

Funny precarious
Malu Halasa
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Favoured by Syria's new president, Ali Farzat, leading cartoonist and popular newspaper publisher, seemed to have a licence to mock. Can it last?

Spring came early to Damascus this year. The rains stopped and it was unseasonably warm. There were worries that it was a false spring, much like the political thaw that took place in 2000 when President Bashar al-Assad took over after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had ruled Syria with an iron fist. Bashar, whose name in Arabic means "bearer of good tidings", ushered in a few wholesome months of civil society and opposition party forums. It suggested that Syria, one of the more closed and heavily regulated countries in the Middle East, was heading for a full-blown Damascus spring. Eighteen months later, the forums closed down. Dissident journalists were unexpectedly freed under the young president's general amnesty, but at the same time their families were threatened by security authorities.

One success of the Bashar honeymoon was Addomari, the first independent newspaper to be established in Syria since 1963. Its name, meaning "lamp-lighter", embodies an existential angst: an unheeded, lonely voice, crying in the political wilderness. Its publisher, Ali Farzat, is a political cartoonist whose fortunes have been linked to the Assads. Banned by the father, Farzat opened his satirical newspaper - an equal mix of editorial cartoons and stories critical of the government - under the son.

It was obviously an important project for the new president: he passed a special dispensation that allowed Farzat to bypass Syria's labyrinthine press laws and publish. The two men met eight years ago, during an exhibition of Farzat's banned cartoons, and Bashar, an ophthalmologist who studied in London, said he saw no reason why the cartoons had been censored. An unlikely alliance was born.

In February 2001, 25,000 copies of Addomari's first issue sold out within hours of hitting the streets. News vendors banged on the door of the paper's downtown Damascus

office, demanding more copies. Farzat immediately printed another 25,000 and doubled the print run for the second issue. There could have been no more auspicious beginning.

Editorial cartoons, like journalism, are imports to the Middle East. Destructive criticism, however, is a tradition that dates back to oral poetry, and few Arab regimes can stomach any kind of criticism - destructive or constructive. Farzat is a leading figure among Middle Eastern and North African cartoonists. In the 1980s, when the Syrian newspaper AlThawra stopped publishing his work, readers registered their disapproval and circulation fell by 35%. A month later, Farzat was back.

His cartoons rely on visual puns. He ridicules everyone, but reserves his sharpest barbs for generals and men in suits. Other images recur: ladders or tall plants (symbols for hierarchy), crowds (metaphor for the Arab masses) and switches. One of his banned cartoons shows the back of a general's head - fleshy from too many meals at fine Damascene eating establishments - sporting an on-off switch.

While western readers appreciate the universality of Farzat's satire, Syrians living under the "city-eye system" - the eyes and ears of the regime - react differently. Syrian philosopher Sadik Jalal al-'Azm says: "Internally, you feel he releases something. Everyone who looks at his cartoons has the same sense of catharsis." Except, perhaps, those under attack.

In June 2001, the authorities told Addomari's proprietor not to go to press with the issue then at the printers. They had been alerted to a cartoon and story critical of prime minister Mohammad Mustafa Miro which must have been secretly read by the security authorities - an allegation denied by the ministry of information. Privately, Farzat said he had been warned that going ahead would result in a ban. Instead, he compromised: the two questionable pages were printed blank except for two sketches including a bloodied hand holding a pin-encrusted pen.

Censorship, and worse, dog Arab cartoonists. The Palestinian Naji al-Ali was assassinated in London. Bahgat Othman, from Egypt, was prevented from drawing caricatures for a decade because he offended then president Anwar Sadat. And the Algerians Chawki

The Guardian, concluded

Amari, who ridicules the military, and Sid Ali Melouah, who pokes fun at Islamists, both live in exile. Even with Bashar's dispensation, Farzat has made powerful enemies. In January, the cartoonist announced that distribution problems were threatening to close the paper. 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, then resumed publishing. The current print run hovers around 25,000.

Addomari's reputation rests not on its articles but on its cartoons. The lead story of issue 61, going to press at the time of writing, criticises government-controlled price rises for kerosene and electricity, at the same time as significant pay hikes were awarded to government officials. A Farzat cartoon shows a clerk who, taking money from someone else, is shadowed by a man stealing money out of his pocket.

The issue also pursues an ongoing critique of the country's new press laws, under which there is a ban on articles about national security and social unity, and journalists can be jailed for erroneous reports.

Despite Addomari's campaigns, there remains the nagging suspicion that it focuses on "permissible" topics such as corruption, since Bashar himself has spoken openly against it. "There is no official versus unofficial in these countries," says Allen Douglas who co-authored *Arabic Comic Strips: Politics Of An Emerging Mass Culture*. "Everything is under censorship. So what the cartoonist tries to do is to negotiate between his own position and the government's, and figure out how much he can get away with at any given time. For example, it's easy to be a Syrian and publish a biting attack on the corruption of Anwar Sadat... And if you want to make a cartoon against the US, Israel, the IMF - these things are all open season. But criticising the Egyptian government is not going to go down well in Cairo."

Some Arab cartoonists find it problematic to bite the hand that feeds them, since many are employed by their governments. Farzat worked on a Syrian military magazine before launching Addomari. And in 1977, he drew comic strips for a children's magazine that was also a vehicle for government propaganda.

Even when a cartoonist has no particular country in mind, governments still cry wolf. A 1988 cartoon exhibition

at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris featured Farzat. In one of his cartoons, against a war-torn backdrop, a general dripping in medals and battle ribbons stands by a stew pot and ladles out more medals and ribbons into the bowl of a man in rags. When Iraqi officials saw the cartoon, they accused Farzat of parodying their country during the Iran/Iraq war. The Iraqi government, part sponsor of the exhibition, threatened to withdraw funds unless Farzat's work was removed. In solidarity, Arab and French cartoonists signed the offensive cartoon, saying that it belonged to them, so their work should be taken down as well. The Iraqis backed off.

Drawing cartoons and publishing a weekly newspaper are not unrelated activities. Both are fuelled by reporting, Turkish coffee and gossip - but a 40-member staff publication has higher overheads than paper and ink. For Addomari to survive, the paper must sell in the oil-rich Gulf states - and that means grappling with new governments and new censorship laws. Addomari has an important symbolic value to Syrians, says Sadik Jalal al-'Azm. It is involved in "a courageous struggle, no matter its faults and weaknesses. It is also an indication that the old guard has come around to realising that the country cannot be run in the same way any more."

Until better communication exists between the rulers and the ruled, Syrians must rely on intuitive skills honed through long years of exposure to Farzat cartoons. For the decipherers and code-breakers on either side of the political fence, his humour has been like a divining rod.

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