#Sisi_vs_Youth: Who Has a Voice in Egypt?

ALBRECHT HOFHEINZ (University of Oslo)

Abstract
This article presents voices from Egypt reflecting on the question of who has the right to have a voice in the country in the first half of 2016. In the spirit of the research project “In 2016,” it aims to offer a snapshot of how it “felt to live” in Egypt in 2016 as a member of the young generation (al-shabāb) who actively use social media and who position themselves critically towards the state’s official discourse. While the state propagated a strategy focusing on educating and guiding young people towards becoming productive members of a nation united under one leader, popular youth voices on the internet used music and satire to claim their right to resist a retrograde patrimonial system that threatens every opposing voice with extinction. On both sides, a strongly antagonistic ‘you vs. us’ rhetoric is evident.

2016: “The Year of Egyptian Youth” (Sisi style)*

January 9, 2016 was celebrated in Egypt as Youth Day—a tradition with only a brief history. The first Egyptian Youth Day had been marked on February 9, 2009; the date being chosen by participants in the Second Egyptian Youth Conference in commemoration of the martyrs of the famous 1946 student demonstrations that eventually led to the resignation of then Prime Minister Nuqrāshī. Observed in 2009 and 2010 with only low-key events, the carnivalesque “18 days” of revolutionary unrest in January-February 2011 interrupted what

* Rather than a conventional academic paper, this article aims to be a miniature snapshot of how it ‘felt’ to live in Egypt by mid-2016 as a member of the young generation (al-shabāb) who have access to social media (ca. 70% of Egyptians aged 10-29 have a Facebook account; my calculation based on eMarketing Egypt: “Facebook in Egypt,” 4th edn., Aug. 2013, and “Demographics of Egypt,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Egypt>, accessed 26 Dec. 2016) and who position themselves as outspoken members of this generation (gīl) upholding the tradition of the 25 January 2011 revolution. In this attempt, the article is no more than a first, exploratory step within the “In 2016” research project. It is primarily based on monitoring social media buzz throughout the first part of this year, not least using <BuzzSumo.com> to track popular issues shared via social media. This was supplemented by informal talks with bloggers, journalists, students, and former activists (from the 2011/12 period) in Cairo in January/February 2016. In the aim of providing a ‘snapshot,’ the present tense is used here to refer to observations pertaining to the ‘scene’ during the first half of 2016; while the past tense refers to specific occurrences. For stylistic reasons, I do not transcribe the name of the Egyptian president al-Sīsī, but use the spelling Sisi throughout. Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions and translations in this article are mine. —Audio-visual predecessors of the article were presented at conferences at the University of Oslo (Five Years after the Arab Spring: Political and Ideological Trends), 10 June 2016, and the University of Southern Denmark (Formations of Middle Eastern Subjectivities: Cultural Heritage, Global Structures and Local Practices), 22 September 2016. I am grateful for the feedback received from the audience as well as from my peer reviewers.

© Albrecht Hofheinz, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Norway

Marking this day more prominently than its precursors, the President chose the stately stage of Cairo Opera House for the occasion. Surrounding himself with seventeen carefully selected young men and women—all looking very respectable and respectful—Sisi extolled the devotion of these “children” of his as a model when he declared the “Year of Egyptian Youth” (ʿĀm al-Shabāb al-Miṣrī). In unreformed patriarchal style, as if he had never heard the sarcastic reactions to Mubarak’s last speeches, he pontificated:

\[ ...{
\begin{align*}
\text{ءابنائي وبنائي! إن شبابنا من أبطال القوات المسلحة والشرطة المدنيّة ...} \\
\text{ضيّرون أروع الأمثلة في} \\
\text{الضحية والتفاف لنفسينا في أمّنا الطيّبة. ...} \\
\text{ولكن ابنيائي وبنائي من شبابنا في الجامعات والمدارس ...} \\
\text{ويحترمون في المصانع والمزارع يصنعون لأمّتنا المستقبل ويرعون لنا مقدّساته من أهل الشرّ اللذين أرادوا أن يزرعوا في أرضنا الطيّبة. ...}
\end{align*}\]

\[ ...{
\begin{align*}
\text{أبنائي وبنائي من شبابنا في الجامعات والمدارس} \\
\text{وآخرين في المصانع والمزارع يصنعون لأمّتنا المستقبل ويرعون لنا مقدّساته من أهل الشرّ اللذين أرادوا أن يزرعوا في أرضنا الطيّبة. ...}
\end{align*}\]


Great Youth of Egypt! I speak to you today straight from the heart of a father addressing his children. […] My sons and daughters! Our heroic youth in the armed forces and the civilian police […] provide the most awesome examples of selflessness and sacrifice to protect the nation [al-watan; 10 sec. applause] from the forces of evil who meant to plant chaos and violence in our land of peace (fī ardīnā al-ṭayyiḥa). […] It is my sons and daughters in schools and universities […] and those who work in factories and farms who forge the future for our nation (umma) and plant for us the seeds of hope. Honourable sons of Egypt: to talk about hope, and to link it to the youth, is not mere rhetoric I employ at an official event—it is an attempt to put things straight again, so that this nation (umma) returns to her straight path and takes the right steps to rise and progress. Therefore, today, on the Day of Youth, surrounded by this magnificent youth of ours (wasṭa ḥādiḥi ʿl-kawkabān min shabābīnī al-rāʾ), educated people, creative people, athletes, politicians, I decided to declare this year 2016 a Year of the Egyptian Youth [9 sec. applause].

The networked youth reacted immediately, as in this Facebook post:

سيسي: عام 2016 هو عام الشباب ونعمل بأقصى جهد لاحتواءهم

#Sisi_vs_شيايب

Sisi: 2016 is the Year of Youth, and We’ll do our utmost to include them.

The Prison Authority: There’s no room left at all, Mr. President!

#Sisi_vs_Youth

The glaring contrast between Sisi’s talk of inclusion and his regime’s practice of incarcerating tens of thousands has been pointed out repeatedly during the year and developed into a rhetorical topos used not only by obvious opponents of the regime, but also by people working with it. It epitomises the tension between the official celebratory discourse of...
“my sons and daughters,” of “our youth” (shabābunā) building Egypt, and between the restless, impatient criticism expressed by many of those who self-consciously identify and act as “shabāb.” This tension was a most striking characteristic of the situation of young people in Egypt in 2016, to such an extent that even pro-regime Egyptian media felt the need to address it as an issue. Only three weeks after announcing the Year of Youth, Sisi himself had to acknowledge, in a live TV interview, that he was out of touch with Egyptian youth. The reporter asked him, somewhat timidly:

Journalist: 60% of Egyptians are youth. […] They don’t, perhaps, have the same, well, patience that you find in older generations. […] Does your Excellence, how should I say, get annoyed sometimes by this criticism from the youth?

Sisi: As for the youth… listen: I have children—and I never get annoyed with them. So why should I get annoyed by the children of Egypt? Egypt’s children are a big part of her. But let me tell you something: We don’t know… ehm… I’m speaking to you openly now, and I hope that they hear me: we don’t know how to communicate with them. We don’t know how to create avenues of mutual understanding. 7


As will become evident in this article, the concept of ‘shabāb’ is multi-faceted and not easy to pin down; its precise use during 2016 warrants a separate study into who it is applied to and by whom, in what contexts, and with what values attached. Here, I am less thinking of the irreducible diversity of an age group, but of the multitude of cultural constructions of the concept by a variety of social actors, not only among those who sometimes are stylized as the ‘generation’ of the Jan. 2011 revolution (gil al-thawra) (on the latter, cf. Richard JACQUEMOND, “Un mai 68 arabe? La révolution arabe au prisme du culturel,” Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée 138, 2015 : 131-46, <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.9247>).

7 “al-Mudākhala al-kāmilah li-l-Raʾīn” Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Šīṣi maʿaʾ Amr Adīb wa-taṣrīḥāt hāmma li-shabāb al-Ultrās,” al-Qāhira al-Yawm, 1 Feb. 2016, <https://youtu.be/vqWKaz9KRY?t=838>. The interview contains other characteristic elements of Sisi’s views: ‘This country was about to collapse in 2011; since 30 June 2013, things are slowly getting better as “we” are trying to build it up again. No patriotic official will ever harm as much as the fingernail of an Egyptian. I have great hopes for this country;
Indeed. Although jails were filled to the brim with tens of thousands of young people, Sisi’s police zealously continued to clamp down on almost every one daring to raise their voice, or even merely perceived to be a regime critic, whatever their political stance. Under these circumstances, any meaningful dialogue was rendered impossible, and sarcasm often seems the only way out. Young Egyptians are honing their skills in this art; and they are—often bravely—facing the consequences. Not only, however, is there a glaring gap between the official discourse of ‘inclusion’ and the actual treatment of the youth—a gap that vastly popular cartoonist Ḥawīsh, whose Facebook page has over 2 million likes, captured in the cartoon shown here, with a whole generation being put behind bars.

More striking perhaps is the regime’s utter lack of sensibility for how its own acts, its own clumsiness, its own paranoia in the face of critique, helps to provoke ever more
sarcasm.\textsuperscript{11} Islam Gawish was arrested just as he was in the limelight more than ever, with his second cartoon collection to be presented in print at the 2016 Cairo Book Fair; prosecution then wavered in what he should be accused of—insulting the President and the state? Spreading news on Facebook without government permission? Using pirated software? In the end, and because scorn was pouring in the minute his arrest became known, Gawish was released under the excuse that it was his employer who had deployed the pirated software…\textsuperscript{12}

Similarly ‘hilarious’ was the regime’s reaction to the so-called “condom incident” (\textit{wāqī’at al-\textit{wāqī} al-dhakārī}). On the fifth anniversary of the January 25 Revolution—\textit{\textit{tawīl} al-\textit{ḥadīth}}—two young men bravely defied the security clampdown on Tahrir Square to distribute condom balloons to unsuspecting police officers, with the message, “From the youth of Egypt to the police” (\textit{\textit{min shabāb Maṣr li-l-\textit{ḥaus}}}).\textsuperscript{13} This can be interpreted not only as a note to the police—as in, ‘We don’t want you to produce more of your kind’—but also as a satirical reaction to the omnipresent slogan, \textit{Tahyā Maṣr} (“Long live Egypt”) that the regime had appropriated for itself. The video that the two young men produced went viral, receiving close to 2 million hits within 48 hours, and soon, images of ‘security condoms’ appeared on Facebook.\textsuperscript{14} Meanwhile, the airwaves were filled with endless talk-show regurgitating ‘public outcry’ over such indecency.\textsuperscript{15} Eventually, the interior ministry refrained from arresting the culprits (who were famous due to their involvement in popular

TV series\textsuperscript{16}), declaring instead: “We left them for society to deal with” (lit., to put them on trial: \textit{taruknāhum kay yuhākimahum al-muqtama}). “What’s that?,” the comedian was quick to react;

“Incitement to violence? […] So your media label us ‘US-Israeli spies’ and ‘Masonic’s’ and ‘foreign agents’ and ‘thugs’—and after all that you say, ‘we left them to be dealt with by society’? Or does your excellency plan to send over some plain-clothes informants as usual to abuse us and then say, ‘that was society’?”\textsuperscript{17}

**Generation Stuck**

Evidently, when Sisi complained that avenues of understanding were lacking, he merely recognized what many young Egyptians were feeling: that there was a wall between the regime on one side, and ‘the youth’ on the other. “We” face “them;” “they” cause problems for “us”: this rhetoric can be found on both sides.\textsuperscript{18} While Sisi wondered why so many young people were not amenable to his paternal exhortations, the young, on the other side, were exasperated over being ‘stuck’. As pop star Ḥamza Namira reacted to the arrest of Islām Gāwīsh:

So what do you expect of us, the young? Should we stop laughing, painting, singing, thinking, dreaming? We’ve turned grey before time; we’re stuck with no taste left for life; and still you’re not pleased.\textsuperscript{19}

An Egyptian activist and blogger I interviewed in Cairo in January 2016 described the situation in similar words. He did, however, indicate that below the political stagnation, this generation was seeking a way out:

\textsuperscript{16} Shādī Hasan Abū Zayd was correspondent to the comedy show “Abla Fāhītā”; Aḥmad Mālik is a successful TV actor.


\textsuperscript{18} Examples can be seen in most quotations in this article, beginning with Sisi’s TV interview referred to in footnote 7 above.

We’re stuck, he said as his hands moved to illustrate a scene of exuberant energy blocked and stuck. We’re stuck—but Cairo has never been as interesting as now. I’ve lived here for over a decade, and Cairo has never been as interesting as now. There’s so much going on, in so many ways, there are so many initiatives, cultural initiatives, social initiatives, neighbourhood projects, moves against gentrification, art cinema clubs where people are watching and debating interesting movies… After they took from us the street, blocked us from politics, we went home, but we didn’t just go home and sit there; many of us went into another field, work in culture and so on. In a way, it was a good thing that they took the street from us, since we were too engaged in the hot day-to-day fights; we were in a way naïve, many people really believed that we just had to remove Mubarak and everything would be fine. I heard people chanting, ‘Yes! Now we can marry!’ (ha-nitgawwiz ha-nitgawwiz!) on Feb. 11 [2011], can you imagine? They really believed that it was so easy! So therefore there’s a good side to that they took the street from us. We forgot that revolutions take time. All revolutions do. […] Now we’re in a phase where there’s all this activity on the cultural and the social plan, and that is revolutionary. But we still are stuck. This generation (gīl) is stuck. I’m not optimistic; I’m just observing. And I’m challenging the notion that nothing is happening [after the crackdown following the army takeover in June 2013]. The sense of defeat is misleading. Yes, the defeat was heavy, and yes, there’s plenty of depression (ikti‘āb). But this impression is misleading, given the important dynamics in the cultural and social fields that are noticeable below the political stagnation [and, one might add, the economic crises that increasingly made headlines over the second part of the year].

The same view was offered a few months later by well-known cartoonist Andeel:

A lot of Egyptian culture producers nowadays have zero trust or hope in the government’s plans for cultural production, which means more innovative ideas, solutions and possibilities for newer and more liberated arts. This is what has to happen if the government continues making it impossible for people to gather in the streets or public places, or even have access to decent cultural services.

Initiatives like these [independent cultural projects] can grow a generation that believes in freedom and the right to think and choose and know

---


21 Interview with an Egyptian activist and blogger in his thirties, Cairo, February 2016; my translation.
about the world a lot more than us and our parents. So many years from now, an [extra-ordinary] event like yesterday’s […] can become a usual thing.\textsuperscript{22}

“The main thing” Andeel identified in these micro-level cultural initiatives “is a sense of independence. These are people who seem to have visions for themselves.” This sense of independence, of claiming the right to think and plan and act “myself” may be most elaborately celebrated in a few relatively privileged, alternative cultural spaces. My impressions from observing Egyptian social media, and the exponential growth of public uttering on social media itself, however, suggest that this wish to express ‘myself’ resonates on a wider scale.

Listen to me! ME!!

Among the most conspicuous attitudes that young Egyptians display on social media is the insistence to be heard, the claim that Me and My Voice have a right to be uttered and heard, in spite of and right in the face of the “old men” who “live in the past but want to control the present.”\textsuperscript{23} This attitude finds its programmatic expression in the song Isma’ni (“Listen to me!”) that became the most popular hit among Egyptian youth in 2015. It was performed by superstar Hamza Namira, the same singer whose frustration over the young generation being ‘stuck’ we have just noted.\textsuperscript{24} Hamza Namira had issued a number of songs that became emblematic for the mood of Egyptian youth over the past few years. His first big hit, back in 2009, was Ḥīlam mā‘āyā where the refrain was “iḥlam mā‘āyā… bi-bukra gāy / wi-law ma-gāsh… iḥnā n’gīboh b’nafsinā” (“Dream with me / of a tomorrow that’s coming / and if it doesn’t come / we’ll bring it on ourselves!”). On the eve of the 25 January 2011 demonstrations, this was the song that was put on the revolutionary Facebook page Kullinā Khālid Sa’īd to underscore the call to realize a common dream.\textsuperscript{25} When the revolution came

\begin{itemize}
  \item 23 CAIROKEE: “Akher Ogneh” (see below, footnote 34). For examples from the Sudan for this demand to be heard, see Albrecht HOFHEINZ, “Broken Walls: Challenges to Patriarchal Authority in the Eyes of Sudanese Social Media Actors,” forthcoming in Die Welt des Islam, 2017.
\end{itemize}
under siege in summer 2011, Ḥamza Namira encouraged his fellow human beings, his fellow Insān, to Ḥāṣir ḥiṣārak, “Besiege what besieges you / Tomorrow you’ll see victory / you’ll fill the heart of darkness with light / as long as your heart beats on.” After Sisi’s takeover in June 2013, Ḥamza Namira dared to call this a “coup,” and the regime banned his songs from state radio. Immediately after this move to silence Namira’s voice, “Listen to me!” was released; by June 2016, it approached 7 million views on YouTube:

My life has never been one of my own choosing,  
You’re the one who’s been forcing me and making my decisions for me.  

You’re the one making me lose everything, taking me back to the past and wanting to imprison me in it.

Why should I be a carbon copy of you, just barely alive?  
And become lost in this life.

[...][refrain]

Listen to me! [...refrain]

No! In one word I say to you:  
No! I won’t be a clone of your past!

No! We’re fed up of staying silent,  
No! I’m going to say this at the top of my lungs:

Listen to me!

We’re the generation that’s become grey-haired in their youth.  
Every dream brings more pain, and every footstep more agony.

We’ve carried the burden of life and tasted its bitterness for many years,  
And you still want us to live in humiliation.

No! We’re one of our generation,  
No! We’re saying this at the top of our lungs:

No! We’re fed up of staying silent,  
No! In one word I say to you:

No! I’m going to say this at the top of my lungs:

"Listen to me!" was released; by June 2016, it approached 7 million views on YouTube:


No, I will choose my own way. And I will stubbornly resist...

This is my time to shine!28

Look: I know Egypt, as intimately as I can see all of you before me here, and I also know the remedy for her [sc. Egypt], as well as I can see you before me here. And I say this to everyone listening to me in Egypt: If you please, do not listen to anybody’s words but mine! [5 sec. applause] We... [goes back to emphasize:] I’m utterly serious: don’t listen to anybody’s words but

Shoqaa: Aa外形 مصر زي ما أنا شايفكم كلمتى قدمى كده وعاجلاً وفجأة، ناقشوا عما يعجبكم في مصر: لَو كنت متمسكون بالكلام، بالكلام، بالكلام غيري، أنا رأجح ل بكذب ولا يهدد ولا ليا مصولة بلذي بش، [ تصفيق 5 ث] ومند بي لياصغلا تيرها [ sic ]، وقهان أنا يقول إنه، في البرنامج اللي انا خافكم فيه كان الهدف منه إنه: احنا لو نشرف شبانا قضية مصر الحقيقية من خلال برنامج مدة 8 شهور، يكنكن دراستكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكمّل دراساتكم وعليكم بكشفه ومعه بكلمة معرفته... لكن احنا النهارده حنقط مصر ولا ايه؟ أنا مش حاسمح بتلك.. بنكمّل دراستكم.. بنكمّل دراساتكم... بنكن
mine! I’m a man of my words; I don’t waver; and I have no other interest in mind than my country. My country alone! [5 sec. applause] And not only an interest other than her [sic]—I also have the right understanding of what I’m saying. The right understanding of what I’m saying! This programme that we are putting in place here was designed to let our young people (shabābānā), for the first time, know what Egypt’s true cause is, through an 8-month programme. We’re going to finalise the necessary studies and get a good grip on it… [Sisi pauses, and his focus visibly shifts] … but are we going to rip Egypt to pieces or what? I shall not tolerate this! Watch out! [4 sec. applause] Watch out! I shall not tolerate this! [Sisi’s voice and face take on an increasingly stern expression] No-one should think that my patience and my good nature mean that this country can fall. I swear to God: anyone who tries to trespass on her, I’ll erase him from the face of the earth! [17 sec. applause] I’m telling this to all of you, to every Egyptian listening to me… what do you think this is all about!? Do you want to… do you… Who are you anyhow? Who are you? …Ha! …No! …Here’s 90 million! [He raises his fist] And I am responsible before Our Lord in that I’ll stand before Him on Judgment Day to tell Him: ‘I took care of them’ [makes a gesture of an enclosure]. If you want to take care of them, with me: welcome! If you don’t, well, then please: shut up! [makes a decisive cut-off gesture] 30

The president positions himself as the omniscient leader who alone knows and can tell his countrymen how to run Egypt; an expert doctor who alone knows how to remedy what’s wrong with her. To listen to anybody else would make the country fall. I swear to God: anyone who tries to trespass on her, I’ll erase him from the face of the earth! [17 sec. applause] I’m telling this to all of you, to every Egyptian listening to me… what do you think this is all about!? Do you want to… do you… Who are you anyhow? Who are you? …Ha! …No! …Here’s 90 million! [He raises his fist] And I am responsible before Our Lord in that I’ll stand before Him on Judgment Day to tell Him: ‘I took care of them’ [makes a gesture of an enclosure]. If you want to take care of them, with me: welcome! If you don’t, well, then please: shut up! [makes a decisive cut-off gesture] 30

Egyptians, in the president’s vision, fall into two categories. Either they belong to the people—all the 90 million—who stand behind their leader and follow his word. Or else, they have no right to speak. They have no right to exist. 31

30 The translation and transcription here follow the text as recorded on the video; al-Maṣrī al-Yawm’s transcription is ‘smoothed’ a little, replacing a few colloquial expressions with Modern Standard Arabic, and omitting the passage “Who are you anyhow? Who are you? …Ha! …No! …Here’s 90 million!”

Sisi cares for Egypt. Sisi leads Egypt. Sisi is Egypt. Nothing else can be true. Anyone who disagrees will be mercilessly crushed by the mighty power of the President and His People.

Defiant hope; no illusions, but ire and persistence

It is no wonder that such an attitude makes it difficult to find “avenues of mutual understanding.” What is more striking is that many of the ‘nobodies’ threatened in no vague terms by Egypt’s strongman continue to raise their voice, right in the face of such threats. Two weeks after Sisi spurt out his “silence!” (uskūtū) command, the band Cairokee defiantly retorted: we are “voice when they want everyone to keep silent.” Cairokees’ “Voice of freedom” (“Ṣūt il-hurriyya”) had been one of the emblematic songs of the 2011 revolution; on 12 March 2016, they released their “Ākhir ughniyya,” their “Last song,” which quickly became a super-hit with over 1.2 million views on YouTube during the first three weeks alone.

“As long as there’s fear, we can’t be free,” is their starting point: lā hurriyya maʿ al-khawf. They have no illusions about the state of the nation. Fear is back in force; fear dominates. But as obstinately as the creator of the condom prank,33 the group repeats: “Even if this is my last song, I’ll go on to sing for freedom!” The song is worth reading and translating in full; for—as one of the top comments on YouTube put it—“this is not a song, but a revolutionary communiqué speaking for all our generation” (dī mish ughniyya, dī [...] bayān sawrī bi-`ism gilnā kulluh).44

Let me tell you something useful:

there are plenty of defects and traditions;

society is united against change;

---


33 Shady H. ABUZAIID on his Facebook wall, 26 Jan. 2016, <http://fb.com/shady.h.abuzaid/posts/10156462830755402>:

أيه ؟ قفشتوا ليه ؟ انا بهزر …

34 Cairoke: “Akher Oghneya,” CairokeOfficial, 12 March 2016. <http://youtu.be/TZu2euqj2Ge>. The comment is by Mohamed Hagag, <https://is.gd/3TsX7h>. The Arabic text is taken from the official YouTube site; the translation is mine, adapted from the official subtitles.
the way people think is sick, tired, and weak; come on, let’s look together for the one who’s benefitting from this!

The one who’s benefitting is the one who controls you, who’s moving you around, dictating you where to go, subjugating you. They’ve imprisoned you inside your own mind, behind the bars of your own fear.

You’re afraid to think freely ‘cause someone might catch you. I speak out not only against the system, I speak out against the slave mentality [lit. ‘the slaves’] [since otherwise,] even if the system collapses a thousand times, we’d still be stuck in the same place.

There are things, problems, there are traditions that turned into defects, there are habits that need to be changed! But history is repeating itself...

There’s a war against freedom, freedom’s always forbidden. All these retrograde minds, they are the ones being listened to. We’ve been raised to always think that the walls have ears. Alright, turn this music down, I want them to hear my full voice: If this is my last song, I’ll be singing about freedom.

Come on, sing along loudly: “Freedom!”

Freedom means change. It means freedom of thought and expression. Freedom means your choice, not someone else’s.

It’s a generational conflict, it’s so obvious, and we all know it. They want you to walk their path and not yours.

The old man wants to live in the past and control the present;
these guys remind me of the “Skenshizer” commercial.35
No matter what I say, they never listen to me
to them all my words are rubbish and must be banned.
Let me have a new dream, an extra-ordinary one:
I don’t want to be walking with a herd of sheep!
Our country is young, its majority are youth;
you killed their loyalty, you closed every door in their face.
We have so many dreams, give me a chance to drive;

If this is my last song,
I'll be singing about freedom.
Come on, sing along loudly:
"Freedom!"

Guess what—they say I’m afraid?!
Get out of the way, put on some lipstick36 :>:
I made a revolution inside me and it continues;
the dream lives on in me, and my voice is still free.
In every age I’ve been singing; I’ve been voice when they wanted
everyone to keep silent.
Freedom means sacrifice; it’s a real test, but I’m up to the chal-

This refers to a promotion video for Nestlé Crunch screened in Ramadan 2015 that plays on the genera-
tion gap and that gained great popularity in Egypt. It contrasts Crunch as a cool chocolate bar for the
young with ‘Skenshizer,’ an (imaginary) product old men are nostalgically rattling on about. See “Kay-

Cairekke were criticised for the male chauvinist tone of this line; they were quick to apologise, saying
that it was an expression common in the street (lughat shârî’), but that it was wrong to use it (May
Aâdâd, “Vidêdê: Ahad a’dî” Câirôkke’ ya’tadhîr ‘an ‘hutt aghmar shaflayîf’ fl ughniyyatîhîm al-akhîrâ:

JAIS • 16 (2016): 327-348
Our dreams I’ll never sell, nor the martyrs who fell; 
take me to your jail so I can see our youth; 
real men today live in jail.

هُيْرُ ما هِبِعُ أَحَلَامُنا وَالشِّهِيدُ الَّذِي سَقَتَهُ 
حُدُيْلَ عَلَى سَجَنَكَ خَلِيلُ اَشْوَفُ شَيْبَا 
الرِجَالَةَ مَا أَقَامَ فَيِنَ السَّحْوَ سَأْكَتَهُ 
لوُ ذِي اِخْرَافْي عِنْ تَأْيُكَ 
فَسَأْلُوا عَلَى خُضُوعٍ عَالِيٍّ 
حُريَّةُ

If this is my last song, 
I’ll be singing about freedom. 
Come on, sing along loudly: 
“Freedom!”

Where Sisi poses as the only legitimate voice of Egypt, Cairokee perform as the persistent voice of the young generation. Where Sisi portrays this generation as in need of his expert guidance, they insist that the old man’s prescriptions are perpetuating a sick society of sheep subjugated by fear. Imprisoned in their own slave mentality, Sisi’s followers are unable to see that this system only serves the dictator in power and his cronies. It is this mindset that needs to change; otherwise, no regime change can bring real progress. Therefore, the energy and enthusiasm of the young generation needs to be set free. Where Sisi imagines that 90 million are standing behind him, in reality, the majority of Egyptians are young people who feel that all doors have been shut in their face. Like Sisi, the young want their country to flourish; but it can only do so if the doors are opened, if freedom and self-responsibility replace sheepish fear and submissiveness. Sisi may threaten to bury the naysayers underground; but the seed of free minds lives on in many a heart, and is bound to bear fruit one day.

Cairokee filmed their video in selfie style; as commentators on YouTube noted, in the manner of Atfāl Shawārī (“Street Children”), a group of six young men who began to release a series of short satirical videos on Facebook in January 2016, all but a few filmed at night in one or other of Cairo’s streets, using only their voice and a mobile phone. Visually already, they represent culture from underground, springing up quickly and ready to run if necessary; relying only on themselves after all else has been taken from them. Their first video, “Barāʿīm al-Īmān” (“Buds of Faith”) poked fun at the old-fashioned and stagnant performance of religion on the state-run broadcast media.37 The title itself is a satirical comment contrasting the young freshness of the ‘buds’ promised to the audience with the old-fashioned and sapless reality of the actual performance that “has not changed in five centuries,” as one commentator on YouTube put it, and that therefore has lost all attraction for the young generation. The five-minute video strings together commonly used invocations and other religious phrases without making any textual changes, but using vocal exaggeration and facial expression to ridicule the way in which these texts are used by the state’s religious institutions. Atfāl Shawārī dared to tread treacherous ground here; their mocking of bigotry was denounced as blasphemy by many, as a mocking of religion itself. Undeterred, they continued to caricature the pervasive discourse of social conformism,

hypocrisy, and media crookedness. Increasingly, they broached political issues as well. In May, this proved too much for the regime. They were rounded up and put in custody after they had mocked the mentality of “those who worship the boots of the military” (ʿlabadat al-biyāḍa); branded the police as thugs (il-dâkhliyya baltaqiyyya); called on Sisi to show some self-respect and leave (irhal—the emblematic slogan raised against Mubārk in 2011); and affirmed that “the revolution continues”. The networked youth reacted by multiplying selfie shots under the hashtag #خدام_الفنون_تهرب ("the phone camera makes you tremble"), a theme taken up by Islām Gāwīsh in a cartoon titled, “No video, no photo, no drawing will make tremble anyone but the feeble and weak.”

Hushing which voice?

Truth be told, not everyone is as combative as the examples mentioned here; there are those who after a long fight feel exhausted and fed-up and just want to get out. And the voice of Sisi continues to loom large—though it is difficult to assess just how many Egyptians really do believe every word he says. But as visible on social media, it is clear that the regime is


39 Afāl Shawārī, “ʿAbadat al-biyāda,” YouTube, 2 May 2016. In September 2016, the four members of the group still in custody (the youngest one had been released on bail immediately, while the police never got hold of the sixth member) were released with conditions; all six are still awaiting possible trial on charges including the “subversion of the fundamental principles forming the basis of the state” (“Miṣr: al-Ifrāq an ‘anāsir ‘Afāl Shawārī’ alladhīna da’aw al-Sisi ‘li-l-istiqāla,” France 24, 13 Sep. 2016, <https://is.gd/FeGylm>; Ġāriq NAGM AL-DIN, “Miṣr: Ikhlās sabīl aṭfāq ‘Afāl Shawārī,’” al-’Arabi al-Jadīl, 7 Sep. 2016, <https://is.gd/AKOOhf>.


41 Witness prominent activist ‘Allī ʿABD AL-FATTĀH’s letter from prison at the fifth anniversary of the revolution: “The only words I can write are about losing my words. […] I have nothing to say: no hopes, no dreams, no fears, no warnings, no insights; nothing, absolutely nothing” (“I was terribly wrong” – writers look back at the Arab spring five years on,” The Guardian, 23 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/arab-spring-five-years-on-writers-look-back>). A similar attitude was also expressed by poet ʿAbd Mānṣūr Sāl-SMĀ (b. 1985) when I interviewed him in Cairo in January 2016 (cf. his poetry collection Kāfīr bi-bībī bīlādī, Ṭanṭā: Ṭanṭā Book House, 2013). At the end of the year, a young social media analyst and former (2011) revolutionary street fighter wrote in a public post, “‘Umniyyāt al-wahīda fl 2017 inn’ānā u-Maṣr nbīb ha’d” (“my only wish for 2017 is that Egypt and I part ways”) (ʿAbd El Rahman NADĪ on his Facebook wall, 31 Dec. 2016, <http://fb.com/ IbNady/posts/1450692274963499>).
and was still dominating the scene. Only one or two brave souls dared to call a spade a spade ("'Nuff crap!") though their voice remained a whisper rather than a whoop. Most of the audience were going “hush!”—but it was not unambiguous whether they were calling for silence to listen to Sisi (out of respect? or out of fear?), or rather meant to silence Sisi. Things had become a bit less clear and unanimously submissive as Egypt entered the year 2016. As the year progressed, dissent became louder. On 13 April 2016, Andeel republished this cartoon on his Twitter account, now using the straightforward hashtag #irhal, “get out,” after Sisi had shut down a man who wanted to comment on a talk the President had just delivered to what was styled as an “Egyptian family meeting” (liqāʿ al-usra al-misrīyya).44 Sisi’s “I didn’t give anyone permission to speak” (anā ma-ddētsh il-izn li-ḥadd yitkallīm) made headlines as many Egyptians, even prominent talk show hosts, criticized this ceasing of Egyptian sovereignty provided the rallying cause for the first open street not succeeding in suppressing creative dissent. Cartoonist Andeel had summed up the year following the military takeover by depicting a totally quiet Egyptian scene overshadowed by a huge speech bubble saying, “Shhhhhhhhhhh.”42 When asked what he would draw differently at the end of 2015, he reversed the direction of the “Shhhhhhhhhhh.”43 The domain of the citizenry had grown, while the bubble spaker—now visible as the president—had been brought down from the sky. Obviously, he had little to say but a load of crap, but he


JAIΣ • 16 (2016): 327-348
protests in the country in over a year. The April 6 Youth Movement issued a statement saying, “Let today be a new beginning. More important than slogans, parties, political shouting, is that we go down today and say I am here. I am still here and I have an opinion, a voice and worth. The January revolution still lives and its legacy is still within us, despite everything that has happened.”

Sisi’s demand that people should not listen to anyone but him now translated into his warning journalists not to be an echo chamber for social media, but to practice “responsible” journalism. His regime, however, faced not only the buds of a more assertive but also renewed challenges from a judiciary that for a while had been perceived as having fallen fully subservient to the executive, but that now delayed the implementation of the maritime border agreement with Saudi Arabia, and — more importantly — rescinded parts of the controversial protest law enacted by presidential decree in 2013 that had put many of the most outspoken revolutionary activists behind bars. The struggle for who may raise a voice in Egypt is far from over, and speaking out does not necessarily translate into actual


impact, but at year’s end, it appeared that Sisi’s insistence on being the only one listened to meets with growing assertiveness on the part of those who defend the right of free speech also for those who don’t agree.

In lieu of a conclusion

This article has explored voices on the question of ‘who has a voice’ in Egypt in 2016. It has stayed relatively close to the ‘event’ level and not attempted to reduce this snapshot to an in-depth analysis of arrays, codes, and broken codes in the Gumbrechtian spirit.50 Such an analysis must remain the subject of a future publication. Nevertheless, in lieu of a conclusion, I would like to offer some ideas on what appear to be organising principles in the material here presented, and draw some parallels to my fellow researchers’ work.

You vs. Us is one such principle, dividing a potentially multifaceted community into two polarised camps that end up both using this code, if conversely. It appears in the hashtag #Sisi_vs_Youth, in Sisi’s “Who are you anyhow? Here’s 90 million!” and in most any example quoted in this article. This code—which may be particularly apparent in the social media’s filter bubbles—is of course not new; it perpetuates the same attitude of exclusion from legitimate participation that was expressed in pop star ‘Alī al-Ḥāggār’s 2013 song “We are a people, and you are [another] people” and that provided the moral backdrop for the violent eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood.51 As we have seen, Sisi is still quick to use the same discourse of eradication and nullification when faced with opposition. Sisi’s “we” includes ‘his’ sons and daughters, ‘his’ children, those who constitute ‘our noble youth’: those who follow Sisi’s fatherly guidance. The young people who speak out against this attitude, on the other hand, position themselves as spokespeople for ‘the youth’ in general, for ‘our generation,’ who valiantly resist the slave mentality keeping society subservient to the tyrant dictator, and claim to be willing to offer their lives for this goal. They do not go so far as to sing of patricide, but they do present a rather one-dimensional image of the ‘fathers,’ of a retrograde older generation that seeks to perpetuate the past and to kill young people’s dreams and their future.

It is interesting to see, however, that this clear-cut “you vs. us,” which at first sight has a straightforward correlation with powerful patriarchal rule facing a handful of feeble underdogs, does point to an inverted power dimension, which we may comprehend as a collapsed code where the Nobody = Omnipotent. When Sisi warned journalists not to rely on the social media, he explained that this was a “very dangerous” thing since it was possible today, with only one or two ‘electronic brigades,’ to create a closed circle of false infor-


JAIS • 16 (2016): 327-348
mation amplified by ‘irresponsible’ journalists and thereby to spawn an issue out of nothing, undermining people’s sense of security, and splitting the nation.52 The ‘nobodies’ have to be crushed all the more relentlessly since they are, despite their small numbers, capable of disrupting all ‘our’ efforts, of destroying what the ‘90 million’ Egyptians are striving to achieve. This collapsed code can also be recognized in the revolutionaries’ self-portrayal as the ‘buds’ of a better future, the tiny ‘seed’ that is buried underground, but that is bound to blossom and bear fruit in the future.

These two pairs appear to me to be the most prominent ‘Gumbrechtian’ organising principles in the material I have presented here; especially so since they are shared across the lines of confrontation. It is tempting, however, to propose a few others as well; and the first one that comes to mind is the idea that Reality = a Joke (Satire), that what happens in Egypt can only be properly understood, and is bearable only, if taken as a form of dark humour.53 In the examples introduced here, this collapsed code appears specific to the ‘youth’ side of the spectrum; it should be interesting, however, to investigate this further by linking it to the proverbial Egyptian humour that is sometimes held to be an essential prerequisite in the ability of the people of this country to survive the relentless challenges of everyday life. In this regard, the view of reality as dark comedy relates to the broken code Ordinary Citizen = Hero explored by Elena Chiti.54 And this ordinary hero presupposes, one may say, a broken code Order = Chaos, which in turn contains the sub-sections Police = Criminals (“il-dākhliyya baltagiyya”; Shady ABUZAIĐ’s satirical Facebook comment, “do you plan to send over some plain-clothes informants as usual to abuse us and then say, ‘that was society’?”)55 and Care = Imprisonment. All this contributes to the dystopian view of the present that Chiti also describes and that, to close the circle, is only manageable through satire.

These broken codes elicit quite a bit of emotive energy, as broken codes in the Gumbrechtian sense are bound to do. It is, however, also possible to identify some codes that seem to function in a relatively uncontroversial manner, at least in the material I have investigated here. There is Courage vs. Fear: all actors claim to be brave, despite being weary of the dangers threatening on all sides (one may explore this as a broken code as well, however, where the open admission and declaration of being afraid is an act of courage).


53 This obviously inspires a lot of satirical cultural productions, whether on YouTube (the multitude of successors to Bāṣim Yūsuf), on Facebook (il-Waraqa is only one example shutdown !), on stage (Masraḥ Masr, criticized by some as superficial but hugely successful also via its multiplication via MBC TV [<https://is.gd/Ifnset>] and social media; cf. Husām KAMĀL, “Masraḥ Masr… al-dīh li-l-dīh,” al-ʿArabī al-Jadīd, 21 Jan. 2016, <https://is.gd/zGmZa>), or in print as adab sākhir (cf. Richard JACQUEMOND, “Satiric Literature and Other ‘ Popular’ Literary Genres in Egypt Today,” in this dossier special).

54 Elena CHITI, “‘A Dark Comedy’: Perceptions of the Egyptian Present between Reality and Fiction,” in this dossier special.

55 See footnotes 39 and 17.
The old Male vs. Female stereotypes not only sneak in through Cairokee’s lipstick line. The equation of activeness with the male is positively affirmed in the group’s singing the praise of “real men;” it also remains visible in the condom prank. And the reactions to Atfāl Shawārī’s videos suggest that Piety vs. Blasphemy continues to be an influential code also among large sections of the youth. 56

The most prominent array (an artefact, a role, or an activity that influences bodies) in the material collected here would seem to be Prison—the ever-expanding place where Sisi shuts away all elements threatening his nation-building project; the practical joke played on those he purports to embrace; the abode of a whole generation; the realm where “real men” live today. Thugs (baltagiyya, see above) play a supportive role in this context. And both the Screen World of YouTube and Facebook videos, and Music (hip-hop and other) certainly have an effect on Egyptian bodies in 2016, though this is not directly documentable in the present article. Perhaps it is the Voice, the activity of Speaking Up, of trying to have an impact through sermon or satire, that itself constitutes a characteristic array of this year?

© Albrecht Hofheinz, Dept. of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS),
University of Oslo, Norway ◄ albrecht.hofheinz@ikos.uio.no ►

56 Cf. the comments to Atfāl Shawārī’s video “Barī‘im al-īmān” (see footnote 37), many of which express disgust, often conveying the opinion, ‘I used to like your videos, but this blasphemous stuff is not acceptable.’