



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

When political humour lands in troubled waters



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RAMISA ROB

Political humour, in the form of satires and parody, in writing, cartoons and network shows, has existed since politics itself but has also historically received a lot of pushback. The craft of using humour, exaggerations and irony to lampoon and criticise cultural mores, public figures, governance, etc functions as a fabled bellwether for positive change. It has always been a tricky form of journalism and activism for obvious reasons: it pokes the powerful. The “job” of the craft is to discomfit the powers that be, but it has landed in troubled waters – in legal cases all over the world – when it has done the job and rubbed the powerful the wrong way. But every time political humour comes under attack, so does the framework of freedom of speech and the distinct sensitivities of who can mock what.

The US is a good case study to understand the legal rights of humour in public discourse. A landmark decision 60 years ago set the precedent to protect satires and parodies as free speech. The Supreme Court of the United States passed a landmark ruling in 1964, *New York Times* vs Sullivan, which deterred the powerful from using defamation lawsuits to intimidate and silence public discourse. The ruling essentially upheld that the First Amendment – freedom of speech – is more important than replenishing the reputation of public figures, and that “debate on public issues should be inhibited, robust, and wide-open.”

In 1988, another landmark case, *Hustler Magazine* vs Falwell, the court evoked the Sullivan decision and sided with the magazine that published a parody advertisement portraying a nationally known minister. The court upheld that parodies of public figures, even those intending to cause emotional distress, are protected by the First Amendment.

Recently, the Sullivan decision received numerous bids for overruling as bids for silencing non-Republican commentary rose in the US. Former President Donald Trump – who did not attend his goodbye dinner where media elites and comedians roast the president and is yet to admit he lost a fair election – publicly attacked the Sullivan decision and sued CNN for defamation seeking \$475 million. As recent as February 2023, Florida state legislator Alex Andrade filed a bill to effectively overturn Sullivan. The Republican politicians who have been against the legal protection of political jokes are, unsurprisingly, ones who have supported various conservative decisions in the US.

Logically, more often than not,

it is corrupt governments and authoritarian nations who have issues with political humour, because they don't want to be called out; they want to dictate without some wisecrack nudging their official authority. The relationship between authoritarianism and political satirists and comedians have a lengthy history of incompatibility.

Take Vladimir Putin, for example, who banned the makers of South Park figurines, Lego characters and teddy bears which were the centre of the toys-only, humour-driven anti-Putin protest in Siberia. After that, Putin imposed a ban on toy protests. And even in 2021, Idrak Mirzalizade,

In the 1940s, underground humour inspired resistance movements in Nazi-occupied territories. In today's age, there's a reason why there's a well-researched phenomena called the “Daily Show effect.” People, particularly young people, take more interest in politics when it comes with a punch, rather than straight-faced journalism. And that is why political jokes pose the most formidable threat to those who don't want their power shaken, their public duties questioned.

a Moscow-based Azerbaijani comedian, was sent to prison for 10 days and banned from Russia for life after pro-government media outlets distorted the harmless joke he made about discrimination against non-Russians – during his appearance on popular TV show *Razgony* – to one that incites hatred.

Another recent and popular example is Hasan Minhaj's Saudi Arabia episode on his show *Patriot Act* in 2019, where he mocked Prince Mohammed bin Salman's effort to cast himself as a moderniser, and called him out for the murder of the columnist Jamal Khashoggi and the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, where comedians and journalists face pervasive censorship, invoked a vague cybercrime law to request Netflix to take the episode down.

(And Netflix did, in a scrutinised market decision, that legitimised Saudi's censorship.)

The point is, of course, Saudi Arabia had a problem with Minhaj's episode. Comedy is no laughing matter for repressive regimes. Arab countries have laws that criminalise offences to heads of state, the army, public institutions, for disavowing national and religious values. In these nations, journalists and entertainers, when taking a jab at the powerful, have historically been punished for broad crimes like tarnishing the country's reputation, offending public morals, inciting unrest or shaking the foundations of national security. In Egypt, widely popular comedian Bassem Youssef – inspired by Jon Stewart – was harassed, taken to court for mocking the Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, and is now in exile.

More examples are being painted now, with authoritarian governments on the rise; journalists and comedians in Turkey, India and so on have recently faced lawsuits. Even Rahul Gandhi, the vocal opposition leader in India, was hit with a harsh sentence in a defamation case for a joke he made years ago. Yet, the whole point of political humour is to prick where it hits, to make us laugh at our own foibles and weaknesses. In journalistic practices, when directed at individuals in power, satire's purpose constitutes the very yardstick of journalism: to make the afflicted comfortable and the comfortable afflicted.

And historically, humour as a political tool has worked to electrify anti-state public sentiments, which perhaps is all the more reason for authoritarian governments to attack it. In Syria, during the civil war that has taken 70,000 lives, satirical graffiti mocking President Bashar Assad exhilarated street protests. Even in the 1940s, underground humour inspired resistance movements in Nazi-occupied territories. In today's age, there's a reason why there's a well-researched phenomena called the “Daily Show effect.” People, particularly young people, take more interest in politics when it comes with a punch, rather than straight-faced journalism. And that is why political jokes pose the most formidable threat to those who don't want their power shaken, their public duties questioned.

But humour is necessary for the political arena itself. It builds resilience through absurdity; it takes a sense of security and comfort in our skin to accept reality checks ensconced in leg pull without taking offence. We don't always like it when people make fun of what we do or how we are. And that's fair and human. But as public figures, and even as journalists, when you do your work for the public, you sign up for public criticism, for a quip and a roast now and then. When we can endure the targeted humour – even the pettiest of jokes – it signals a more ethereal power, reverberating the hush of dignity and establishing our thick skin as individuals and as a society.

Steps the government should take for Eid travellers



Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury is secretary general at Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity.

MOZAMMEL HOQUE CHOWDHURY

The upcoming national election means that the travelling woes for homeward bound people this Eid-ul-Azha will be tied to the government's image issue. Therefore, the government is expected to take the necessary steps to reduce the passengers' sufferings and the fare-related anarchy that is usually rampant in our transport sector during Eid rush.

According to a survey by the Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity (BJKS), more than 11 million people from Dhaka, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Gazipur and the nearby districts will travel to different parts of the country this Eid. In addition, almost four million people are expected to travel between different districts. Even though Eid travels started from June 22, the main travelling flow is expected to begin on June 26, after salaries and bonuses are disbursed to jobholders. On June 26-27, it's expected that 3-3.5 million people on average will leave the capital every day. The government's decision of close garments and other factories for the holidays in stages was easier to

pressure from public transport, it will increase the risk of road accidents and loss of lives.

People in the northern regions of the country may suffer the most during Eid travels this year. People travelling along the road between Dhaka airport and Gazipur, up to the other side of the Bangabandhu Bridge, may have to suffer quite a lot due to cattle-carrying trucks and roadside cattle markets, which will lead to terrible traffic at various exit points and leave the travellers to wait hours on end trying to leave the capital. It is imperative that all the pavements and roads in the capital be cleared of hawkers, illegal parking and cattle markets. Smaller vehicles such as rickshaws, battery-run rickshaws, and easy bikes should be barred from highways.

Having observed the trends in Eid travelling over the last few years, we have seen different wings of the police work tirelessly to keep the roads and highways flowing smoothly. But some dishonest members of the law enforcement agencies and extortion

vehicles being deployed with a fresh coat of paint to make them look new. Unfit water vehicles are repaired in the dockyards. Some dishonest transport owners find a way to cheat the system and run these vehicles during Eid travels to carry both passengers and cargo. When these vehicles get into accidents, investigation shows that they do not have any fitness clearances, the drivers don't have licences, or there are no route permits.

Even on the waterways, it is a common sight that vehicles without enough buoys, lamps, and other life-saving equipment are handed over to unskilled boatmen with the responsibility of transporting thousands of passengers. There has been a lack of skilled drivers on the roads as well. As a result, during the Eid seasons, drivers are often required to undertake shifts of 10, 15 or even 20 hours non-stop. Unskilled drivers driving unfit vehicles results in the deaths of hundreds of passengers during Eid every year. According to observations made by the BJKS, during Eid-ul-Azha in 2022, 398 people died and 774 were injured in 319 road accidents.

Online train tickets have resulted in railway passengers being placed in a bit of a hassle this Eid. As in the past, initiatives to help people may be hindered by black marketers and syndicates of dishonest railway employees. Due to 100 percent of the tickets being available online, a large section of marginalised people will remain deprived of railway services.



More than 11 million people from Dhaka, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Gazipur and nearby districts will travel to different parts of the country this Eid. PHOTO: ABU BAKAR SIDDIQUE

implement during Eid-ul-Fitr than it will be for Eid-ul-Azha.

Our public transportation system has the capacity to carry 800,000 to a million passengers by road and waterways, and another 120,000 via railway. However, if more passengers are loaded than the available capacity, it results in terrible suffering for the general public. In certain routes, there are 8-10 times more passengers than the capacity for public transportation that is available. These routes are mired by traffic and human congestion.

The major challenges in this year's Eid travels are going to be traffic jams, road accidents, slow pace of toll collection, low velocity of cattle-carrying vehicles, and cattle markets and pop-up markets on the roadside. Hence, if the smooth flow of public transportation is hindered, then we might see hellish conditions on the roads this Eid.

Our public transportation sector has been going through a terrible crisis for many years. Like Eid-ul-Fitr, 800,000 to a million bikers may carry almost 1.6 million passengers by motorcycle to their destinations this Eid. While this may alleviate some

by a few transport leaders often rub the sheen off the hard work of many. Besides, the practice of analogue toll collection in today's “Digital Bangladesh” creates choke points at toll collection booths, creating horrific tailbacks, which often get as long as 10-20 kilometres. These are easily fixable problems that merely require the relevant authorities to be willing to find solutions.

There are some dishonest transport owners and drivers who leverage the excessive pressure of passengers and transportation crisis to make extra profits. The weakness of government regulatory agencies, with the “endorsement” of some law enforcement members, allows for this to happen. Some symbolic measures are taken against them in the form of mobile courts, but that does not do much in preventing the collection of excessive fares. Thus, in many cases, there may be attempts to charge double of triple the amount of regular fare from passengers during Eid. To establish the rule of law and to help the general public, tough measures need to be taken to stop the collection of extra fares during Eid travels.

Every year during Eid, we see unfit

Taking this matter into consideration, it is important that necessary measures are eventually taken to include marginalised people into the public transport services provided by the state.

Every year during Eid, we see travel agencies hoard tickets for internal flight routes and sell them to passengers at hiked prices. The same has been happening this year. During Eid, between 100,000 and 200,000 passengers travel by air. For the benefit of these passengers, the director of the national consumer rights protection and district administrations should be conducting mobile court drives.

With the rising prices of commodities and an unemployment crisis, Eid travellers this year will be massively affected by hijackers and commens. These incidents are enough to ruin Eid celebrations for anyone. Thus, it is important for law enforcement members to be on alert at bus and train stations and river ports. Steps should be taken to stop robberies and theft on the highways as well.

Translated from Bangla by Azmin Azran.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Canceled

5 Honolulu hello

10 Eat away

12 Trig functions

13 Mill powerers

15 Seriesending abbr.

16 Singer Charles

17 Tiny

18 Prepare, as leftovers

20 Gasp for air

21 “Divine Comedy” writer

22 Looks over

23 Was bold

25 Dorothy's dog

28 Pop

31 “There ought to be —”

32 Steamy

34 Passport, license, etc.

35 Commotion

36 Greek vowel

37 Diving and kayaking, e.g.

40 Deal maker

41 Red as —

42 Bookish group

43 Ticked off

DOWN

1 More original

2 Made speeches

3 “You fell for it!”

4 Keats work

5 Pallid

6 Tell tales

7 Words on an arrow

8 Moon of Saturn

9 Useful skills

11 Book goofs

14 Slosly sleep spots

19 Supply with funds

20 Director Almodovar

24 Moon of Jupiter

25 Asian island

26 Geriatrics topic

27 Winery worker

29 Sound system

30 Affected laugh

33 Social group

35 Fine study

38 Close

39 Dict. label on an old word

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

S	C	O	T		S	T	A	I	R	
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