

Iranian Youth and Cartoons in the Islamic Republic under President Khatami

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In the Middle East 'freedom of expression' is a rather difficult ambition to achieve. In some countries, though, the situation is slowly improving. In others, satirists seem to have a licence to mock and their work might prove to be a different way of conveying a political message. However, since comic strips came to the Middle East from the West they have been subject to much criticism: On the one hand, some fifty years ago Frantz Fanon and other leftist intellectuals criticised political cartoons as "prime agents of cultural imperialism and alienation".¹ On the other hand, they have been considered a threat because they "generate change – by freeing the imagination, challenging the intellect, and resisting state control".²

Cartoons appeared in the Middle East in the second half of the 19th century as a consequence of Western influence. In the Ottoman Empire the first cartoon was published in the journal *Istanbul* in 1867, that is 35 years after the publication of the first Ottoman gazette. But already in 1852 an Armenian had published the first humour gazette.³

According to Douglas's well documented volume, cartoons could be found in the Arab countries before the turn of the century, but assumed their own specific identity only in the second half of the 20th century and especially after the oil boom of the 1970s. Among the characteristics of cartoons in the Arab world are: 1) a smaller circulation compared to cartoons in Europe; 2) the fact that they are often recycled and rebound in new issues; 3) the fact that upper and middle-class children often pass them on to the lower class; 4) regarding language, Arabic is normally used as the choice of a local dialect might prove to be a threat to pan-Arab circulation.⁴ French, though, is often preferred in Algeria.

With regard to freedom of expression, it is worth noting that since most newspapers and magazines are financed by the authorities, some Middle Eastern cartoonists find it hard to bite the hand that feeds them. Nonetheless, the presence of the censor often creates sharp readers, who look for hidden ideological messages.

Since in the Middle East education and culture are seen as political domains, the messages conveyed by the authorities can prove to be particularly strong in the case of narratives

designed for children. Thus Islamic strips telling the life of the Prophet Muhammad and other leading men have increasingly spread, as well as stories on the *Intifada*. In a way, the contradiction between Islamic hostility to images and comic strips has been solved by teaching proper religious conduct and generosity (giving water to a thirsty dog is rewarded by Allah with a psychological, spiritual and/or material reward).⁵

Even cartoon dubbing can prove to be a hard task. This was the case, for instance, with the Walt Disney epic *The Lion King*, dubbed into Arabic by a Lebanese production company. In fact, the translators were not allowed to use the two key words of the epic – *lion* (*assad*) and *king* (*malik*) – because *assad* refers to the ruling Syrian republican dynasty, while the region is full of real kings – Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain – who might not tolerate to share the same title with an animal.⁶

The case of Syria

In Syria the authorities try in fact to block the entry of other Arab newspapers and magazines, resulting in the creation of a “monopoly of images”. Syrian comic strips are thus characterised by pedagogic and political aims. Religion, history and archaeology are not on the top of the list, but rather science, productivity, irrigation and modernity are in first place. When the family is depicted, the father is substituted by the former President, Hafez al-Assad, Father of the Nation.⁷

In the case of Syria, many cartoonists can be quoted. However, this essay will focus on a Shia case. In fact, the most recent and representative case of satire in the Middle East took place within the Alawis, recognised as a Shia community by a *fatwa* issued in 1973 by the late Imam Musa al-Sadr, then head of the Higher Shia Council in Lebanon.⁸ In February 2001 the well-known political cartoonist Ali Ferzat – an Alawi – was allowed by the young President Bashar al-Assad to open the satiric magazine *Addomari* (lamp-lighter), the first independent newspaper to be established in Syria since 1963. Ferzat often published in the Arab press and also sold his cartoons to the French newspaper *Le Monde*. He is appreciated so much by the Arab public that when the Syrian newspaper *Al Thawra* stopped publishing his work in the 1980s, circulation fell by 35%.⁹

Another case of censorship took place in 1988 at the cartoon exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. One of Ferzat's cartoons depicted “a general dripping in medals and battle ribbons”. He “stands by a stew pot and ladles out more medals and ribbons into the bowl of a man in rags” (Fig. 1). The Iraqi officials present at the exhibition interpreted this cartoon as a parody of their country during the war against Iran. Being amongst the sponsors, the Iraqi government threatened to withdraw funds. However, Ferzat was not obliged to withdraw his work thanks to the solidarity of his fellow artists.

Figure 1. Ali Ferzat (Syria).



Figure 2. Ali Ferzat (Syria).



Figure 3. Ali Ferzat (Syria).

The reputation of Ali Ferzat's new magazine rests on its cartoons rather than on its articles. Among the themes covered by his cartoons are ladders or tall plants symbolising hierarchy, and crowds representing the Arab masses (Fig. 2).

Since 25,000 copies of *Addomari*'s first issue sold out within hours of hitting the street, this move proved to be very successful. However, due to a cartoon and story which were critical of Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa Miro in June 2001, the authorities advised Ali Ferzat not to go to press. Trying to compromise, he printed the two questionable pages in black, "except for two sketches including a bloodied hand holding a pin-encrusted pen".

Further problems took place in January 2002, when the "state-owned distribution company wanted to impose a reduction in the number of copies from 60,000 to 13,000. *Addomari* closed for three issues and then resumed publishing. The current print runs around 25,000". Currently the staff consists of 40 journalists and, in order to survive, Ferzat needs to sell his magazine to the oil-rich countries, thus it is essential to compromise with their censorship laws.

The case of Iran

Nearly three quarters of Iran's population is under the age of 30 and this new generation has a new way of doing things. However, this poses a major challenge to the government as urban youth in particular calls for greater economic and political reform. They have a different attitude to business and making money. Many also feel frustrated by Iran's isolation from the international community.¹⁰

According to the journalists' organisation *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, the Islamic Republic represents the biggest 'jail' for those who work in the media sector. Even under the reformist President Khatami many newspapers have been closed by the judiciary, and in this context, cartoons represent a very direct means for expression of the political situation, both from the internal and international point of view.

After some brief sketches taken from the 20th century, this essay will focus on cartoons taken from the Iranian press under the presidency of Muhammad Khatami. Among the sources of this research, and playing a predominant role, are the weekly satiric magazine *Golagha* and the women's magazine *Zan*, directed by Faezeh Hashemi, as well as other newspapers and magazines. Last but not least, the author examined satire on the Iranian.com website, where mostly – but not all – expatriate cartoonists publish their work.

Satire in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century

Satire in Iran is certainly not an invention of the last few years. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, new political and social ideas took shape and used satire as a means of expression. In particular, the newspapers of the Constitutional Revolution challenged the Iranian authorities and institutions such as the ulema and the monarchy, holding them liable for the repression of women and peasants.

On 30 May 1907 the first issue of the socialist paper *Sur-i Israfil* (Trumpet Call of Israfil) was printed. At that time, two other newspapers were published, but *Sur-i Israfil* was without doubt the most radical and the best written. Its fame was partly due to its satirical column "Charand Parand" by the well-known Ali Akbar Dihkhuda (1879-1956). His style was different: "A play on words, a new interpretation of an old proverb, a retelling of a story, so that his prose became a bridge between story telling and journalism".¹¹ And, since he "used satire and allegory to mock superstitions, belief in predestination, and patriarchal traditions that degraded women and children", from the literary point of view, Dihkhuda's message was also considered revolutionary.¹²

In his satiric column, Dihkhuda was particularly harsh with the ulema, whom he criticised and ridiculed:

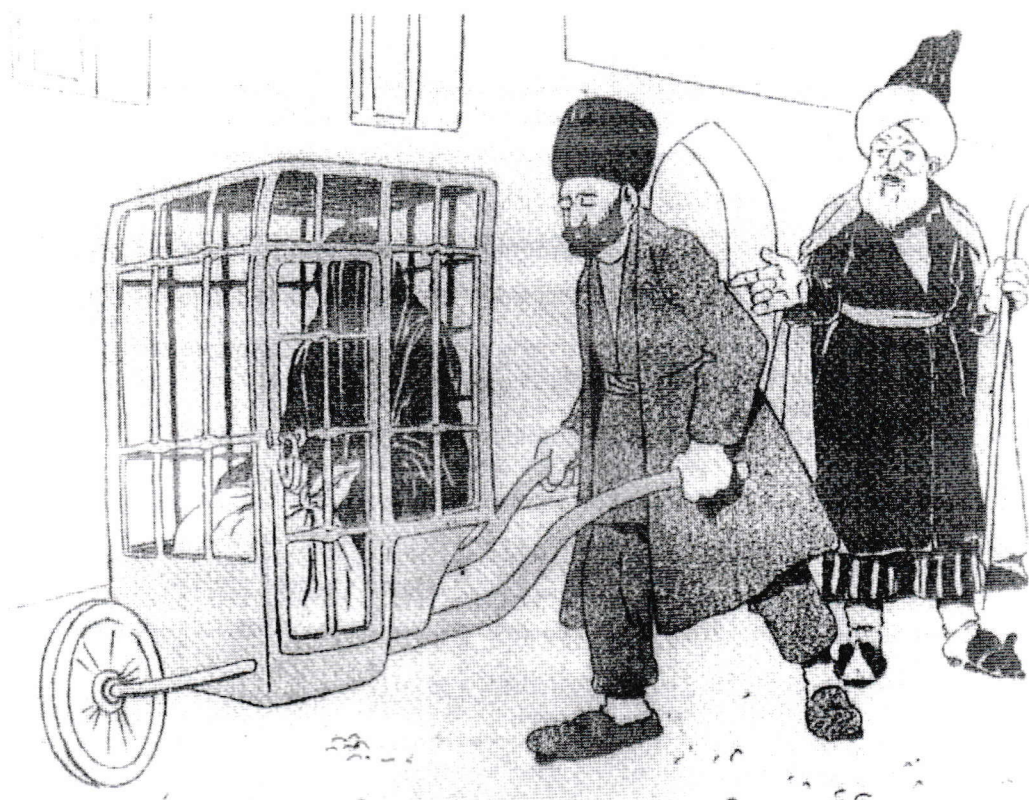


Figure 4. Ali Akbar Tahirzadah Sabir (Iran).

If you tell them, Mr. Sayyid! Become a prophet, and Shaikh! Claim that you are an imam. The reverend representative of the imam immediately begins to turn his eyes in awe, puts a sad expression on his face, weakens his voice... His whole existence becomes ready for receiving revelations!¹³

Needless to say, such an attitude resulted in a number of confrontations between the editors and the conservative ulema. Their misdeeds were often reported, as well as their manipulative behaviour in regards to women:

The semiliterate low cleric *akhund* took advantage of his religious position and turned his bureau in the mosque into a brothel. He married for wealth, practised polygamy, and was so shameless in conduct as to spend his wife's dowry to the last penny.¹⁴

Other examples of satire in Iran at the beginning of the 20th century were the satirical Azeri-language newspaper *Mulla Nasr al-Din*, published in Tbilisi (Georgia) by its editor Muhammad Jalil Qulizadah, an ethnic Iranian, with the help of the poet and satirist Ali Akbar Tahirzadah Sabir. In his cartoons, Sabir challenged the powerful ulema and accused them of being the strongest opponents to women's rights (Fig. 4).¹⁵

As a consequence of such attacks against the ulema, the religious class in Iran, as well as in Najaf, banned *Mulla Nasr al-Din* as blasphemous. Feeling threatened by its satire, Muhammad Ali Shah also tried to stop the distribution of this newspaper. However, popular support and the fact that it was printed outside the country allowed the editors to continue working.¹⁶

Besides satire published in the media, this new genre also appeared in literature. In Isfahan, Malik al-Mutikallimin, Sayyid Jamal al-Din Va'iz, and Majd al-Islam Kirmani jointly wrote *The True Dream*, which they published anonymously. Written in daily conversational language and Isfahani dialect, this volume recounts a dream on the Day of Resurrection, when Isfahan leaders are all called in by the Lord in order to explain "their past misdeeds such as embezzlement and waste of public funds". Sent to St. Petersburg, the manuscript was printed and seventy copies brought back to Iran, where the authors were soon labelled heretics.¹⁷

Satire under Muhammad Reza Shah and during the Revolution

Among the visual satirists at the time of Muhammad Reza Shah, the best known is Ardeshir Mohassess. Born in Rasht in 1938, he appealed to Iranians disaffected with the Shah and became the voice of dissent in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, he did not subscribe to religious fundamentalism and thus did not align with the mullahs. His work is therefore critical of extremists in both camps. He published his cartoons in Iran in the evening newspaper *Kayhan*, and abroad in the political weekly *Iran Shahr* based in London. Needless to say, his work was censored by the Shah and in 1976 he left first for Paris and then for New York. His cartoons on the Revolution of 1979 are considered his finest achievement. They are preserved in the collections of the Library of Congress in Washington DC, and published in the volume *Life in Iran*. One of the main characteristics of his work is the fact that members of the Pahlavi family and their officers "are masked in the clothing and trappings of the Qajar period". And "the faces of Ardeshir's people betray a combination of intensity and weariness bred of struggle and uncertainty". At the same time, they "possess the self-containment of those who are deeply absorbed by religious belief, whose focus of being is inward rather than outward. Ardeshir's people are not the victims of clashes of political ideology or economic agendas. The conflicts they endure are brought about by the unconstrained ambitions of autocratic rulers, conflicts rooted in religion and in the blood".¹⁸

Then comes the cartoon drawn in 1977 and named *The men bent in prayer to God and the government aeroplanes arrived*. (Fig. 5)¹⁹ According to the editor of the volume, it "exposes the tragic paradox inherent in westernisation campaigns like that of the Shah, which bring about the deadly intrusion of the massive destructive power of modern military technology into an essential medieval way of life".²⁰

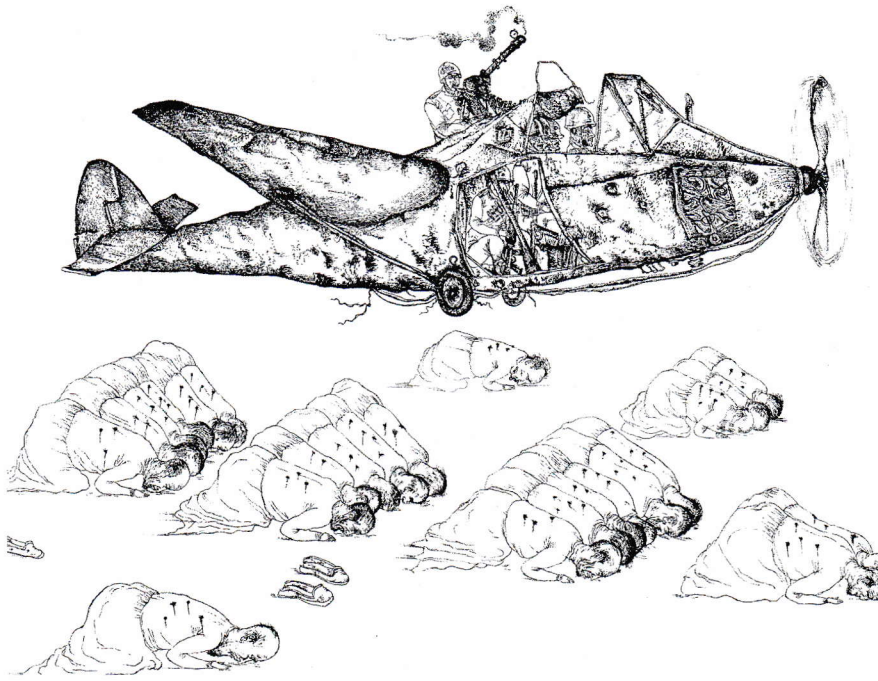


Figure 5. Ardeshir Mohassess, 1977 (Iran).



Figure 6. Ardeshir Mohassess, *What's the fire of a bullet when the heart is aflame* 1977 (Iran).

The visual satire shown in Fig. 6 is *What's the fire of a bullet when the heart's aflame*.²¹ To those who experienced the Revolution, it was a reminder of the "casualties of the many bloody attempts by the Shah to stem the rising tide of fundamentalism", such as Tehran's Bloody Friday in September 1978, marching "resolutely forward unchecked even by death".²²

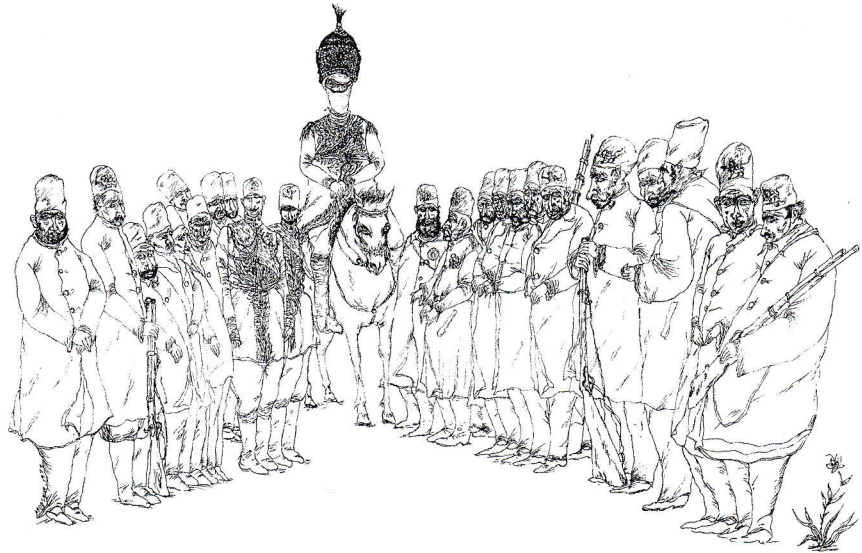


Figure 7. Ardeshir Mohassess (Iran).



Figure 8. Ardeshir Mohassess (Iran).

Another theme covered by Ardashir Mohassess is a sharp critique of the Shah and his actions in *To Avoid the danger of possible assassination the king is trying to remain unknown forever* (Fig. 7), and *The king personally oversees the execution of compulsory education*.²³

Last, but not least, in 1978, two years after his exile, this satirist depicts a cartoon in which he accuses the censor: *From right to left: editors of the newspapers of peace, justice, truth, brotherhood, and freedom after their arrest and before being sent to prison* (Fig. 8).²⁴

All these cartoons have been executed over three years, between 1978 and 1980, in pen and India ink on large sheets of white paper.

Satire under President Muhammad Khatami

Amongst the readers of the Islamic Republic are the youth. Under president Khatami satire and cartoons emerged as the new expression of journalism and writing for Iranians abroad and at home. Among Iranians abroad, Marjane Satrapi emerged as the author of an autobiography. Using cartoons, she tells her personal story as a child during the Revolution and at the beginning of the Islamic Republic, when the veil and other restrictions were imposed (Fig. 9). Born in Iran in 1970 and currently based in Paris, Marjane has already published four volumes in French. The first has also been translated in Italian.²⁵

Under the leadership of Faezeh Hashemi, the women's magazine *Zan* published some interesting cartoons on women's participation in soccer (Fig 10 & 11).

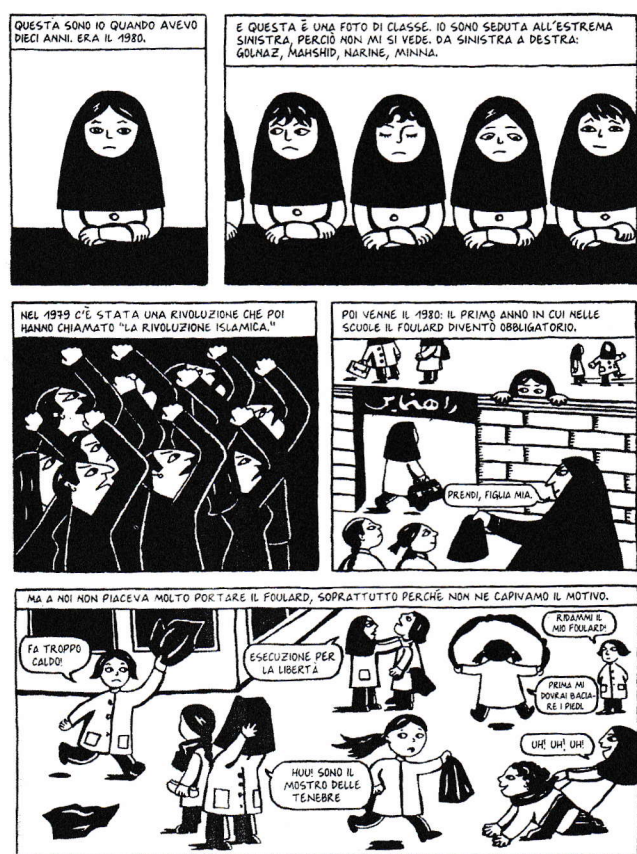


Figure 9. Marjane Satrapi, 2002 (Iran)

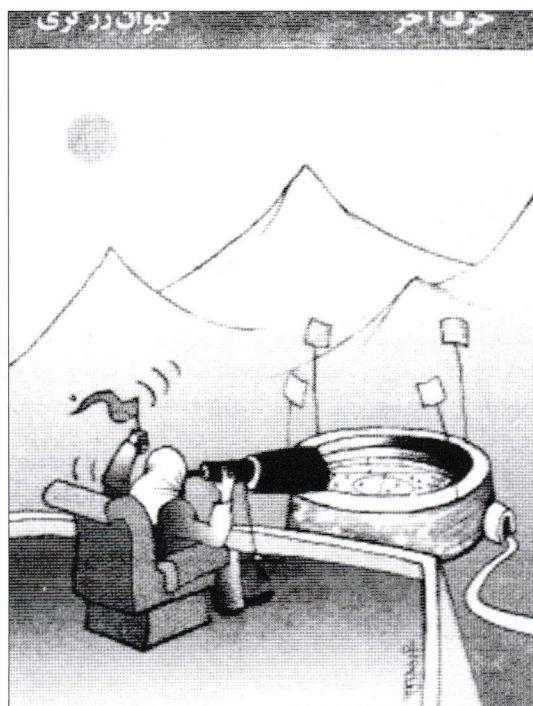


Figure 10. From Zan Magazine (Iran).



Figure 11. From Zan Magazine (Iran).

Directed by Shahla Sherkat, the women's magazine *Zanan* published neither cartoons nor satire. Nonetheless the journalists had the courage to publish some interesting covers, such as the woman with a band-aid on her mouth (Fig. 12). The title on the cover is: «Women's political rights from Bahman 1357 (the advent of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979) up to now».²⁶

Trying to classify cartoons on the basis of their themes, it is possible to underline some major categories such as the economy, the public administration, foreign affairs, division among reformists and conservatives. Here are some examples.

With regard to the economy, oil is the major product of Iran and therefore has been the focus of journalists. In July 2001, for instance, a dispute with Azerbaijan regarding oil took place. Kamal Kharrazi, the Iranian Minister for Foreign Affairs, informed the Azerbaijani chargé d'affaires in Tehran that he was opposed to plans by Azerbaijan and foreign oil companies to continue operating in the Alov-Araz-Sharg concession area, that is, in waters that Iran considered its own. On 23 July, Iran ordered the *Geofizik-3* survey ship to leave the zone it was working in, on the grounds that it was inside Iranian waters. The survey ship was carrying out a 10-14 day seabed sounding and environmental study and collecting water samples. This was the first time in the recent history



Figure 12. Cover of the women's magazine Zanan, October 1994 (Iran).

of the exploration and development of the Caspian Sea's hydrocarbon resources that an operator had been ordered to withdraw from a disputed area under threat of force. The operator involved was BP. It had signed a production-sharing agreement (PSA) in July 1998 covering the Alov-Araz-Sharg structures in the Azeri sector of the Caspian Sea. The contract area is the largest offshore tract awarded by Azerbaijan and covers 1,400 sq. km some 170-km southeast of Baku and 150 km east of the Azerbaijani coast.²⁷ The dispute was covered by the Iranian weekly satirist magazine *Golagha* with the following cartoon on the cover (Fig. 13): Standing in the middle, Nick Brown, the British Ambassador to Tehran until December 2001, announces: "British companies will not start any project in the Caspian without permission from Tehran". Pointing at oil platforms in the Caspian, Kamal Kharrazi, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, asks: "What are they doing there?" The character Shahgholam replies: "They are doing nothing. They are scuba-diving!"²⁸

Another interesting cartoon (Fig. 14), related to the economic difficulties of the area, shows a government official using his 'official' car to make a personal profit. In fact, after office hours he works as a taxi driver. When a passenger gets into the 'taxi', the government official asks: "Where would you like to go", to which the passenger replies: "Nowhere,

«نیک براون (سفیر انگلیس در تهران) اعلام کرد: شرکت های انگلیسی بدون اجازه تهران در خزر وارد عمل نمی شوند.» - حیات نو



Figure 13. The cover of the satirist magazine Golagha, 2001 (Iran).



Figure 14. From Golagha, 2002 (Iran).



Figure 15. From *Golagha*, 2002 (Iran).

I am one of the several people who regularly comes to your office without being able to find you. I came here because I need you to sign a document!"²⁹

The internal division between reformists and conservatives is well represented by the cover of *Golagha* in July 2002: a medical doctor asks his patient if he prefers the shot on the right or left part of his bottom. The poor man replies: "Please, no politics now! Just do it in the middle!"³⁰

NOTES

- 1 Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire masques blancs*, quoted by Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips*, Indiana University Press (1994): 2.
- 2 Fatma Müge Göçek, "Political Cartoons as a Site of Representation and Resistance in the Middle East", in Fatma Müge Göçek (ed.), *Political Cartoons in the Middle East*, Princeton, Markus Wiener, 1998: 1.
- 3 Göçek (1998): 6-7.
- 4 Douglas (1994): 3-4.
- 5 Douglas (1994): 83-109 (chapter "Sacred Images: Islamic Comic Strips").
- 6 David Gardner, "Democracy is just a mirage", in *Financial Times*, 17/5/2002: 1.

- 7 Douglas (1994): 110-29 ("Syria: The Party-State and Its Strips").
- 8 Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam. Musa al Sadr & the Shia of Lebanon*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1986: 174.
- 9 Interview with Ali Ferzat, Damascus, 3 March 2001; and Malu Halasa, "Funny precarious", in *The Guardian*, 27/7/2002: 34.
- 10 Among the most recent publications on youth in Iran are: Mahnaz Shirali, *La jeunesse iranienne: une génération en crise*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris (2001); and Delphine Minoui (ed.), *Jeunesse d'Iran. Les voix du changement*, Autrement, Paris (2001).
- 11 Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911*, New York (1996): 116-17.
- 12 Afary, 1996: 5.
- 13 "New revelation", in *Sur-i Israfil*, 20 June 1907, No. 4-6, p. 6, quoted by Afary (1996): 122.
- 14 "Qandarun", in *Sur-i Israfil*, 30 April 1908, No. 27, pp. 7-8, and 1 May 1908, No. 28, pp. 7-8, quoted in Afary, 1996: 129.
- 15 Afary, 1996: 41, 119. The cartoon is figure 7 of Afary's volume, taken from *Mulla Nasr al-Din*, 10 March 1907, No. 10: *Trip to the Bathhouse: You cannot trust a Horse or a Woman*. The husband carries his wife to the bathhouse himself because he will not trust her or the horse that carries her.
- 16 Afary (1996): 120-21.
- 17 Afary (1996): 46-47.
- 18 Ardeshir Mohassess, *Life in Iran. The Library of Congress drawings*, Mage publishers, Washington DC (1994): 6-7, introduction by Bernard F. Reilly Jr.
- 19 Mohassess (1994): 35.
- 20 Mohassess (1994): 7.
- 21 Mohassess (1994): 36.
- 22 Mohassess (1994): 7.
- 23 Mohassess (1994): 15, 23.
- 24 Mohassess (1994): 25.
- 25 Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, vol. 1, Lizard, Rome (2002): 9.
- 26 *Zanan*, Mehr va Aban 1373 (October 1994), year 3, Issue 20.
- 27 "BP Caught Between a Rock in Iran and a Hard Place in Azerbaijan", in *Arab Oil & Gas*, 16 August 2001: 5-6.
- 28 *Golagha*, vol. 12, No. 18, 9/8/2001, cover.
- 29 *Golagha*, vol. 13, No. 12, 27/7/2002: 7.
- 30 *Golagha*, vol. 13, No. 12, 27/7/2002, front page (p.1).

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