Drawing Dissent: Political Cartoons in Yemen

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Does the fallout from the now infamous Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad reflect inherent mass radicalism or irrationality on the part of Muslim societies? Judging from the news coverage broadcast to Western audiences, one would think so. Most media images focused on bearded men or veiled women demonstrating and burning flags reinforced by dramatic sound bites, as when the usually sober BBC (2006) cited one protester as saying: "They want to test our feelings. They want to know whether Muslims are extremists or not. Death to them and their newspapers."[1] These reactions seemed disproportionate, if not irrational, because of the medium: they were, after all, just drawings.

Yet political cartoons are rarely *just drawings*. Visual images, whether photographs of bearded men burning flags or simple sketches scandalizing a revered religious figure, provide a powerful medium to talk politics. Reactions to the Danish cartoons, and reactions to the reactions, illustrate what cartoonist Berke Breathed (of *Bloom County* fame) meant when he said that they "revealed vividly that the public's emotional strings were within easy reach via a simple drawing and a word balloon."[2] Cartoons provide a venue for political speech, and, in the context of societies which suffer from shaky freedoms of expression, provide also a venue to express political dissent.

The reactions to the Danish cartoons were exceptional due to their intensity, but this may say more about the power of the medium than the seeming irrationality of its consumers. While the activities of a few states certainly reinforce the image of radicalism—Iran, for example, recently held a Holocaust cartoon contest as a lampoon of the Danish cartoons (CNN.com 2006)—such events are designed to shock and can tell us little about the day-to-day use of cartoons in political speech in Muslim countries. Here, I demonstrate the use of cartoons as political expression in Yemen, one of the many Muslim societies in which speech is not free, but neither is it totally silenced. Religion most certainly enters into Yemen's political cartoons, but it is neither the only nor even the primary focus. Instead, other basic characteristics of Yemeni society and government, such as its extreme poverty, low levels of educational attainment, and deteriorating press environment, are much more helpful in understanding the content of Yemeni political cartoons in terms of who gets to speak and what can be said.

Yemen is an impoverished society with scant resources available for artistic or intellectual production—Yemen's first real feature film, *A New Day in Old Sanaa*, was released only in 2005, and scholars commonly must send their books for publication to publishing houses in Cairo or Beirut, where printing runs may be on the order of no more than 50 to 100 copies. These limitations are reflected in the newspapers themselves. While Yemen nominally has a large number of publications, many of them have only limited circulation and publish only sporadically. Since the state employs many of Yemen's journalists directly or indirectly and owns the presses that most newspapers must use, government officials can use this scarcity of resources to influence who publishes, and what they publish.

Journalism in Yemen is not a lucrative profession, and resource scarcity also influences the journalists and cartoonists themselves, many of whom must rely on state employment for their main jobs—one of the editors of an opposition party paper, for example, also works in the Ministry of Information, independent columnists freelance for the flagship state daily *al-Thawra*, and the talented cartoonist for the well-respected independent daily *al-Ayyam* holds a day job at the state-run *14 October*. One can interpret this phenomenon both positively and negatively. In the former sense it indicates a degree of tolerance of dissent by government officials, but in the latter it represents informal control, since "tolerance" implies discretionary power on the part of those doing the tolerating; columnists and editors, for example, frequently face court cases resulting in temporary suspensions from publishing, while one cartoonist noted that artists will sometimes not sign their work out of fear for their livelihoods.[3]

Consider also the "20-riyal newspaper" phenomenon. Although *al-Ayyam* enjoys sufficient sales and advertising revenue to charge 20 Yemeni riyals (about $0.10) a copy, most independent and political party papers publish weekly in tabloid layout and must charge 30 to 40 riyals. Meanwhile, government papers such as *al-Thawra* or the armed forces paper *26 September*, as well as ruling party publications such as *al-Mithaq* and *22 May*, have both larger and many more pages, but cost only 20 riyals. Yet there are also a number of 20-riyal "independent" newspapers that regularly support government positions or attack opposition figures—these are the "government attack dogs," as one foreign embassy official put it, used to pursue "the regime's dirty work" via unofficial

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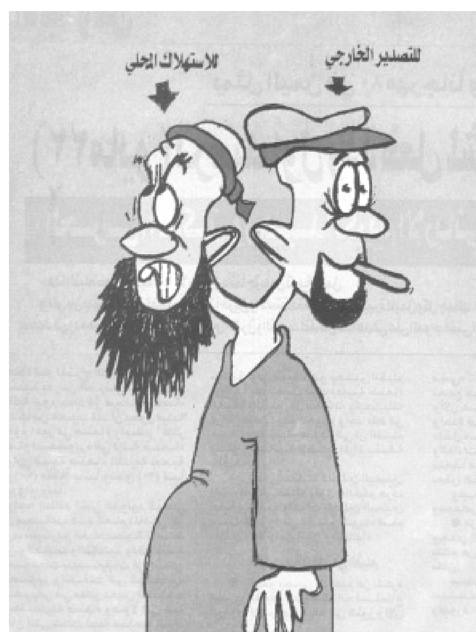
Figure 1

(Opinion poll results: should the president be reelected?) *al-Nida* (Sanaa), n. 54, 10 May 2006.

Figure 2



"For domestic consumption/For export." (The ruling party lampoons opposition Islamists.) *22 May* (Sanaa), n. 621, 24 Nov. 2005.

channels. Speech may be costly, but *subsidized* speech is less so, and refusal to accept the subsidy can provoke considerable government mistrust of the independent publications. One editor, for example, in noting that his paper takes no government funds, added, "if we're not taking their money, they think we're getting funds from somewhere else, such as the American Embassy."

Further difficulties constricting the media market complicate the political economy dilemmas facing independent and opposition publications. Despite improvements, educational attainment is low and illiteracy rates are high, hovering around 50% nationwide, but notably worse in the rural areas where some 75% of the population resides. Further, connections between urban centers and scattered rural villages are generally poor, making distribution difficult; one editor noted that most papers are only present in at most about a quarter of the country's provinces, and then usually only in the urban areas. Rural areas are comparatively more reliant on state-run broadcast media, with attendant difficulties in accessing reliable political information; one opposition paper editor lamented this problem, saying that readers and listeners "can't really know what's true, since the news comes from on high."

To illustrate problems associated with manipulation of the news, consider the following event from the lead-up to Yemen's 2006 elections. The president had announced in the summer of 2005 that he would not run for another term (more precisely, that he "would not nominate himself again"), but in May 2006 during the run-up to the ruling party's special meeting that selected him as their candidate, the independent Yemen Polling Center released results from a poll indicating that 57% of Yemenis favored the president's reelection, a figure that some government news sources inverted to 75%. The cartoon, displayed here as Figure 1, published in *al-Nida*, an independent weekly, lampoons this event as well as the more general theme of the predilections of military-backed Arab governments for "99-percent elections."

Cartoons of this nature provide a critical means not only to express dissent, but also, as one cartoonist stressed, to raise awareness about political and social issues, especially in the rural areas where illiteracy is highest and access to information is lowest. Not all cartoons are intended for such an audience, of course. When asked about the intended audience for political cartoons, one editor looked blank for a moment, and then responded that cartoons are generally inaccessible to the general public, since "only the high and mighty would understand the punch." Although this is consistent with the observation of another editor that "the only real politics happens in the cities"—newspapers cater to the literate and accessible markets in cities, which have greater concentrations of individuals capable of understanding wordy cartoons—not all caricatures target urban intellectuals. One cartoonist noted, for instance, that although it takes extra effort and skill to compose a cartoon with few or no words, these are usually the most striking. Further, he claimed, these are also the most accessible to illiterate audiences: such cartoons have greater reach than the papers in which they are printed, since people photocopy and send the cartoons to their villages.

Political cartoons also provide an alternative venue to express political criticism in a press environment whose openness has, according to most local journalists and international bodies, declined fairly precipitously over the past several years, certainly when compared to the relative if imperfect press freedom of the initial period of Yemeni unification in the early 1990s.[4] Characteristics of the medium itself help explain why one cartoonist was able to state that people could say things in cartoons that they could not say in print. Political cartoons by nature are *supposed* to lampoon or criticize: the specific Arabic term is a loan word, *karikatur*, rather than something indigenous and potentially ambiguous such as "drawing," "picture," or some other, milder term.[5] Moreover, this characteristic is well-understood and widely recognized, and when the government permits newspapers to print political cartoons (and publishes them itself in state-run papers), it is also forced to acknowledge the legitimacy of the criticism inherent in the medium.

This well-understood conception of what political cartoons are supposed to do complements, in turn, a general understanding that criticizing one another is something that political parties *do*. Ruling party papers thus criticize the opposition freely, although they usually focus on the (Islamist) Islah Party as the single most influential opposition party. The cartoon shown here as Figure 2, printed in the ruling party's *22 May*, encapsulates a common and legitimate criticism of Islah's uneasy dualism: pragmatic and progressive Islamists who are active in reaching out to Western governments and publics, and the party's more radical wing that allegedly attracts popular support and mobilizes street politics. The captions read, simply, "for domestic consumption" and "for export."

The opposition parties, despite their ideological diversity, have in recent years stopped attacking one another and have

Figure 3

"The Filling Congress." (Opposition Islamists lampoon the ruling party.) *al-Sahwa* (Sanaa), n. 1002, 15 Dec. 2005.

Figure 4

Ruling party exterminates corruption. *al-Thawra* (Sanaa), n. 15011, 15 Dec. 2005.

focused instead on the ruling party and the government. Although some differences emerge among opposition party papers in terms of the content of their cartoons, they generally converge on local affairs and criticism of government policy and performance. Although in years past it may have been possible to locate religiously-charged (Islah) or socialist-oriented cartoons (the Yemeni Socialist Party), the parties have generally eschewed these themes for cartoons such as that shown here as Figure 3, published in Islah's *al-Sahwa*, which criticizes government policy performance in the lead-up to the ruling party's showy seventh general congress held in December 2005. The banner refers to the "Filling Congress," a play on words where "filling" and "seventh" differ by a single letter.

Yet since criticism is the expected norm for political cartoons, editors of government papers face a dilemma: What to print when criticism of the government or hegemonic ruling party is out of bounds? An opposition paper editor noted that cartoons in government papers do not discuss economic or political issues (a somewhat exaggerated claim), while one cartoonist lamented that, in regime papers, artists do not have the freedom to express themselves, and must focus on social issues. Government papers sometimes print propaganda cartoons designed to laud the government or mobilize people behind the ruling party; consider the cartoon displayed as Figure 4, printed in the state daily *al-Thawra*, which depicts the ruling party as the insect spray exterminating the pest of corruption (a claim whose irony is presumably unintended).

Propaganda efforts are not, however, credible *as caricatures*. Yet government papers can be critical, but in a very particular way: they criticize social problems or Yemeni habits for which the government cannot reasonably be held responsible. Consider first the following cartoon printed in *al-Thawra*, and reprinted here as Figure 5, which sympathizes with the common Yemeni concern of rising prices but attempts to depict it as a phenomenon in which the government does not appear as a participant: the factory owner sells his product to a wholesaler for 100 riyals, who sells it to a retailer for 200 riyals, who in turn sells it to a disgruntled consumer for 400 riyals.

Another illustration (Figure 6), again from *al-Thawra*, depicts two disenchanted students leaving one of the many low-quality (and privately-operated) language institutes that have proliferated recently: "I used to know a couple of words in English, but now I don't know any!"

The language institute cartoon was drawn by the same artist who penned the "99/66" *al-Nida* cartoon, which could not have made the pages of *al-Thawra* given the different constraints facing the different editors. More generally, of course, there are limits to what cartoonists may depict in their works, but these limits are noticeably ambiguous. The only red line generally agreed upon is the prohibition on depicting the president himself, but beyond that there appears to be significant disagreement on who can be lampooned safely—one individual said that practically everyone else is fair game, another said that the president's family and high officials are also off-limits, others added either the army or certain tribal shaykhs to the list, one digressed and said that depictions of the prime minister are acceptable, while one cautious editor said that cartoonists could not draw identifying characteristics of anyone, high official or otherwise.

A similar lack of consensus surrounds other issue areas: one cartoonist cited sectarianism and women's rights as being red lines, while the same cautious editor just mentioned considered these perfectly acceptable topics. Some individuals cited sexuality and marital relations as taboo while others did not, and sub-national conflicts (tribal wars, north-south tensions) were deemed too sensitive politically by some but not others. Again, one can interpret this phenomenon positively or negatively. In the former sense one could consider the lack of consensus to mean that very few topics actually are off-limits, implying a great deal of tolerance on the part of the government. Yet one can also interpret this as yet another instance of the personalized authority inherent in the Yemeni system: formal institutions exist but are weak, laws are written but not applied, and ruling elites maintain considerable space for discretionary action to enforce or provide exceptions to the rules. Cultivating ambiguity, in turn, increases the discretionary space available to these elites even as it impedes the rule of law.

What does this summary overview suggest about political cartooning in Yemen in particular or the Muslim world in general? While no single country by itself can adequately represent Muslim societies in their considerable diversity of conditions, what we can learn from Yemen is suggestive of broader themes. Some of the basic constraints in Yemeni society that I have highlighted—poverty, illiteracy, insularity—are by no means unique to Yemen; one could, presumably, find similar dynamics in action in much of sub-Saharan Africa and in other

Figure 5

Manufacturer to wholesaler: 100 riyals. Wholesaler to retailer: 200 riyals. Retailer to consumer: 400 riyals. *al-Thawra* (Sanaa), n. 14862, 21 Jul. 2005.

Figure 6

"I used to know a couple of words in English, but now I don't know any!" (At the privately-operated language institute.) *al-Thawra* (Sanaa), n. 14856, 15 Jul. 2005.

less-developed countries. Furthermore, neither these issues, nor Yemen's problematic press environment, are particularly closely connected to Islam, or at least these issues are not unique to Muslim countries. In other words, the constraints imposed upon journalists and cartoonists, and the incentive structures to which newspaper editors and publishers respond, are presumably similar to the constraints and incentives found in other poor countries ruled by soft authoritarian regimes. While religion is an ever-present component of Yemeni life, it is not the only component, nor is it even the most relevant component of every aspect of *public* life. If the country's political cartoons are any indication, Yemen's day-to-day politics are not overwhelmingly religious or inexplicable, but rather flow from familiar demands: more democracy, less corruption, and better government services.

Notes

1. Note the irony that I have cherry-picked the cherry-pickings to cite this quotation.

2. Breathed was referring to a 1977 editorial cartoon he penned that lampooned the public's reaction to a federal judge's busing order imposed on the Austin school system.

3. Unless otherwise noted, individuals cited are Yemeni editors, journalists, and cartoonists interviewed in the spring/summer of 2006 in Sanaa and Aden.

4. See, for example, Reporters Without Borders (www.rsf.org) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (www.cpj.org). Reporters Without Borders ranks Yemen as 149th out of 168 in its 2006 Worldwide Press Freedom Index.

5. Political cartoons are also caricatures in the sense that they exaggerate and distort to highlight important elements of otherwise complex issues. This often means invoking easily recognizable stock characters—two recurring ones are the devious, mustachioed military officer and the corrupt, corpulent government official—and stereotypical rather than actual individuals, which are sufficiently informative to make a memorable point and sufficiently ambiguous to avoid negative repercussions (official ones, at least).

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