

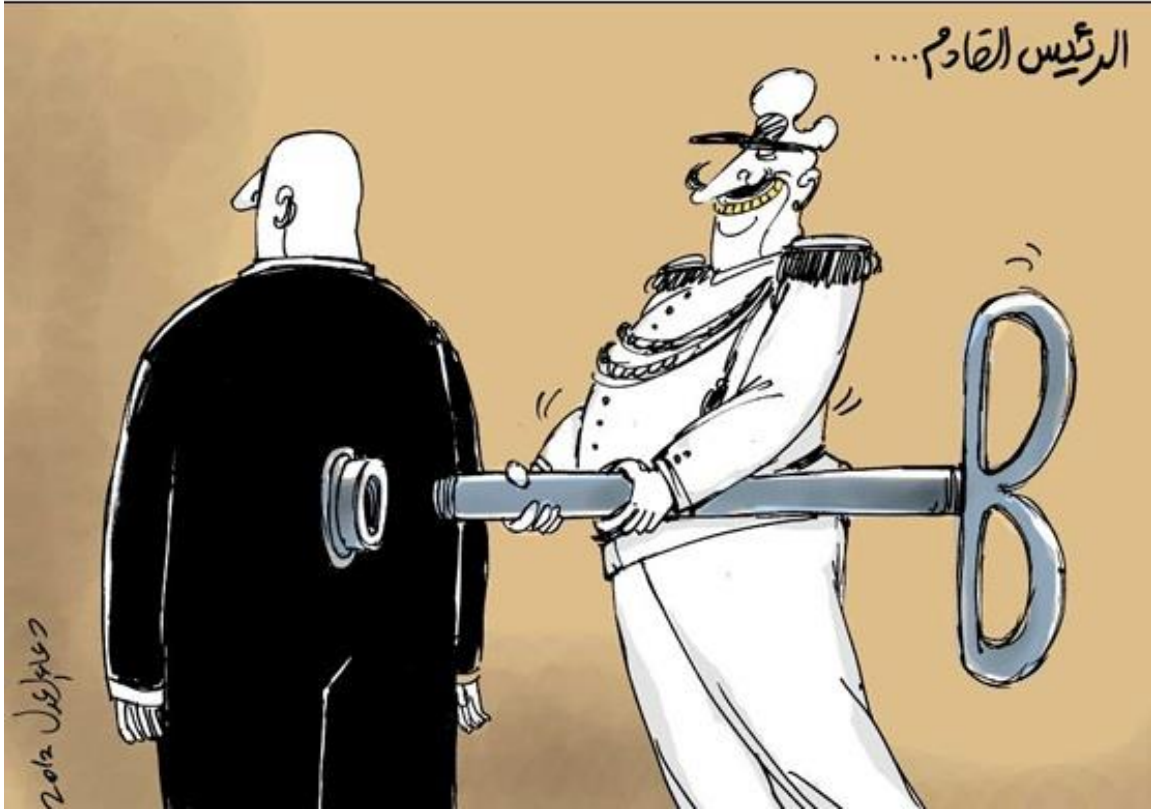
# The Economist

**Skewering dictators**

## **Laugh them out of power**

**Political cartoons in the Arab world are getting punchier**

IN MANY Middle Eastern states, cartoons are powerful weapons of subversion. In the past the men who drew them were often coy in the face of censorship: a mocking depiction of a king on a jewelled throne holding his nose as he surveyed his citizens might be acceptable, but not more obviously humiliating depictions of the monarch. Better to focus on foreign themes like America's support for Israel. Yet Arab cartoonists have been getting more daring. In Egypt they spent a year sending up their embattled president, Muhammad Morsi, before he was ousted. Syrian opposition newspapers show President Bashar Assad bathed in blood.



This sketch by Doaa Eladl, a prominent female Egyptian, is relevant again today since it refers to the military's strong influence over the country's politics. The caption (top right) says "The next president".

Islam's emphasis on the written word at the expense of visual depiction (it is forbidden to draw the Prophet Muhammad) meant that cartoons, long popular in Europe, came late to the Muslim world. They became popular in the Ottoman empire in the mid-19th century. Yacoub Sanou, a Syrian Jew, started publishing cartoons in Egypt in 1877. Several decades later

others followed suit in what are now Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.



Emad Hajjaj is the most prominent cartoonist working in Jordan today. He caused a stir with this sketch sending up a certain class of Jordanian women.

Cartoonists in these and neighbouring countries claim they helped to spark the Arab spring. Ali Ferzat, a Syrian caricaturist, was critical of his leaders long before protests broke out in 2011. Now less constrained, many others are joining in. Jonathan

Guyer, a Cairo-based scholar researching cartoons, talks of a new golden age. He says, "I barely see stupid gags or anti-Semitic tropes now." Young cartoonists incorporate popular culture into their work, attracting new audiences. Khalid al-Baih, a Sudanese cartoonist based in Qatar, has seen his sketches pop up in Beirut and Cairo.



Z is a Tunisian cartoonist who stays anonymous. Z drew this

sketch of the president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, and his wife fleeing the country two weeks before they actually left for Saudi Arabia in January 2011

The authorities still try to fight back. In 2011 Mr Ferzat was beaten up in Damascus after drawing Mr Assad trying to hitch a lift from Libya's then-dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. Mocking Morocco's king in a picture can still land you behind bars. Several cartoonists were sued earlier this year for making fun of Mr Morsi. "But our work is being taken more seriously by the public," says Andeel, the pen-name of a cartoonist at *al-Masry al-Youm*, a leading Egyptian newspaper.

One taboo has yet to be broken: making fun of religion, as opposed to clerics and Islamist politicians. And few Gulf rulers have had their noses tweaked by local cartoonists, rather than those who live safely abroad. When that happens, they may start twitching.

- Source: Doaa Eladl
- Ali Dilem, an Algerian, has been brought before the courts more than 50 times for his work, which is usually published in the newspaper *Liberté*. The soldier is saying to a dead BP worker: "It's good you are free." Source: Ali Dilem
- Naji al-Ali was perhaps the best known cartoonist in the Arab world. He was assassinated in London in 1987. Source: Naji al-Ali
- Khalid al-Baih, a Sudanese sketcher based in Qatar, drew this cartoon after Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese president, ordered a halt to oil transfers from South Sudan. Source: Khalid al-Baih
- Source: Emad Hajjaj
- Z is a Tunisian cartoonist who stays anonymous. Z drew this sketch of the president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, and his wife fleeing the country two weeks before they actually left for Saudi Arabia in January 2011. Source: Z

From the print edition: International