government”. “Really?” Youssef asks, “No real men in this government? Is that your last word? Do you know who was part of this man-less government? Take a quick look around the cabinet table and think, maybe you’ve missed someone...”

At the same time, the protests outside his studio continued, and the country was divided in its view of the comedian. Cairo’s court of appeals had already received over 30 complaints against Youssef, accusing him of insulting the military, the ‘will of the people’ and symbols of Egypt, and thereby threatening the country’s stability and security.

At the end of February 2014, Youssef picked up on another contentious issue. A few days before his show, the Egyptian military had announced that it had developed a new device that could not only detect Hepatitis C and AIDS from a large distance, but also cure it. Much of the media failed to critically question this announcement but hailed it as a great achievement, while diabetes and cancer were quickly added to the diseases that the machine, which would be made available to Egyptians on June 30, could cure. Youssef devoted a large part of his programme to the announcement, stating that he would mention the ‘invention’ every week on his show, until the government had either cured all those it had promised to cure, or issued a clarification and held everyone involved in the announcement responsible. Curiously, in the two weeks that follows this, the signal of his channel was jammed repeatedly while Youssef’s show was on. A group calling itself the “Egyptian Electronic Army” claimed responsibility, citing Youssef’s excessive use of sexual innuendos as the motivation for its actions. Both the existence of such a group, and its ability to jam MBC’s signal, however, are highly doubtful. “This has never been done in the history of TV here”, Youssef later told ‘60 Minutes’, “we don’t know who’s doing it, and we frankly don’t know what to do.” So they kept on broadcasting.

The last hiatus

On the 19th of April, MBC announced that Al-Bernameg would once again go on a temporary hiatus, extending until the 30th of May, or put more precisely: until the end of the presidential elections that were scheduled to be held that month. In the statement, the channel openly credited

the show's hiatus to the fact that it might "influence Egyptian voters". This was of course a quite remarkable statement, given that one might argue that this is exactly the function of free and independent journalism in the run-up to a presidential election, and given that Egyptian state-media has never been shy about influencing voters. After an extended third day of voting due to generally low turnout, the official result saw Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi win 96.91 percent of the vote far ahead of the leftist Hamdeen Sabahi, who in almost all districts received less votes than there were spoilt ballots. At that point, rumours that the hiatus of "Al-Bernameg" might not be quite so temporary had already made the rounds, followed by Youssef's press conference on the 2nd of June. One week later, Al-Sissi was inaugurated as the sixth president of Egypt.

Last thoughts on Al-Bernameg: One step forward, One step back.

Surely, there are at least two ways to evaluate this story.

The first, rather optimistic conclusion that can be drawn from the history of Al-Bernameg show the possibilities for freedom of expression in Egypt. Throughout most of the time between 2011 and early 2014, despite harassment, lawsuits, more than one hiatus and two episodes that were pulled by CBC, El-Bernameg has produced more than one hundred episodes of political comedy which in this style and format would have been impossible under the Mubarak regime. It has not only mocked leaders, but undercut the absolutist propaganda of their regimes, and voiced open and direct criticism on a range of issues. It has also amassed a substantial viewership and fan base, demonstrating that there is a financially lucrative market in Egypt for political satire, and setting creative precedents for the genre.

The second, less optimistic, conclusion is obvious: the space that allowed for this development in the years following 2011 has quite clearly been forcefully closed, and it is uncertain if it will open up again any time soon. While the idea of a hysteresis of free speech - that a room that has once been opened cannot be completely shut, as too many people will have experienced this freedom and understood it as their right - is attractive, the first half of 2014 gives only limited support for such a thesis, as the language and discourse of the security state has returned with a vengeance.

Bassem Youssef's personal future at this point appears unclear: but it is hard to imagine a heart surgeon in Egypt to be unemployed for long.