



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### 'Leave, I want to have a shower!' The use of humour on the signs and banners seen during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square

Zack, L.

**Publication date**

2012

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Between West and East: Festschrift for Wim Honselaar on the occasion of his 65th birthday

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Zack, L. (2012). 'Leave, I want to have a shower!' The use of humour on the signs and banners seen during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square. In R. Genis, E. de Haard, J. Kalsbeek, E. Keizer, & J. Stelleman (Eds.), *Between West and East: Festschrift for Wim Honselaar on the occasion of his 65th birthday* (pp. 711-729). (Pegasus Oost-Europese studies; No. 20). Pegasus.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# “LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!” THE USE OF HUMOUR ON THE SIGNS AND BANNERS SEEN DURING THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN TAHRIR SQUARE

Liesbeth Zack

جرح القلم أعمق من جرح السيف  
‘The wound of the pen is deeper  
than the wound of the sword’  
Arabic proverb<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

On Tuesday 25th January 2011, National Police Day,<sup>2</sup> huge numbers of people took to the streets in Egypt to demonstrate against the government and the reign of President Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for almost 30 years. These demonstrations were inspired by the Jasmine Revolution that took place in Tunisia at the end of 2010 and ended the regime of President Ben Ali.<sup>3</sup> The protests in Egypt were initially organized using new media, such as Facebook and other social networks, and, due to the major role played by these media, they became known as: *ṭawrat 25 yanāyir* ‘the Revolution of 25 January’; *ṭawrat al-šabāb* ‘the Revolution of the Youth’; and *ṭawrat al-Facebook* ‘the Facebook Revolution’. The demonstrations ultimately led to the resignation of President Mubarak on 11 February, 2011.

Although protests were organized all over Egypt, the place where the unrest began, and where the greatest numbers of people demonstrated, was the aptly named Tahrir (‘liberation’) Square in the heart of Cairo. The protests were peaceful on the part of the demonstrators; they put up barricades at all the entrances to the square and ensured that no-one carrying any weapons was allowed inside.<sup>4</sup> There was also a strong feeling of unity among the protesters. Muslims and Christians, young and old, rich and poor all stood together, sharing food and drink, shouting their slogans and waving their signs.

For decades, making jokes about their circumstances had been a way for Egyptians to vent their frustrations at a time when saying what one really felt was not always possible. As Tamer (2009: xii) rightly notes:

By means of joking, humor gains an important social function to criticize depressing political circumstances in which state censorship can be overcome. Humor, in this manner, serves as a central factor of liberation, which leads to momentary relief from the depressing situation.

During the uprisings of 2011, humour was a strong weapon with which to express discontent with both the regime and the living conditions in Egypt. Although many of the signs and banners carried by the protesters had a serious message, there were also large numbers of slogans which expressed in a witty and creative way the opinions of these protesters about their circumstances.

This article will examine the role that humour played during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in 2011. There were signs and banners in Egyptian Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic<sup>5</sup> and English, but this paper will concentrate on the Arabic texts. Many of the images discussed in this paper were sent to the author by email, or were posted on web pages that no longer exist, meaning that no references can be provided. However, thousands of similar pictures can be found by typing “Tahrir demonstrations” into any search engine. In the summer of 2011, a book containing images of these protests was published by Karima Khalil,<sup>6</sup> which captures the spirit of the demonstrations beautifully. In this paper reference will be made to some of the pictures in Khalil’s book.

## **2 Analysis of the signs<sup>7</sup>**

On looking at the signs, one cannot help but notice that the protesters made use of variations on certain themes in a very humorous manner, an example being the “Leave, I want to have a shower” type of messages. The slogans set out below are arranged according to theme. Most of them are written in the Egyptian Arabic dialect. This is a more suitable medium for making jokes than Modern Standard Arabic, which is perceived by Egyptians as more formal and, consequently, less suitable for the purpose of humour. Unless otherwise indicated, the texts are thus in Egyptian Arabic.

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

## 2.1 “Kentucky-jokes”

During the January protests in Egypt, rumours were spread by pro-government parties that the protesters were being given KFC meals by Western powers in return for demonstrating against the regime.<sup>8</sup> This was untrue, and many people carried signs making reference to these allegations by poking fun at them and displaying indignation at what was being suggested. There were some banners where the owners “admitted” to receiving KFC meals, but said that they were fed up with this fare and wanted a change. A few examples are:

انا زهقت من الكنتاكي أرحمنى وإرحل

*ana zihī't<sup>3</sup> min ilkintāki<sup>9</sup> 'irḥamni wi-'irḥal<sup>10</sup>*

‘I’m fed up with Kentucky, have mercy on me and leave.’

زهقت من كنتاكي عاوز لحمه. واحد مصرى زهقان

*zihī't<sup>3</sup> min kintāki 'āwiz laḥma. wāḥid maṣri zah'ān*

‘I’m fed up with Kentucky, I want meat. A fed up Egyptian.’

Meat is unaffordable for most Egyptians (as is Kentucky Fried Chicken), meaning that it is a rare treat for many. Others therefore pointed out that the food that was available to them was much simpler than the fancy, expensive Kentucky meals. The individual carrying the following sign was holding a piece of *baladi*-bread (the coarse wholemeal bread eaten by most Egyptians, which is cheap because it is subsidized by the government) and a box of spreadable cheese wedges:

هو ده كنتاكي بتاعنا

*huwwa da kintāki bita'na*

‘This is our Kentucky’.

The following comment, which is in the same spirit, was written on a box filled with *‘eš fino*. These are French-style sandwiches made with white flour, which are slightly more expensive than *baladi*-bread:

كنتاكي أهو

*kintāki 'aho*

‘Here is Kentucky’.

The next sign pointed out that the rumours must be a lie, because the Kentucky Fried Chicken shop in Tahrir Square was closed when the demonstrations started:<sup>11</sup>

كنتاكي مغلقه يا غبي  
*kintāki muḡlaqa ya ḡabi*  
 ‘Kentucky is closed, stupid!’.

The following sign featured the KFC logo, with the face of Mubarak on it:

جديد من كنتاكي. كومبو ارحل  
*gidīd min kintāki. kumbu irḥal*  
 ‘New from Kentucky. The “Leave” combo’.

These KFC-inspired signs clearly highlight how the protesters used humour to turn the rumours being circulated to discredit them to their advantage. Indeed, the demonstrators used what was being suggested to make their point about the poor quality of the food that most Egyptians have to endure.

## 2.2 (Variations on) existing proverbs

The Egyptian dialect is rich in proverbs and expressions. This was noted by the Swiss orientalist, John Lewis Burckhardt, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Burckhardt wrote the following in the introduction to his work *Arabic Proverbs, or, the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*:

The natives [of Cairo], in general, are so fond of figurative language and of witty allusions and comparisons taken from low life, that these sayings are constantly quoted on every occasion, and express the tendency or moral of an event much better than could be done by a long or flowery speech.<sup>12</sup>

We can also see evidence of some creativity on the signs in terms of the use of sayings and proverbs, as illustrated in the following examples:

إكرام النظام دفنه<sup>13</sup>  
*’ikrām inniḡām dafnu*  
 ‘the best honour you can pay to the regime is to bury it’.

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

This is a variation on the Arabic proverb إكرام الميت دفنه *ikrām ilmāyyit dafnu* ‘the best honour you can pay to a dead man is to bury him’ (see Hinds and Badawi 1986: 745b).

هنفضل قاعدين أصل التكرار يعلم الحمار  
*hanifḍal ’a dīn ’aṣl ittikrār yi’allim ilḥumār*  
‘we’re going to stay, because repetition teaches the donkey’.

The proverb “كتر التكرار يعلم الحمار” ‘much repetition teaches the donkey’<sup>14</sup> is here applied to the stubbornness of the president.

أنا ثوري إذن أنا موجود  
*’anā ṭawrī ’idān ’ana maujūd* (in Modern Standard Arabic)  
‘I’m a revolutionary, therefore I am’.

The example above is a variation on René Descartes’ famous words “Cogito ergo sum”<sup>16</sup> ‘I think, therefore I am’, which translates into Arabic as أنا أفكر إذن أنا موجود *’anā ’ufakkir ’idān ’anā maujūd*. However, the literal translation of the Arabic is ‘I think, therefore I am present’. Accordingly, the banner could also be interpreted as ‘I am a revolutionary, therefore I am present [in Tahrir Square]’.

يا بخت من زار وخفف يا بارد  
*ya baxt<sup>3</sup> min zār wi xaffif ya bārid*  
‘Happy is he who doesn’t outstay his welcome, you boor’ (literally ‘Oh lucky one, who visited and kept [the visit] light [i.e. short], cold one’).<sup>18</sup>

This is an Egyptian saying, save for the final two words, which were added. The long visit is clearly a metaphor for the length of Mubarak’s regime, while the reference to “cold” is linked to the common perception in Egypt that an individual’s disposition is related to the state of his blood. For instance, if someone is cheerful, or has a good sense of humour, people will say *dammu xaffif* ‘his blood is light’, while someone who is boring is described thus: *dammu ṭ’il* ‘his blood is heavy’. If an individual is *extremely* dull, people will say *dammu wā’if* ‘his blood is standing still’. Finally, when a person is regarded as cold-hearted without feelings, people say *dammu bārid* ‘his blood is cold’.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3 Variations on the theme “Leave, I want to have a shower”

The theme “leave, I want to have a shower / I miss my family / I have other things to do / I am fed up” was seen frequently during the demonstrations, with many witty variations. The idea behind this was that people were settling down in Tahrir Square and refusing to go home until Mubarak announced his resignation. The first signs highlighted here all referred to the loved ones that the protesters were missing:

إرحل بقى خطيبتي وحشتنى<sup>20</sup>

*'irḥal ba'a xaṭibti waḥašitni*

‘Leave already, I miss my fiancée.’

إرحل مراتى وحشتنى. متزوج منذ 20 يوم<sup>21</sup>

*'irḥal mirāti waḥašitni* (in Egyptian Arabic)

*mutazawwij mundu 'isrīn yawm* (in Modern Standard Arabic)

‘Leave, I miss my wife. Married for 20 days’.

إرحل يا بارد مراتى وعيالى وحشونى<sup>22</sup>

*'irḥal ya bārid mirāti wi-'iyāli waḥašūni*

‘Leave you boor, I miss my wife and children’.

There were also signs which expressed other pressing reasons why the president should hurry up and leave:

إرحل عاوز اتجوز

*irḥal 'āwiz atgawwiz*

‘Leave, I want to get married’ (this sign, in the shape of a pink heart, was held by a man).

إرحل الوليه عاوزة تولد والولد مش عايز يشوفك<sup>23</sup>

*irḥal ilwuliyya 'ayza tiwliḍ wi-lwalad miš 'āyiz yišūfak*

‘Leave, my wife’s in labour and the kid doesn’t want to see you’.

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

إنجز عندنا ثانويه عامه<sup>24</sup>

*'ingiz 'andina sanawiyya 'āmma*  
'Hurry up, we've got exams'.

The *sanawiyya 'āmma* are the national exams taken to obtain the Certificate of General Secondary Education, which is required for admission to university. These tests are crucial to Egyptian schoolchildren, as the score they achieve determines which faculty they can join and the courses they can take. In stark contrast to the previous sign referred to, the young child holding the following example was hoping to return to kindergarten soon:

ارحل بقى.. انا عندى حضانه

*irḥal ba'a.. ana 'andi ḥaḍāna*  
'Leave already, I have to go to kindergarten'.

Other protesters were getting tired of carrying signs or chanting slogans, or had other reasons why they wanted to go home:

ارحل حرام عليك ايدى وجعتنى. مصرى وبس<sup>25</sup>

*irḥal ḥarām 'alēk īdi waga'itni. maṣri wi-bass*  
'Leave, shame on you, my arm aches'. Signed: 'Just an Egyptian'.

ارحل كتفى وجعنى

*irḥal kitfi waga'ni*  
'Leave, my shoulder is hurting me' (this protester was carrying a sleeping child on his shoulders<sup>26</sup>).

ارحل صوتى راح

*irḥal ṣōti rāḥ*  
'Leave, I have lost my voice' (presumably, from chanting).

امشى بقى عايزة استحمنى

*imši ba'a 'ayza astahamma*  
'Come on, leave, I want to take a shower!'

هاتمشى هاتمشى انجز عشان أروح أستحمى  
*hatimši hatimši ingiz 'ašān 'arūḥ 'astahamma*  
'You're going to leave anyway. Hurry up, so I can go and have a shower'.

أرحل بقى عايز أدخل الحمام  
*'irḥal ba'a 'āyiz 'adxul ilḥammām*  
'Come on, leave, I want to go to the toilet'.

Holding up the next sign was a cheerful looking youth with unkempt hair:

هاتمشى.. هاتمشى انجز عشان أرحل  
*hatimši.. hatimši ingiz 'ašān 'arūḥ aḥla'*  
'You're going to leave anyway... Hurry up, so I can have my hair cut'.

Some protesters, however, were not in a hurry to leave, and were enjoying the atmosphere:

تمشى ما تمشيش مش فارقة معايا أنا حبيت الناس اللي هنا وأنا اللي مش ماشى  
*timši ma-timšiš miš far'a ma'āya 'ana ḥabbēt innās illi hina wi-'ana illi miš māšī*

'Leave or not, it doesn't make any difference to me. I like the people here and I'm the one who isn't going to leave'.

Another demonstrator was refusing to return to the times when certain products were scarce and people had to queue for things like bread:

يا مبارك غور غور مش هنقف تانى فى طابور  
*ya mubāarak gūr gūr miš hanu'af tāni fi ṭabūr*  
'Mubarak, leave, leave, we won't stand in a queue again'.

#### 2.4 Explaining their point in another language

There were some signs that attempted to explain the demonstrators' feelings in something other than plain Arabic, because it was thought that the messages would not otherwise be noted by the government:

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

我们不要你

نحن لا نريدك انا كاتبها بالصينى اصله مبيفهمس عربى

*nahnu lā nurīduk* (in Modern Standard Arabic)

*ana katibha bi-ṣṣīni aṣlu ma-biyifhams*<sup>26</sup> ‘arabi (in Egyptian Arabic)

‘We don’t want you. I’ve written this in Chinese because he doesn’t understand Arabic’.



! ر ح ل بالهيرو غلىفى يمكن تفهم يا فرعون

’*IRḤAL bi-lhiruḡlifi yimkin tifham ya far’ōn*

‘L E A V E in hieroglyphs, maybe then you’ll understand, Pharaoh’.

The word *pharaoh* is used by Egyptians to refer to a powerful and dictatorial leader.<sup>27</sup>



بالمقلوب يمكن تفهم يا أبو علاء

’*IRḤAL bi-lma’lūb yimkin tifham ya ’abu ‘alā*’

‘L E A V E, written as mirrored, maybe you’ll now understand, father of ‘Alā’.

The word ’*IRḤAL* is written here in mirrored script. Mubarak is addressed with his *kunya*, which is a name comprised of the word *abu* ‘father of’ or *umm* ‘mother of’, followed by the name of the eldest child.<sup>28</sup> In this case, Mubarak is called ’*abu ‘alā*’ after the name of his eldest son, ’*Alā*’.

## 2.5 Professionals offering their services

The following three signs, written by various professionals offering their services, all play with the meaning of the verb *xala*’, *yixla*’ which can mean ‘to pull out, extract’ or ‘to get away’:<sup>29</sup>

أنا مهندس زراعى وجاى أخلع مبارك من جزووره  
*ana muhandis zirā'i wi-gāy axla' mubāarak min guzuuuru*  
 'I'm an agricultural engineer and I've come to tear Mubarak out by the roots'.

طبيب أسنان جاى أخلع مبارك  
*ṭabīb 'asnān gāy 'axla' mubāarak*  
 'I'm a dentist come to extract Mubarak'.

مستشفى الشعب. خلع الضرس 25 ج. خلع مبارك 25 يناير  
*mustašfa-šša'b. xal' idḍirs 25 g. xal' mubāarak 25 yanāyir*  
 'The Hospital of the People. Extracting a tooth: 25 Egyptian pounds.<sup>31</sup>  
 Extracting Mubarak: 25 January'.

## 2.6 References to cows

Mubarak has been called *ilba'ara-ddaḥka* by Egyptians because of his resemblance to the cow on the box of La Vache qui Rit-cheese wedges. At the same time, the cow is a symbol of foolishness. Protesters made use of this symbolism in several ways, as can be seen in the following examples:

إذا الشعب يوما أراد الحياة      فلا بد أن يستجيب البقر  
*'idā-š-ša'bu yawman 'arāda-l-ḥayā    fa-lā budda 'an yastajiba-l-baqar*  
 'If, one day, the people want to live, then the cows must answer their call'  
 (in Standard Arabic)

This is a parody of the famous first line of the poem *'Irādat al-ḥayā* 'The will to live' by the Tunisian poet Abū al-Qāsim al-Šābbī (1909-1934), which reads as follows:

إذا الشعب يوما أراد الحياة      فلا بد أن يستجيب القدر  
*'idā-š-ša'bu yawman 'arāda-l-ḥayā    fa-lā budda 'an yastajiba-l-qadar*  
 'If, one day, the people want to live, then fate must answer their call'.

The difference between the two sentences is only in the last words, which sound very similar: *baqar* and *qadar*.

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

تعرف على صاحب الصورة؟؟ لو إتعرفت على صاحب الصورة هتسافر معاه  
السعودية

[picture of a cow]

*ti'arraḥ 'ala ṣāḥib iṣṣūra?? law it'arraḥ<sup>3</sup> 'ala ṣāḥib iṣṣūra hatsāfir ma'ā-  
ssu'udiyya*

‘Can you identify the person in the picture? If you can identify him, you’ll travel with him to Saudi-Arabia’.

The Tunisian president, Ben Ali, went to Saudi-Arabia on 14 January, 2011, and the individual carrying this sign was imploring President Mubarak to follow his example.

## 2.7 Various

The next two banners referred to the fact that the government used thugs to attack the protesters during the days of demonstrations in January and February:

وظائف خالية. مطلوب للعمل فوراً لدى الحكومة المصرية! بلطجية خبرة لا تقل عن  
خمس سنوات

*wazā'if xāliyya. maṭlūb li-l'amal fauran ladā-lḥukūma-lmiṣriyya!*

*balṭaḡiyya xibra lā taqill 'an xamsi sanawāt* (in Modern Standard Arabic, in the style of an advert for a job)

‘Vacancies. Needed to work for the Egyptian government, thugs with at least five years experience’.

أفلام مبارك تقدم فيلم احمى بيتك بطولة حبيب العدلى والبلطجية

*'aflām mubāarak tuqaddim film iḥmi bētak buṭūlat ḥabīb il'adlī wi-*

*lbalṭaḡiyya* (in Modern Standard Arabic, in the style of a commercial for a film)

‘Mubarak Films presents the movie “Protect your house” starring Ḥabīb il'Adlī and his thugs’.

Habib el-Adly (Ḥabīb il'Adlī in Egyptian Arabic) was Minister of the Interior in Egypt from 1997 until the fall of the government in 2011.

Some demonstrators made fun of the measures that the government had taken to disperse the crowds and force them to go home, such as the use of curfews and teargas:

حظر تجول ايه يا غبى أنتا فكرنى فرخة<sup>32</sup>

*ḥaẓr tagawwul 'ēh ya ġabi 'inta fakirni farxa*

'What curfew? You idiot, do you think I'm a chicken?'

أنا خرمان بقالى أسبوع لم أشم قنابل مسيلة للدموع<sup>33</sup>

*'ana xarmān ba'ālī 'usbū' lam 'ašimm qanābil musīla li-ddumū'*

'I'm desperate, I haven't smelled any teargas for a week.'

In some comments, reference was made to Mubarak's past. One sign read:

المنوفيه تعذر للشعب المصرى

*ilminufiyya ti'tizir li-šša'b ilmaṣri*

'The Menoufiyya governorate apologizes to the Egyptian people.'

Mubarak was born in 1928 in كفر المصلحة *Kafr al-Muṣayliḥa*<sup>34</sup> in al-Minūfiyya governorate in the Egyptian Delta. Reference was also made to Mubarak's past career as an officer in the Egyptian Air Force. Puns were based on the word *yīṭīr* 'to fly':

يا شباب التحرير

إوعى تسيب حسني يطير

*ya šabāb ittahrīr*

*'iw'a tsīb ḥusni yṭīr*

'Youths of Tahrir, be careful not to let Husni fly away.'

The following sign speculated about the money belonging to the Egyptian tax payers that Mubarak and his family had put into their own pockets:

يا مبارك يا طيار

جبت منين سبعين مليار

*ya mubārak ya ṭayyār*

*gibt<sup>35</sup> mnēn sab'in milyār*

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

‘Mubarak, you pilot, where did you get seventy billion [pounds]?’

Another reference to the wealth and power of the president can be seen below:

اعذرووه أول مره حد يقوله لأ<sup>35</sup>

*u'zurūū 'awwil marra ḥadd<sup>35</sup> yi'ullu la'*

‘Forgive him, it’s the first time somebody tells him no’.

Mubarak was reviled for his stubbornness when he refused to see the need for him to step down:

إذا كان الحمار عنيدا فنحن أعند من الحمار. مع الاعتذار للحمار

*'idā kān al-ḥimār 'anīdan fa-naḥnu 'a'nad min al-ḥimār. ma'a-l-i'tiḍār li-l-ḥimār* (in Modern Standard Arabic)

‘If the donkey is stubborn, then we are more stubborn than the donkey (with apologies to the donkey)’.

لو كان هوأ دكتوراه فى العناد إحنا معانا نوبل فى الصبر

*law kān huwwa dukturā fi-l'inād 'iḥna ma'āna nūbil fi-ṣṣabr*

‘If he has a doctorate in stubbornness, then we have a Nobel prize in patience’.

ارحل بقى يا عم خلى عندك دم<sup>36</sup>

*irḥal ba'a ya 'amm<sup>36</sup> xalli 'andak damm*

‘Leave already! Show some feeling!’<sup>37</sup>.

نقول إية تاني كل الكلام إتقال

مش ناقص غير نجيب لمبارك كرسى تيفال

*ni'ul 'ē tāni kull ikkalām 'it 'āl*

*miš nā'iṣ gēr nigīb li-mubāarak kursi tifāl*

‘What else can we say? Everything has been said.

The only thing that’s missing is a Tefal chair for Mubarak’.

This pun refers to the non-stick qualities of Tefal pans; getting the president a chair with a Tefal seat might help him to get up and leave more quickly.

Mubarak was also compared to a ‘*afrit*’ or demon; the gist was that even a

demon would have left by now, but Mubarak was still there:

ده لو كان عفريت كان طلع  
*da law kān 'afrit kān ṭili'*  
 'Even if he was a demon, he would have left [by now]'.

The process leading to the revolution was sometimes compared to the delivery of a baby, due to how difficult it was:

الولادة متعسره جدا لأن المولود اسمه الحرية<sup>38</sup>  
*ilwilāda mit 'assara giddan li'ann ilmawlūd ismu-lḥurriyya*  
 'It's a very difficult delivery because the newborn's name is freedom'.

أسماء مواليد الإسيوع. 1/25 - إخلع. 1/28 - غور. 2/4 - إرحل  
*'asmā' mawalīd il'isbū'. 25/1 - 'ixla'. 28/1 - ḡūr. 4/2 - 'irḥal*  
 'The names of the newborns of this week. 25/1: Get away. 28/1: Piss off.  
 4/2: Leave'.

A man wearing a football referee's outfit, and with a whistle in his mouth, had a sign pinned to his shirt which read:

الشعب هو الحكم  
*išša' b<sup>3</sup> huwwa-lḥakam*  
 'the people are the referee'.

He also had a red card in his hand which read:

مبارك برّه  
*mubāarak barra*  
 'Mubarak out'.

Of course, Tahrir Square is appropriately named, as the sign of one of the protesters, a sleeping man, expressed eloquently:

فى التحرير حتى التحرير  
*fi-ttahrīr ḥatta-ttahrīr*  
 'On Tahrīr (Liberation) Square until the liberation'.

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

The following sign sat on top of a burned out van filled with garbage:

مقر الحزب الوطنى

*maqarr ilhizb ilwaṭani*

‘headquarters of the National Party’.

The National Democratic Party (often just called the National Party in Arabic) is Mubarak’s party, and ruled Egypt for over 30 years.<sup>39</sup> Its headquarters, which were close to Tahrir Square, were burnt down on 28 January, 2011.

It is clear and obvious: Mubarak’s time is over; the time has come for a change of regime:

مبارك



تاريخ الإنتهاء 25/1/2011

*Mubārak tarīx il'intihā' 25-1-2011*

‘Mubarak: expiry date 25 January, 2011’.

When the president finally left, people promised to stay in touch, although Mubarak himself did not seem interested in making a phone call:

باى مبارك موبيلات بقى!

*bāy mubārak mubaylāt ba'a*

‘Bye, Mubarak, (we’ll keep in touch by) mobile’.

<sup>40</sup> أسبوع يا ريس ولا حتى تلفون

*'usbū' ya rayyis wala ḥatta tilifōn*

‘A week, Mr. President, and not even a phone call?’

## Conclusion

Humour played a major role in the protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the

peaceful demonstrations that led to the resignation of the government on 11 February, 2011. Indeed, humour has long been a way for Egyptians to vent their feelings about the government in a country where freedom of speech is not a common concept. Egyptians love to use proverbs and a range of expressions when they speak, and revealed a great deal of creativity in adapting these to their purpose during the protests. People took inspiration from each other and elaborated on certain themes, such as “Leave, I miss my fiancée!”

Egyptian Arabic was used on most of the signs displaying humorous messages. The dialect is, by definition, the appropriate vehicle for Egyptians who want to tell jokes and make witticisms, as evidenced by its use in newspaper cartoons. However, a witty effect was sometimes created by giving an unexpected twist to a well-known phrase or poem in Modern Standard Arabic, such as the Arabic translation of Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum”, or Al-Šābbī’s famous line of poetry “If one day the people want to live”.

University of Amsterdam

#### Notes

\* I would like to thank Manfred Woidich for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. Of course, any errors remain my sole responsibility.

1 The notion that the pen is more powerful than the sword is well-known in European languages. For instance, in English, the expression “the pen is mightier than the sword” by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) is famous; the quotation is from his play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy* (1839: 35). A similar idea was expressed earlier by Shakespeare when he wrote in *Hamlet* “many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills” (2003: 145). However, the notion was first coined by the Arabs; see Van Gelder (1987).

2 25 January, National Police Day, was declared a national holiday by President Mubarak in 2009 in honour of the police force. This holiday commemorates the fact that more than 50 Egyptian police officers were killed by British forces on 25 January 1952, in Ismailiyya. This occurred after the British demanded that the police officers hand over their weapons and surrounded their headquarters. See Beattie (2005:191).

3 He fled the country on 14 January, 2011, after 28 days of protests.

4 See Tignor (2011: 324).

5 The language situation in the Arab world is described as diglossia. This means that in Arab speaking countries, two varieties of Arabic are used side by side: a “lower” variety, i.e. the dialects that are used in everyday conversation, and a “higher” variety, i.e. Modern Standard Arabic, which is used in formal settings, such as for writing; see Ferguson (1959). However, in informal writing, for instance in newspaper cartoons, casual letters and notes, and when chatting or texting, the Arabic dialects are often used.

6 An interview by Aida Nasr with Khalil about how the book came into being can be read on

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

<http://thedailynewsegypt.com/books/messages-from-the-revolution.html>.

7 The views expressed on the signs discussed herein are those of the protesters and do not necessarily represent the views of the author of this article.

8 See, for instance, Abdulrahim, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/07/world/la-fg-egypt-kentucky-20110208>.

9 It is interesting that in this example, the article *il* is prefixed to the name *kintāki*, while in the examples that follow it is not. Proper names are determined in Arabic, and *kintāki* does not therefore need to take the article (see Woidich 2006: 124).

10 All the signs are written in Arabic; the transliteration is provided by the author of this paper. The transliteration follows the system in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (see Versteegh (et al.) 2006: viii). A macron indicates a long vowel; a dot under a consonant indicates that the consonant is emphatic, except for *ḥ*, which is the voiceless pharyngeal fricative /ħ/. ʾ indicates the glottal stop /ʔ/; ʿ indicates the voiced pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/. ġ is the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/. *ḍ* and *ṭ* are interdentals /ð/ and /θ/. The <sup>◌◌◌</sup> indicates the schwa that is inserted to avoid three-consonant sequences.

11 See, for instance, the blog by McGreal, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/07/tahrir-square-protesters-egypt>

12 Burckhardt (1830: iv).

13 Khalil (2011: 55).

14 See Taymūr (1986: 391).

15 Khalil (2011: 73).

16 This dictum was first coined in French in 1637 as “je pense, donc je suis” by René Descartes (1596–1650) in his *Discours de la méthode*, see Descartes (1878: 34). There is also an alternative Arabic translation: أنا أفكر فأنا موجود *anā ʿufakkir fa-anā maujūd*, see Cantarino (1975: 23), who quotes it from Maḥfūz (1971: 25).

17 Khalil (2011: 101).

18 There are several other Egyptian proverbs which start with the expression *ya baxṭ<sup>◌</sup> min* ‘Happy is he who ...’: Taymūr (1986: 505-6) mentions four of them in his collection of Egyptian proverbs.

19 See Hinds and Badawi (1986: 303b).

20 Khalil (2011: 98).

21 Khalil (2011: 99).

22 Khalil (2011: 100).

23 Khalil (2011: 110).

24 Khalil (2011: 109).

25 Khalil (2011: 117).

26 Many people took their children with them to Tahrir Square to join in with the protests.

27 See Hinds and Badawi (1986: 650b).

28 See Wensinck (1981: V 395-6).

29 See Hinds and Badawi (1986: 261b).

30 Khalil (2011: 82).

31 This is approximately three Euros.

32 Khalil (2011: 111).

33 Khalil (2011: 116).

34 In Egyptian Arabic: Kafr il-Muṣēlḥa (see Ramzī 1994 2/2: 197).

35 Khalil (2011: 72).

36 Khalil (2011: 84).

37 Literally: ‘have blood!’ See the comment in §2.2 about the use of the word *damm* ‘blood’ to describe someone’s disposition.

38 Khalil (2011:96-97).

39 The National Democratic Party was founded by President Anwar Sadat in 1978; see Roussillon (1998: 368).

40 Khalil (2011: 94).

## References

- Abdulrahim, Raja 2011. 'KFC gets a bad rap in Egypt.' *Los Angeles Times*, February 7 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/07/world/la-fg-egypt-kentucky-20110208>. Retrieved on 25 September 2011.
- Bearman, P. et al. (eds.) 1981<sup>2</sup>. *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Leiden.
- Beattie, Andrew 2005. *Cairo: A Cultural History*. Oxford.
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edward 1839. *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy: A Play in five Acts*. London.
- Burckhardt, John Lewis 1830. *Arabic Proverbs: Or, the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, Illustrated from their Proverbial Sayings Current at Cairo, Translated and Explained by the Late John Lewis Burckhardt*. London.
- Cantarino, Vicente 1975. *Syntax of modern Arabic prose. Vol. III: The compound sentence*. Bloomington.
- Daly, M.W. (ed.) 1998. *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Vol. II: Modern Egypt from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge.
- Descartes, René 1878. *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences. Nouvelle ed.* Paris.
- Ferguson, Charles 1959. 'Diglossia.' *Word*, 15, 325-340.
- Gardell, Mattias 2011. "Every man and woman is God's caliph": The rise of the Islamic democratic mainstream.' In: Mårtensson et al. (eds.), 240-265.
- Gelder, Geert-Jan van 1987. 'The Conceit of Pen and Sword: On an Arabic Literary Debate.' *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 32, 2, 329-360.
- Hinds, Martin and El-Said, Badawi 1986. *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic, Arabic-English*. Beirut.
- Khalil, Karima (ed.) 2011. *Messages from Tahrir: Signs from Egypt's Revolution*. Cairo and New York.
- Mahfūz, Najīb 1971<sup>8</sup>. *Al-Qābirā al-jādīda*. Cairo. [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1945.]
- Mårtensson, Ulrika et al. (eds.) 2011. *Fundamentalism in the Modern World. Vol. I: Fundamentalism, Politics and History: The State, Globalisation and Political Ideologies*. International library of political studies, 45. London, New York.
- McGreal, Chris 2011. 'Tahrir Square protesters defy a return to a normal Egypt.' *The Guardian*. 7 February 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/07/tahrir-square-protesters-egypt>. Retrieved on 25 September 2011.
- Nasr, Aida 2011. 'Messages from the revolution.' *The Daily News Egypt*. 27 September 2011. <http://thedailynewsegypt.com/books/messages-from-the-revolution.html>. Retrieved on 25 September 2011.
- Ramzī, Muḥammad 1994. *Al-qāmūs al-juḡrāfī li-l-bilād al-miṣriyya min 'abd qudamā' al-miṣriyyīn 'ilā sanat 1945. al-qism al-tānī, al-juz' al-tānī: mudiriyyāt al-Garbiyya wa-l-Manūfiyya wa-l-Buhayra*. [*The geographical dictionary of Egypt from the Ancient Egyptians to the year 1945. Vol. 2, part 2: the provinces of Gharbiyya, Minūfiyya and Buhayra*]. Cairo.
- Roussillon, Alain 1998. 'Republican Egypt: revolution and beyond.' In: Daly (ed.), 334-393.
- Shakespeare, William 2003. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Ed. by Philip Edwards. Cambridge.
- Sussman, Anna Louie 2011. 'Laugh, O Revolution: Humor in the Egyptian Uprising.' *The Atlantic*, 23 February 2011. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/02/laugh-o-revolution-humor-in-the-egyptian-uprising/71530/1/>. Retrieved on 25 September 2011.

“LEAVE, I WANT TO HAVE A SHOWER!”

- Tamer, Georges (ed.) 2009. *Humor in der arabischen Kultur / Humor in Arabic culture*. Berlin and New York.
- Taymūr, Aḥmad 1986<sup>4</sup>. *Al-Amṭāl al-‘āmmiyya, mašrūḥa wa-murattaba ḥasab al-ḥarf al-awwal min al-maṭal ma‘ kaššaf mawḏū‘i* [‘*The colloquial proverbs, explained and arranged according to the first letter of the proverb, with an index of subjects*’]. Cairo.
- Tignor, Robert L. 2011. ‘Afterword to the paperback edition.’ *Egypt: a short history*. 2<sup>nd</sup> printing; 1<sup>st</sup> paperback printing, 321-328.
- Versteegh, Kees et al. 2006. ‘Introduction.’ In: Versteegh et al. (eds.), v-x.
- Versteegh, Kees et al. (eds.) 2006. ‘Introduction.’ *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics. Vol. I: A-Ed*. Leiden, Boston.
- Wensinck, A.J. 1981<sup>2</sup>. ‘Kunya.’ In: Bearman et al. (eds.), 395-6.
- Woidich, Manfred 2006. *Das Kairenisch-Arabische: eine Grammatik*. Porta linguarum orientium. Neue Serie, 22. Wiesbaden.