

## Commentary article

# Are Jordanians (still) ‘humourless’?

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### Abstract

*This article discusses the stereotypical misrepresentations held about Jordanians being ‘humourless,’ and how had the 1989 political opening affected the production and reception of humour in the country. I argue that the difficult economic conditions and increasing pressures after the 1989 political opening have produced more humour and carnivalesque resistance against power and the government in Jordan. Indeed, this political event along with increasing economic problems and hardships from the 1990s have challenged the stereotypical notions about Jordanians being humourless and po-faced. However, it was not until 2011 that a large number of ordinary people and humourists began more fully engage with carnivalesque and subversive humour that resist power and demand change. Thanks in large part to the revolutionary moment of the Arab Spring and the development of social media technology, which has offered an alternative and independent platform for people to make fun of themselves and of the people in power.*

*Keywords: humour, Jordan, political opening, Arab Spring, social media.*

## 1. Introduction

Humour seems not to have played a significant (or at least not explicitly documented) role in Jordan’s early political history and in resistance against power. To a certain extent, informally, Jordanians have been stereotypically known for being serious, po-faced, and unable to produce humour and laughter. In contrast to this stereotypical view being at all widespread, humour may have been there in an undocumented conversation, but early Jordanians (potential jokers and satirists) did not have the economic or technical means to produce humour but did it (perhaps informally) in their unrecorded speech all the time. In her article about performativity and public spaces in Jordan, Hijawi (2015) argues that Jordanian men have long maintained an image of seriousness and machismo that has ultimately helped to define a certain national characteristic

of many Jordanian men being frown and humourless. She asserts that “the mechanism and feeling that ‘big brother is watching you’ is in fact quite effective in regulating both the private and public spaces and helps impose a self-policing system by the inhabitants themselves” (Hijawi, 2015, para.1). It is possible therefore that one reason why Jordanian culture seems to have been characterised by an apparent lack of humour is because it was more a culture of ‘seriousness’ (sternness), with a strong inclination to accept conventional manners and adhere to some strict cultural traditions and established social norms that have governed the structure of this society. Of course, other factors would have also influenced the absence of documented political humour, for example the implementation of martial law and the already strict and cultural traditions that may have limited people’s seeming aversion to humour.

Apparent humourlessness in Jordanian culture can arguably be linked to several cultural variables concerning the role of dignity and manhood (masculinity) that many Jordanian males have been typically trying to assert. Other examples of Jordanians’ humourlessness rest on a perception of the people’s seeming aversion to humour and laughter in many instances, including interpersonal communications. There, we might think of one well-known Jordanian proverb that reflects *Jordanity* (traditional Jordanian culture and people). This proverb reads as, ‘no-one’s face smiles even to a hot loaf of bread,’ is often used to describe people’s disapproval of jokes and joke-telling in many social contexts (Al-Khatib, 1999, p. 267). It is also a way to literally describe ordinary people’s faces, which look stern and have little appreciation for humour and laughter in various social settings and spaces, as this proverb claims.

Previous scholarly attention given to humour and jokes in Jordan has tended to over-emphasise linguistic and translational points of view (e.g., Farghal & Shakir, 1993; Shunnaq, 1996; Al-Khatib, 1999; Al-Kharabsheh, 2008; Bader, 2014; Al-Momani, Badarneh & Migdadi, 2016); however, this article examines Jordanian humour in relation to stereotypical notions about Jordanians being ‘humourless,’ and the impacts of the 1989 political opening, and most recently the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, in the formation of Jordanian humour, a significant challenge to that former stereotype. Put simply, I argue that Jordanians have become funnier because of the Arab Spring and advancement in social media technology. This commentary elaborates some of the ways in which humour is both influenced by and participative in this development.

## **2. Humour(lessness) in early Jordanian culture and literature**

Jordan is an Arab Islamic country under the rule of Islamic law and a semi-authoritarian regime, which often limits the level of freedom of speech and self-expression in public spaces and in social media spaces. Humour in early Jordanian culture was seemingly absent or remained largely undocumented. It was therefore given little respect, due to three factors that I shall call socio-cultural: (1) the Jordanian cultural tradition has been influenced by strict nomadic and tribal lifestyles and behaviours, characterised by adherence to strict and ‘proper’ social manners, with interpersonal interactions occurring in a somewhat serious and humourless tone; (2) Humour in early Jordanian culture was often equated with social informality, impropriety, and immaturity. This has inclined some Jordanians towards a view of humour as socially unethical and sometimes awkward; (3) Jordanian people have been (to a certain extent) characterised by their aversion to humour and laughter, and satire (as a form for social critique and commentary) has been seemingly absent. Another factor that may (if Hijwai’s claim about ‘Big Brother’ and self-censorship is valid) be contribute to genuine and/or constructed aversion to humour and laughter is the implementation of almost permanent *de facto* martial law (in effect from 1957 – 1989) to control public order and repress any attempts to replace the Hashemite regime (in power from 1921). However, since the Jordanian political opening and economic liberalisation, from

1989, a growing number of Jordanians have used humour as a tool of resistance, to mock and lampoon the government and its institutionalised discourse about economic reform and liberalisation. That change in trajectory has also been accompanied by a growing theme of self-deprecation about Jordanians' aversion to humour and satire.

Early Jordanian literature seems also devoid of humour. It was imbued instead with cynicism, melancholy and a disinclination to life, social norms, and proper manners. It can therefore be argued (to a certain extent) that Jordanian humour has a relatively short historical tradition. Jordanian (political) humour flourished following the country's political opening, economic growth and liberalisation, and after the relaxation of martial law from 1989. The early practices of Jordanian (political) humour were rooted, among other things, in ethnic joking, Gulf War jokes, politically satirical theatre by Nabil Sawalha and Hisham Yanis, tabloid newspapers, and a few political cartoons and satirical articles that rarely engaged ordinary Jordanians with political humour and satire. Early Jordanian humour had been mostly characterised by joke-telling and funny show performances, but satire (as a tool for political resistance against power and the government) had never been popular among Jordanians before 1989.

Early Jordanian culture and literature were not therefore explicit with transparent humour, but rather implicit with cynicism and socio-political grievances. In his book *The poverty of philosophy: Exercises on Jordanian satirical writings* (2006), Jordanian literary critic Ahmad Abu Khalil provides evidence that the genre of 'politically satirical writing' existed in the cultural life of Jordanians after the establishment of Transjordan by the British in 1921. Abu Khalil (2006) argues that the then famous nationalist poet of Transjordan (later Jordan), Mustafa Wahbi Al-Tal (1897–1949), was considered by many contemporaries to be a 'cynical poet.' Al-Tal's poetry was infused with complaints and grievances about social life and norms, particularly in relation to social injustices and the exclusion experienced by a few marginalised groups in Jordan, such as the *Ghajar* (Gypsies). Writing concerned with politics and social injustice seems thus to have had a long tradition in Jordan before the 1989 political opening.

In its earlier forms, however, as in Al-Tal's poetry, Jordanian writing seems not to have used humour and satire *per se*. There seemed to be no Jordanian satirical literature at the time of Transjordan (1921–46) when the country was still under British administration. In his analysis of cultural life and media productions during the period of Transjordan, Abu Khalil (2006) demonstrates that although media freedom during the 1940s and 1950s gave rise to a proliferation of some alternative media outlets, such as tabloid and weekly magazines, humour had never been popular. Some of the then prominent journalists, such as Minwer Owais, Lutfi Malhas and Hashim Sabi', had not utilised any techniques of humour and satire. Rather, they were more identified with their cynicism and critical reflections on social and political structures.

Without humour, cynicism (alone) cannot be considered satire and its users are not classified as 'humourists.' This evidence might indicate that because the people of Jordan were not in their nature 'carnavalesque' or satirical, there was no literature of this kind during the period of Transjordan. Rather, the Arabs, including the people of Jordan, were perhaps more inclined and interested to the growing body of resistance literature that emerged against western imperialism and more specifically against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, from 1948. Humour seemed therefore not to be a part of political resistance at this time.

Jordanian (political) humour that challenged power was not produced until the early 1960s. That period of Jordan's political history witnessed the first formation of Wasfi Al-Tal's reforming government, on 27 March 1963. Prime Minister Wasfi was the son of Mustafa Wahbi Al-Tal, the famous Transjordanian cynical poet. Wasfi Al-Tal's government was received very positively among Jordanians because it implemented King Hussein's vision of Jordan as a "model homeland" (Susser, 1994, p. 36). King Hussein's then vision focused on the adoption of far-reaching economic and political reform programmes, decentralisation and media freedom

that allowed the government to tolerate feedback and criticism from local media alternative outlets, such as weekly newspapers.

The opinion articles of Fakhri Qu'war, published at that period of Jordan's history in the *Amman Evening Newspaper* during the early 1960s, can be considered one of the earliest examples of Jordanian political humour that included light criticism of the government and the establishment. That form of political satire existed in a context of socio-political commentary and critical reflections rather than directly opposing, mocking, or attacking the political power of the government and the King. Qu'war's articles used to direct 'mild' but 'weightier' criticism towards the government using a limited element of political satire and mockery. It was not until 1982 that Qu'war first published his humorous work *Diaries of a happy man*, which was later adapted into a soap opera comedy broadcast on Jordanian state-owned radio. That form of radio drama depicted the life journey of an indigenous person named Farhan from his early childhood to his admission to a psychiatric hospital. It also sheds light on his naivety and his acts of resistance against marginalisation. The early works of Quwar in humorous literature suggest how political humour and satire existed in a form of social commentary and mockery in relation to modernity. It also acted as a springboard for the dramatisation of Jordanian humour and satire on radio and later on television.

During the early 1980s, the Jordan Radio and Television Corporation (the state-owned radio and television network) produced two influential situational comedies (sitcoms) that I argue have influenced the development of Jordanians' overall sense of humour and use of satire in relation to power and domination. The first was *Haret Abu Awad* (The neighbourhood of Abu Awad), broadcast from 1981. It tackled the customs, culture, and social problems of Jordanian rural society in a very subtle and comic way that highlighted indirectly the tensions between urbanites and rural dwellers. The second was *Al-'lem Noor* (Knowledge is light), broadcast from 1984. This sitcom was heavily influenced by the then famous British sitcom *Mind your language*, broadcast from 1977. For many decades, those two Jordanian sitcoms have resonated greatly in Jordanian collective identity and achieved popularity among many Jordanians.

For example, *Haret Abu Awad* narrated the story of the family of Abu Awad (a typical Jordanian father) and his neighbours in a very comic way that highlighted social classes and the greed of urbanites compared to the naivety of rural dwellers. It was also intended to make people laugh about the life in the Jordanian countryside where the majority of Transjordanian nationals live. However, *Al-'lem Noor* focused on the role of state and non-government organisations in fighting illiteracy in Jordan: a group of elderly people are summoned to attend evening classes and learn basic Arabic language and grammar. The series was notable for its inclusion of all the dialects of Jordan: urban dialects, which are more influenced by Palestinian Arabic, and rural and nomadic dialects, which are the original dialects of Transjordanian nationals in the steppe and the hinterlands. The class was taught by young and beautiful Miss Warda, portrayed by Jordan's most famous actress Abeer Issa, who was employed by the Ministry of Education to teach the elderly students. Humour seemed to be a growing part of Jordanian social life and society at this time.

Comedic media and satirical television productions in Jordan in the 1980s were growing faster than in the 1960s. The expansion and transmission in full colour of Jordan Television was among the most important factors for the development of Jordanians' engagement with a TV sitcom. Therefore, the style, and targets of that situational comedy became embedded and perhaps normalised. The development of Jordanian sitcoms made acceptable certain formerly taboo kinds of language and behaviours about 'the other' and in relation to government and power relations, especially in the late 1980s. During this era, Jordanian (political) humour was not only confined to broadcast on television but also became available in newspaper articles and columns.

Jordanian literary critics, such as Iyad Nassar (2009), consider columnist Mohamed Tomalieh (1957–2008) to have influenced the development of the genre of journalistic, politically satirical writing in Jordan from the mid-1980s onwards. Tomalieh was known for his use of colloquial language and clichés that were new to the techniques and style of formal writing used in newspapers and articles up until that time. He was a Jordanian of Palestinian origin who had lived in refugee camps in Jordan. He used to work for *Ad-Dustour* (a pro-government daily newspaper) under a daily and mildly politicised ‘satirical’ commentary opinion column entitled *Shahed Ayan* (Eyewitness). His articles provided socio-political commentary on life in Jordan using cynicism and self-deprecatory humour. In one commentary article, he considered himself as a “bridegroom who went on his honeymoon on his own, and a soldier who died as a result of his last bullet that celebrated a cease-fire” (as cited by Nassar, 2009, para. 6). His articles highlighted more the culture of cynicism and melancholy experienced at many Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. This development in Jordanian humour scene was a result of the combination of many socio-political and cultural factors discussed above.

In examining some of Tomalieh’s journalistic articles, I have observed that some of his cynicism should be understood in the context of the highly controversial question of identity politics and the idea of marginalisation of poorer sections of Jordanian society, such as Palestinian refugees. Some of his satirical articles, such as ‘The third bullet’ (published in his book *Shahed Ayan* (Eyewitness), 2007, p. 84), focused on the rising tensions between Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, including the hard lives of some marginalised Palestinians in refugee camps in Jordan. Addressing this important socio-political phenomenon in his vignettes, Annani (2006) argues that Tomalieh used to poke fun at his ‘double identity disorder’ (Annani, 2006, para. 6). He demonstrates that Tomalieh cynically viewed himself as ‘Jordanian of Palestinian origin,’ based on his difficult living experiences in one Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, and as ‘Palestinian of Jordanian origin,’ because his family had emigrated from the town of Ramla in Palestine, which fell under Jordanian rule following the outcomes of the 1948 Arab war with Israel.

The nature and especially the targets of Tomalieh’s writing were significant for the development of Jordanian political humour during the late 1980s. This is because he focused more on the role of socio-political agents in the formation of political divisions and alliances between Jordanians, Jordanians of Palestinian origin, and Palestinians in refugee camps. Instead of engaging in regime-based cultural politics, many Palestinians in Jordan have targeted the government and other parts of the regime in order to promote their own political interests. These resistance movements can be best seen through the government-opposing actions and dissenting voices of Jordanians of Palestinian origin and Palestinians in refugee camps. Jordanian humour seemed to have grown as a tool for criticism against the government, but this development was not accelerated until 1989 when Jordan launched its political opening and economic liberalisation which was (and still) guided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

### **3. Jordanian humour after the 1989 political opening**

In this section, I analyse how Jordanian (political) humour after the country’s political opening functioned as a tool to mock the government. I also analyse how the 1990-1991 Gulf War jokes functioned as a tool to promote national unity and solidarity among Jordanians against pressures from outside. These jokes provided Jordanians with a source of relief from the Iraqi failure and defeat. They also provided a medium for socio-political commentary on the regional and global powers that took part in the war, including the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. To analyse the functions of humour in post-1989 politics and the Gulf War, I refer first to the socio-political and economic changes and liberalisation that took place after Jordan’s 1989 political

opening that promoted freedom of speech and expression and the relaxation of state censorship on media production. I also refer to the implications of the Gulf War on the generation and development of political humour and ethnic jokes in Jordan after 1989.

After the 1989 protests, Jordan witnessed a vital democratic transition that started with nationwide protests against the unpopular government of Zaid Rifa'i over price increases and cuts to food subsidies to meet the government's austerity plan, as required by the IMF. In that year, Jordan experienced what was known as a 'political opening,' comprising the resumption of parliamentary elections and the cessation of martial law, which had been officially declared in 1967 after the loss of the West Bank to Israel. This watershed moment in Jordan's political history witnessed the legalisation of freedom of speech, promoted alternative media outlets, and re-granted the establishment of political life and parties, which had been suspended after the dismissal of Suleiman Nabulsi's government, the first elected government in 1957.

In addition to the 1989 political opening, the 1993 Press and Publication Law promoted, to a great extent, a widespread increase in media freedom and freedom of speech and expression in Jordan. From that year (1993), Jordan experienced a steady rise in alternative media (as well as the emergence of political opposition voices), including, but not limited to, the rise of tabloid journalism and satirical journals such as *The Shihan* that were critical of mainstream government discourses and senior government officials. The rise of *Shihan* (a tabloid weekly newspaper) in the early 1990s is a perfect example to reflect on this socio-political change and to think of Jordanians' reception of political humour and satire after the country's political opening and the relaxation of martial law from 1989.

This period also resulted in the growth, proliferation, and wider circulation of Gulf War jokes in Jordanian streets from 1990. In their analysis of Gulf War jokes and targets in Jordanian streets, Farghal and Shakir (1993, p. 15) argue that these represented a new genre of political humour and satire in Jordan, targeting the structure of political powers and conflicts in the Middle East. At that time, Jordanian (political) humour promoted the supremacy of the Iraqi arsenal, despite their military defeat and loss in the war. It enabled Jordanians metaphorically to convert the Iraqi military defeat into a 'psychological victory' that celebrated the Iraqi military. Jordanian (political) humour and satire during and after the Gulf War can be more related to the release theory of humour, helping Jordanians to cope with or release frustration and anger about the Iraqi failure and defeat during the war, and a platform for socio-political commentary on the global and regional powers, and most noticeably on Jordan's economic conditions and opportunities after the 1989 political opening. The Jordanian ethnic jokes during the Gulf War targeted the local Transjordanian people of As-Salt, At-Tafilah and As-Sarih in the northwest of Jordan.

In addition to the wider circulation of Gulf War ethnic jokes, Jordan was among the first Arab countries allowing sensitive political topics to be addressed on stage. After fleeing from Kuwait during the Gulf War, Jordanian stand-up comedians Nabil Sawalha and Hisham Yanis returned to Jordan and established the first politically satirical theatre in the capital city Amman, at the Concord Theatre in 1991. They were theatrically professional, enthusiastic, and very energetic personalities. They achieved fame and audience engagement through their perfect imitations and personifications of several Arab rulers, and their very comic treatment of highly sensitive political topics on the stage.

In one politically satirical play *Welcome to an Arab summit* (1993), the two actors, as Peter Ford (1993) described them in his 1993 newspaper article 'Jordan political satire packs 'em in with lampooning of Arab leaders' (1993), "bound onto [the] stage as if they have just been freed from captivity" (Ford, 1993, para. 1). The actors' rush and bounding onto the stage suggest (perhaps) that the Jordanian political theatre emerged as a tool to celebrate the end of state censorship and the relaxation of laws concerning freedom of speech and expression in Jordan after the 1989 political opening. It can be argued that the Jordanian regime and society shifted

its tolerance of political humour and satire after King Hussein of Jordan attended and seemed to enjoy one of the plays. The attendance helped to end government restrictions and end state censorship on political humour and satire in public domains.

In favour of the new liberalism after 1989, Hisham Yanis made a light-hearted observation, saying “For the first time in 30 years, we are making a profit with a theatre play;” he also pointed out humorously that “We can’t afford to go back to dictatorship” (cited by Ford, 1993, para. 31). Yanis’s comment is interesting here because he chose to use ‘we,’ a seemingly innocuous first-person plural pronoun, but a politically loaded term because it potentially also refers to ‘we’ (the people of Jordan). It is even more interesting that he made a self-deprecating joke about theatre being normally very unpopular. He mocked the very genre in which he was succeeding. This level of meta-awareness combined with self-deprecation (i.e., awareness of the limitations and perhaps futility of one’s own efforts) seems to represent a highly sophisticated level of political humour and satire on stage. Therefore, he not only encapsulated (by talking openly about the political past and future of Jordan) the new freedom of speech, but also the growing sophistication of Jordanian (political) humour, as well as the growing theme of self-deprecation in Jordanian society after the 1989 political opening.

Sawalha and Yanis’s political plays were highly satirical in terms of their use of pun and hyperbole as methods of political analysis. They demonstrated a new genre of Jordanian political humour and satire that perhaps helped to release the tensions of Jordanians. It also functioned as a method of political analysis and as a transient tool for political resistance, but of a kind that did not provoke any changes in everyday political realities. They were thus close in nature to aspects of Bakhtin’s carnival, without being overtly confrontational. The plays also functioned as a trigger for the promotion of two types of political humour in Jordan after the Gulf War: affectionate satire towards Arab leaders that ultimately defended power rather than attacking it, and another form of antagonistic humour against the Americans and their allies in the region (Egypt and Saudi Arabia).

#### **4. Jordanian humour after the Arab Spring**

With the start of the Arab Spring revolutions from 2011, humour has become (to a great extent) a staple of Jordanian culture. Influenced by regional turmoil and counter-publics, many Jordanians have used their social media spaces to produce counter-narrative discourses against the government and its economic and political reform programmes. The counter-political climate of the Arab Spring has indeed rejuvenated Jordanian interest in using humour as a tool to counter state repression and as a subversive tool for popular resistance to the official discourse and its articulations. The political context of the Arab Spring in Jordan, which took the form of a series of street protests against the government from 2011 onwards calling for the reform of the regime and launch of far-reaching government economic and political reform programmes, raises questions about the effectiveness of humour and satire as a tool to challenge power and undermine government control and authority.

Jordanian (political) humour and satire has grown both quantitatively and qualitatively in larger parts of Jordanian society, and to a large extent in social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube after the start of the Arab Spring from 2011. To reflect on the development of Jordanian (political) humour after the Arab Spring, four Jordanian humourists gathered at the non-governmental cultural centre at Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation in Amman on the 13 January 2014 for a public forum on the development of Jordanian humour after the Arab Spring (Khoshman, 2014). The humourists were Yousef Ghishan (socio-political satirist), Musa Hijazin (comedian), Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou’bi (socio-political satirist) and Omar Adnan Abdallat (political cartoonist). In the forum, the humourists discussed the driving forces

and motives that seemed to have influenced the production of Jordanian humour and satire in the streets, and most predominantly in Jordanian social media spaces since 2011. The forum was also aimed at challenging the stereotypical and widely held notion about Jordanians for being serious, po-faced, and unable to produce humour and laughter. In particular, the four humourists reflected on the significant rise and development of Jordanian (political) humour and most importantly the reception of humour and satire among Jordanians following the Arab Spring.

Yousef Ghishan, the moderator of the session, who works for the pro-government newspaper *Ad-Dustour* (The Constitution), argued that Jordanians have become funnier because of the Arab Spring. He provides evidence from the large flow of daily satirical comments and posts that Jordanians make in social media spaces about local and regional politics. Musa Hijazin, a veteran Jordanian comedian better known for his two comic characters, Abu Saqer and Som'a, argued that the central government has played a significant role in the development of Jordanian production and reception of humour since the Arab Spring. According to Hijazin, the government has rather (unintentionally) turned every Jordanian into a satirist (Khoshman, 2014).

Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou'bi argued that the weak performance of the Parliament as a 'rubber stamp' for the government is the one major factor that has most motivated the production and reception of Jordanian (political) humour and satire following the Arab Spring (Khoshman, 2014). Al-Zou'bi is Jordan's most famous socio-political satirist and online activist and has worked for the government-owned newspaper *Al Ra'i* (The Opinion) since 2007. In addition to many politically satirical articles, he is best known for his influential, politically satirical play *Al-an Fahemtukum* (Now I Understand You) that was staged in Jordan at the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. Abdallat, who produces comic and satirical animations and cartoons, argued that elements of frustration and bitter reality have played a significant role in the production of young Jordanians' comedy videos and sarcasm in Jordanian social media spaces following the Arab Spring (Khoshman, 2014). The four humourists have reflected on how social media platforms (as alternative spaces free from the state-run media) have greatly facilitated and perhaps encouraged the production of humour and satire against power and authority in post Arab Spring Jordan.

Examples of (carnavalesque) Jordanian political humour and satire disseminated since 2011 in Jordanian social media spaces have included animated cartoons, politically satirical programmes and plays, satirical parables and anecdotes, sketch comedies, radio comedies and many internet memes. Some of these new genres of political humour in Jordanian social media spaces have provided a mood of resistance to the government and the establishment, using degradation, the grotesque and the temporary subversion of political power and authority. That is more apparently carnivalesque than the previous phase in the development of political humour in the post- 1989 political context. Indeed, the evolutionary moment of the Arab Spring and the advancement of social media technologies have together changed forms of online expression and changed Jordanian people's attitudes towards the government and dominant powers. These attitudes are liberal and anti-government.

Inside the context of social media space, many young Jordanian people have used their social media accounts as a platform for influencing counter-narrative against the government and to promote calls for the reform of the government and the regime by returning to constitutional monarchy, as stipulated in the 1952 Constitution. Some of the leading Jordanian humourists and political activists have also taken to social media spaces their resistant actions to power and the government. These include but are not limited to Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou'bi, Omar Abdallat, Emad Hajjaj, Osama Hajjaj, Maen Qatamin and Musa Hijazin. These people have used their social media spaces to express their opposition opinions to their public, to disseminate their works and sometimes to support or initiate strike actions against the government through the use of hashtags, in order to try to achieve improvements for the society.

The use of humour and satire in Jordanian social media spaces has infused Jordanian political humour after the Arab Spring with a ‘carnavalesque’ mode of resistance against power and government. Such humour has tended to be more subversive and less respectful than the above-analysed, earlier forms of political humour and satire in the twenty-three years after the 1989 political opening. It has sought to express young people’s dissenting views, despair, and frustration about the effect of government policies on reforms. Post Arab Spring political humour in Jordanian social media spaces has utilised more carnivalesque themes: degradation, grotesque and temporary and imaginary subversion of political power and authority.

In post Arab Spring Jordan, political humour and satire has a variety of functions. It functions as a method of political analysis, and a tool for popular resistance and the expression of subversion in social media spaces. It has also become a tool for popular resistance and counter-political force (illustrated here with Ahmad Hassan Al-Zou’bi’s politically satirical play *Al-an Fahemtukum*, in order to talk about Jordan’s economic and political woes as well as the country’s political uncertainty and unrest after the Arab Spring. The title for this play was inspired by the Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali’s famously cynical quote when he proclaimed, in what turned out to be his last televised speech, that he had listened to the people of Tunisia and their demands and was ready to make concessions. The play achieved great popularity amongst many Jordanians and in late 2011 King Abdullah himself attended and apparently enjoyed the play (Brand & Hammad, 2012, para. 2). The success of the play shows not only evolution in public taste for humour and satire, but also how the Jordanian regime has tolerated the rise of political humour, perhaps as a means for releasing the tensions of many Jordanian young people who took to the streets during the 2011–12 protests and in 2018 respectively to demand change and end of austerity measures backed by the IMF.

## **5. Conclusion**

Jordanians before the 1989 political opening were living under a repressive regime, not least because they had arguably lived under almost permanent de facto martial law, which had led to their seeming aversion to humour and laughter. They could not therefore engage (because of the implementation of martial law and the already strict and cultural traditions) with humour and laughter for the fear of breaking the already established social and political norms and orders. This explains why early Jordanian culture seems devoid of humour and laughter. It was imbued instead with cynicism, melancholy and a disinclination to life, social norms, and proper manners. Jordanian humour has flourished after the country’s political opening, economic growth, and liberalisation, and after the relaxation of martial law from 1989. The early practices of Jordanian humour were rooted, among other things, in ethnic joking, Gulf war jokes, the politically satirical theatre of Nabil Sawalha Hisham Yanis, tabloid newspapers, and a few political cartoons and socially satirical articles that rarely engaged ordinary Jordanians with humour and laughter.

However, with the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, Jordanian humour has grown both quantitatively and qualitatively in large parts of Jordanian society, and to a large extent in social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube which have greatly facilitated and perhaps encouraged both the production and reception of humour against the government in post Arab Spring Jordan. The emergence of social media has therefore made Jordanian political humour more carnivalesque and subversive. This is due to the nature of the social media spaces as independent and user-oriented free platforms that function away from the direct government control and censorship. The political context of the Arab Spring in Jordan has thus raised questions about the use of humour as a tool to challenge power and undermine the government discourse about reform and its processes, without necessarily challenging the status quo or

undermining the higher power (the monarch). Such humour, Barahmeh (2022) found, has constantly called for reform of the government but not for regime change or revolution. It has regularly created a transitory carnivalesque politics, where the status quo is always returned afterward.

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