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Mahmud Farjami

Political Satire as an Index of Press Freedom: A Review of Political Satire in the Iranian Press during the 2000s

Political satire has had a prominent part to play in the social and political sphere of journalism in Iran since the appearance of an independent press in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century. This paper examines the problems of political satire in the Iranian press during the 2000s with respect to their historical context during the past century. The paper argues that, addressing the essential relationship between satire and criticism, and the primary role that criticism has in the freedom of press, what happened to political satire and satirists in Iran can be seen as an index of the freedom of the press and journalistic expression for an era.

The appearance of political satire in the Iranian press came fast on the heels of Iranians becoming familiar with modern concepts of “politics” and the concept of “the press” itself. In just three years after the Department of Censorship (Edareye Sansour) was established by Etamad Al-Saltaneh (1843–96) by the order of Nasereddin Shah in February of 1885 to maintain tight control over all publications inside the country as well as those delivered from outside, one newspaper with a wholly satirical content was registered with the government. *Shahsavān*, a Persian magazine, was published in Istanbul in 1306/1888 and secretly posted to subscribers in Iran.¹

But political satire first officially appeared in the Iranian press during Mozafareddin Shah Qajar’s reign (1896–1907) when the first non-state papers were permitted to be published. However, as Aryanpour points out, effective political satire in the Iranian press was only published after the early twentieth century, particularly under the influence of *Molla Nasreddin*, a satirical political and social weekly written in Azeri Turkish, published from 1906 until 1917 in Tbilisi, in 1921 in Tabriz, and from

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¹Edward G. Browne, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia*, (Cambridge, 1983), 106.

1922 to 1931 in Baku.² Although political satire was a very modern phenomenon along with the modern concept of “politics” itself, very soon political satirists took on an important role in creating political awareness and promoting the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–7. Some of the most prominent and effective journalists and activists of that era, like Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, Seyed Ashrafeddin Hosseini Qazvini (also known as Ashraf Gilani), Adib-ol Mamalek-e Farahani (Amiri), Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, and Mirza Malkam Khan chose satire to convey their political messages to audiences, in prose and verse. Furthermore, by this time there were several Persian newspapers with wholly satirical content (text and caricature) such as *Tolu-e Mosavar*, *Azərbaycan*, *Shabnameh*, *Hasharat-ol Arz*, *Estebdad*, *Bohloul*, *Jangal-e Mowla*, *Jarchi-ye Mellat*, and *Sheida*, and *Nasim-e Shomal* which critiqued political and social issues.³

Sur-e Esrafil, a serious newspaper with some satirical content, was one of the most popular, perhaps the most popular, newspaper of the time.⁴ Its success was due chiefly to Dehkhoda’s caustic and satirical column “Charand-o Parand” (Balderdash). Without indulging in the invective and personal attacks characteristic of other columnists, Dehkhoda was able to deflate the court and the conservative clergy with his lively wit. *Nasim-e Shomal* (Northern Breeze) was one of the most influential satirical newspapers, publishing political verses almost always written by its publisher, Seyed Ashrafeddin Qazvini.

Both Dehkhoda and Qazvini were influenced particularly by Jalil Mohammad Qolizadeh and Ali Akbar Saber, two prominent satirists of *Molla Nasreddin*.⁵ Most of these newspapers, except *Nasim-e Shomal*, disappeared before the beginning of the First World War (1914).

From this time until the beginning of Reza Shah’s reign in 1925, political satire existed in the press, though there were fewer satirical newspapers than before. Particularly after the coup in 1921 that elevated Reza Khan to Sardar Sepah (commander of army) and then prime minister, criticism became increasingly difficult and dangerous, but still some of the most influential political critique was published in the form of satire. The most controversial subject was Reza Khan’s idea for replacing the monarchy with a republic, which had both strong advocates and opponents. *Nasim-e Saba*, published by Hossein Kuhi-ye Kermani, which supported the monarchy, and *Nahid*,

²Yahya Aryanpour, *Az Saba Ta Nima* [From Saba to Nima] (Tehran, 2008) 2: 39–105. Kasravi also points out how *Molla Nasreddin* was particularly influential, for its editorial opinion was cloaked in verse and easily understood humorous anecdotes (Ahmad Kasravi, *Mashruteh* (Tehran, 2007) 3: 194).

³Hassan Javadi, *Tarikh-e Tanz Dar Adabiyat-e Farsi* [Satire in Persian literature] (Tehran, 2005), 195–9.

⁴“It [Sur-e Esrafil] is reckoned one of the best of the Persian papers, old and new, and in particular the comic or satirical portion, entitled *Charand Parand* (‘Charivari’), is the best specimen of literary satire in Persian.” Edward G. Browne, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* (Cambridge, 1983), 116.

⁵See Aryanpour, *Az Saba Ta Nima*, 2: 39–105, for a comparison between some Turkish prose and verse in *Molla Nasreddin* and similar prose and verse in Persian in *Sur-e Esrafil* and *Nasim-e Shomal* that show the deep influence of *Molla Nasreddin* on Iranian newspapers.

published by Mirza Ebrahim Nahid, which supported the republic, were two of the most famous papers battling via satire.

Some believe the piece that fostered the most negative public opinion about Reza Kahn's "republic" was a satirical long-form poem, *Jomhuri Nameh* (Letter of Republic), published under the name of a well-known liberal poet, Mirzadeh Eshqi, in the spring of 1924, a few months before Reza Khan left the idea of the republic behind.⁶ Eshqi harshly satirized him and the republic in prose, verse and caricature in his newspaper, *Qarn-e Bistom* (Twentieth Century) and was found murdered a few days later, on 3 July 1924.

Political satire or criticism was rarely published in the Iranian press during the reign of Reza Shah (1925–41) and the few publications in print like *Arjang*, *Nasim-e Shomal*, *Gol-e Zard*, and *Nabid* kept away from oppositional political journalism.⁷

With the occupation of Iran by the Allies in the summer of 1941, Reza Shah was replaced by his young son, Mohammad Reza. In the political chaos of the young king's rule, freedom of the press flourished and continued in differing degrees for more than a decade. Elwell-Sutton's study of the Iranian press in the years after the occupation, 1941–47, shows that the number of press outlets suddenly rose from around fifty to 464 and that nine of these were fully or partly satirical.⁸ Among them were new publications like *Hardambil*, *Baba Shamal*, *Qalandar*, and *Yoyo*, while others had published previously with interruptions. In addition *Chelengar*, *Haji Baba*, *Luti*, *Shab Cheragh*, *Nushkhand*, and *Dad-o-Bidad* were published from 1948 to 1953. *Chelengar*, established by Mohammad Ali Afrashteh in 1951, was the most prominent political journal of the era. Being banned after twelve issues, it was continued under other names (*Jajrud*, *Shabcheragh*, *Rangin Kaman*, *Arzesh-e Kar*) until the coup in June 1953.

Iran's freedom of the press was severely curtailed after the coup against Prime Minister Masaddeq in August 1953, and did not recover until the end of the shah's reign at the start of 1979. But political satire was still a presence in the Iranian press, with even better quality, especially in the weekly, *Towfiq*, which was banned after the 1953 coup.⁹ Published in a new incarnation in the spring of 1958 by members of the foun-

⁶See Mohammad Ghaed, *Eshqi: Simaye Najib-e Yek Anarshist* [Eshqi: the portrait of a noble anarchist] (Tehran, 2001). Ghaed believes this prominent poem cannot have been written by Eshqi alone, and probably Mohammad Taqi Bahar, the then well-known poet and MP, helped him or maybe wrote the whole of *Jomhuri Nameh*, but it was published under the name of Eshqi with his agreement.

⁷Hassan Javadi, *Tarikh-e Tanz Dar Adabiyat-e Farsi* [Satire in Persian literature] (Tehran, 2005), 204–5.

⁸L.P. Elwell-Sutton, "The Iranian Press, 1941–1947," *Iran* 6 (1968): 65–104.

⁹*Towfiq* was published for the first time in Tehran by Hossein Towfiq, in 1922. In 1933, *Towfiq* celebrated twelfth anniversary of its publication. *Towfiq* appeared without any interruption until the death of its manager, in February 1940. The license of the newspaper was then transferred to Hossein Towfiq's son, Mohammad Ali (Mohammad Sadr Hashemi, *Tarikh-e Jarayed va Majallat-e Iran* [The history of the press in Iran] (Esfahan, 1949), 2: 144–7). Following the coup in 1953, Mohammad Ali Towfiq was arrested and the newspaper was closed down. After a while, the license of *Towfiq* was transferred to Mohammad Ali's three nephews, Hassan, Hossein, and Abbas Towfiq (the Towfiq brothers), who published it in 1959.

der's family known as the Towfiq Brothers (Hassan, Hossein, and Abbas), the newspaper soon again became popular and attracted a roster of the best and brightest satirists and cartoonists, including Abolqasem Halat, Abbas Forat, Iraj Pezeshkzad, Parviz Khatibi, and young writers who became famous later like Manouchehr Mahjoubi, Hadi Khorsandi, Omran Salahi, Manouchehr Ehterami, and Kiumars Saberi Foumani, as well as cartoonists Kambiz Derambakhsh and Naser Pakshir (along with Hassan Towfiq who drew most of the cartoons for *Towfiq*). In 1971, when *Towfiq* was banned—probably by the order of Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda,¹⁰ who was the most common target of *Towfiq's* political satire—*Towfiq* was the most famous and important satirical newspaper in Iran, and its few competitors, such as *Kashkiyat* (the satirical supplement of the weekly *Tehran Mosavar*) and *Caricature*, never could attain its circulation and popularity.

Following the 1979 Revolution in Iran, a rare opportunity for freedom of the press was provided, commonly referred to as *Bahar-e Azadi* (The Spring of Freedom), during which the satirical press flourished, too. Roya Sadr lists more than thirty satirical journals which began publication between March and September of 1979, when the first wave of press closures occurred.¹¹ Among them were revived journals from the past such as *Haji Baba*, *Bohlul*, and *Chelengar*, which were now being published again. *Chelengar*, which was renamed *Ahangar* after a few issues,¹² edited by Manouchehr Mahjoubi, became the most famous satirical magazine of the time, reaching a circulation of 150,000 copies.¹³

Satirical columns in serious newspapers were also popular, particularly Hadi Khorsandi's column in the daily, *Kayhan*, which appeared on 10 March 1979, less than a month after the Revolution. Faced with protests and attacks, the column soon stopped and Khorsandi left Iran.¹⁴

Ahangar was the first casualty of the new press law after the Revolution, and was closed down just one day after Prime Minister Bazargan's interim government announced a press law on 7 August 1979. There were then several attacks on the independent publications and finally all satirical papers were closed down by 1981, one year after beginning of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). From the beginning of 1980 some of Iran's most prominent political satirists went into exile, publishing Persian political satire overseas, such as *Asghar Agha* by Hadi Khorsandi and *Ahangar* by Manouchehr Mahjoubi in London, and *Haji Baba* by Parviz Khatibi in New York. Most published irregularly and stopped after only a few years, except for *Asghar Agha*.

¹⁰Hossein and Abbas Towfiq, interviews with the author in 2009, and Farideh Towfiq, *Ruznameh-ye Towfiq va Kaka Towfiq* [Towfiq newspaper and Kaka Towfiq] (Tehran, 2005), 191–6.

¹¹Roya Sadr, *Bardasht-e Akbar: Negahi Beh Tanz-e Emruz-e Iran* [The last take: a review of recent satire of Iran] (Tehran, 2006), 30–163.

¹²Both names mean blacksmith. The reason for changing the name was protests by Afrashteh's family, against what they regarded as "abuse" of Chelengar and Afrashteh's name. Mohammad Ali Afrashteh, the publisher of *Chelengar* had died in 1959 in exile in Sofia, Bulgaria.

¹³Roya Sadr, *Bardasht-e Akbar: Negahi Beh Tanz-e Emruz-e Iran* [The last take: a review of recent satire of Iran] (Tehran, 2006), 48.

¹⁴Hadi Khorsandi, *The Ayatollah and I* (London, 1987), ii.

The monthly *Towfiqiyun* (the Towfiqians), renamed *Fokabiyun* (Humorists) after a few issues,¹⁵ was the first satirical journal to appear after the big press closures of the early 1980s. It published from the winter of 1983 until 1990 and avoided political satire, particularly internal issues during the wartime. Another satirical monthly, *Khorjin* (Carpetbag), was first published as a supplement of the monthly *Keshavarz* (Farmer) in January 1986 and became a separate magazine from issue 27, after nearly two years.

Around the same time, political satire also appeared in the daily *Ettela'at*, one of the state newspapers. It was "Do Kalameh Harf-e Hesab" (A Couple of Sensible Words), a satirical social political column written by "Gol Agha" that began on 13 January 1985. Gol Agha was the pseudonym of Kiumars Saberi, and his satire soon became popular. Saberi later used the pseudonym for a satirical weekly for which he got the license in 1990. In general, however, political satire in the Iranian press was very limited until the end of 1980s.

By the start of the 1990s; marking one year since the end of the war and a few months after the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, few licenses for satirical publications were being issued. The weekly *Gol Agha* and the periodical *Tanz Va Caricature* were launched in 1991, and then the satirical papers *Javald uz*, *Derang*, *Kayhan Caricature*, *Tanz-e Farsi*, *Donya-ye Tanz*, and *Molavvan* got licenses to publish in the 1990s, though *Javalduz* was closed down after twelve issues, *Derang* after two issues in 1991 and *Molavvan* after forty issues in 1994.

Gol Agha not only was the most prominent and popular satirical newspaper of the entire decade but also an institute for training a younger generation in satire, some of whom became the best satirists and cartoonists in the coming years.

Mohammad Khatami's victory in the 1997 presidential election marked the beginning of what came to be known as *Bahar-e Matbou'at* (the Press Spring), one of the best eras for a free press in Iran that ended with the vast closure of publications in the spring of 2000. In these years, discussed in more detail below, political satire flourished and became more reckless and radical whether in form or content, particularly in satirical columns in reformist newspapers.

This survey includes examples of political satire published in the legal print media of Iran under license from the state during the 2000s along with additional examination of alternatives such as cyber media. Also any analytical survey of political satire necessitates discussion of the legal issues surrounding journalism in Iran.

Freedom of the Press in the 2000s

On one night of April 2000, similar official letters from the judiciary were delivered to more than ten publishers of popular newspapers and magazines informing them that

¹⁵In an interview with the author, the publisher and editor in chief of *Fokabiyoun*, Abolqasem Sadeqi, said he had to change the name of the journal from *Tofiqiyoun* to *Fokabiyoun* under pressure of some officials. See Mahmud Farjami, "Sotoun-e Panjom! Tanz-e Matbou'ati Ba'd Az Enqelab-e Eslami" [Fifth column! Satire in the press after the Islamic Revolution], *Kheradnameh* no. 20 (November 2007): 36–7.

their publications had been banned. Within two weeks, sixteen publications had been banned “until further notice” by Judge Saeed Mortazavi.¹⁶

A few days prior to this big closure in April 2000, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had said that some newspapers had become “enemy bases,” and “10 or 15 newspapers” appeared “to be directed from the same centre,” with the aim of “making the people pessimistic about the system.” He had described this as “journalistic charlatanism,” which did not exist even in the West.¹⁷

This was one of several threatening proclamations by Ayatollah Khamenei against the reformist press which had proliferated since 1997. President Khatami’s first year in office saw the number of publications in Iran rise to more than 850, with total circulation exceeding 2 million copies a day.¹⁸ By May 1999, the number of newspapers in the country had reached 930 with a total circulation of 2.7 million copies.¹⁹

During this period, Ayatollah Khamenei himself repeatedly warned against a “cultural offensive by the West.” Meanwhile, the judiciary, whose head had been appointed by the supreme leader, closed down reformist popular presses like *Jameah*, *Bonyad*, *Tous*, *Neshat*, and *Salam* and imprisoned some famous reformist journalists like the publisher Mohammad Reza Jalaeipour, the editor Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, and the satirist Seyed Ebrahim Nabavi (most were released on bail after a while).

Nevertheless, this was the first time since the 1979 Revolution that the press had the freedom to “not only criticize the President frequently, but also the Supreme Leader.”²⁰

By the second term of the Khatami presidency in 2001, although the reformists were dominant in the government and held a majority in Majles (until early 2004), more than a hundred publications were closed down through judiciary’s edict following repeated warnings by Ayatollah Khamenei, usually with no trials, and several hundred journalists became jobless. According to official reports, while between the fifth and the seventh Press Festivals (April 1998–August 2000), a total of thirty-two newspapers had been closed down, and 1,450 journalists and other members of staff had lost their jobs, by May 2001, the eighth Press Festival, twenty-three more

¹⁶ Association of Iranian Journalists, *Daqdaqeh-ye Azadi* [Angst for freedom] (Tehran, 2003), 201–2.

¹⁷ *Matn-e Kamel-e Bayanat-e Maqam-e Moazzam-e Rahbari Dar Didar Ba Javanan Dar Mosalla-ye Bozorg-e Tebran* [The full text of the Supreme Leader’s speech in meeting with youth in the Great Musalla of Tehran], April 20, 2000, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=bayanat&cid=1897> (accessed October 29, 2012). Hossein Shahidi, “From Mission to Profession: Journalism in Iran, 1979–2004,” *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 1–28.

¹⁸ Kazem Mo’tamednezhad, “Barresi-Ye Sharayete Pishraft-E Nashriyat-E Mostaqel Va Kesrat-Gera” [a review of the conditions for the development of independent and pluralistic publications], in *Majmou’eh Maqalat-e Dovomin Seminar-e Barresi-ye Masa’el-e Matbou’at-e Iran* [Collection of articles presented at the second seminar to review the problems of the Iranian press] (Tehran, 1998).

¹⁹ *Ketab-e Jashnavareh-ye Sheshom-e Matbou’at* [The book of the Sixth Press Festival], 60, quoted in Hossein Shahidi, “From Mission to Profession: Journalism in Iran, 1979–2004,” *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 1–28.

²⁰ Mehdi Mohsenian-Rad, *Rasaneh Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 136–9.

newspapers had been closed down. Seventeen journalists had also been imprisoned, although some of them were later released.²¹ Also annual reports of Reporters Without Borders on their website shows from April 2000 to April 2001 more than fifty publications (including twenty-four daily newspapers) were closed down in Iran.²² This situation even became worse when Mahmud Ahmadinejad became the next president in 2005 and appointed Hossein Saffar Harandi, the deputy editor of *Kayhan*, and also a former officer of Sepah Pasdaran (Islamic Revolution Guards Corps), as minister of culture and Islamic guidance, the organization which issues licenses to publishers and supervises the press.

The decade ended with the presidential election on 12 June 2009, when Mr Ahmadinezhad was officially declared the winner, followed by huge protests against the result and their bloody suppression, the greatest national political upheaval since the 1979 Revolution. A few days after the election, a new repression of the media was underway through increased press closures and rampant arrests of journalist. On 7 July 2009, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) described Iran as the world's top jailer of journalists, with at least thirty journalists in prison.²³ Freedom House, in its annual report of 2009, named Iran as one of the worst places for journalists and press freedom with a rank of 181 among 195 countries,²⁴ and in the 2009 Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index Iran ranked only above Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan.²⁵

From June 2009 to the end of year, more than ten papers were closed down,²⁶ tens of journalists were arrested, and the Association of Iranian Journalists (AOIJ) was banned on the same day as Ahmadinezhad's inauguration at the Majles.²⁷ On 3 February 2010, CPJ reported "Iranian authorities are now holding at least 47 journalists in prison, more than any single country has imprisoned since 1996."²⁸

²¹For more details and statistics until 2004 see Hossein Shahidi, "From Mission to Profession: Journalism in Iran, 1979–2004," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 1–28.

²²Reporters Without Borders, "Iran Annual Report 2002," http://en.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=1438 (accessed October 30, 2012).

²³Committee to Protect Journalists' website, "Iran Is World's Top Jailer of Journalists," <http://www.cpj.org/2009/07/iran-is-worlds-top-jailer-of-journalists.php> (accessed October 5, 2012).

²⁴Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press 2009 Survey," http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fop/2009/FreedomofthePress2009_tables.pdf (accessed October 5, 2012).

²⁵Reporters Without Borders, "World Press Freedom Index 2009—The Rankings," http://en.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/classement_en.pdf (accessed October 17, 2012).

²⁶Some *Kalameh-ye Sabz*, *Etemad Melli*, *Seda-ye Edalat*, *Iran Dokht*, *Andisheb-ye Now*, *Hayat-e Now*, *Hemmat*, *Sarmayeh*, *Etemad*, *Armane Ravabet-e Omumi*, *Farhang-e Ashti*, and *Hamshabri*. The four latter were allowed to be published again after some while.

²⁷Persian Deutsche Welle website, "Polomb-e Anjoman-e Senfi-ye Rooznameh Negaran Dar Rooz-e Tahlif-e Ahmadinezhad" [Journalists Association was sealed off on the day of Ahmadinezhad's inauguration], August 6, 2009, <http://www.dw.de/پلمپ-انجمن-صنفي-روز-نامهنگار-اندر-روز-تحليف-احمدينژاد/a-4546152-1> (accessed October 28, 2012).

²⁸Committee to Protect Journalists' website, "With 47 Journalists in Jail, Iran Sets Notorious Records," February 3, 2010, <http://cpj.org/2010/02/with-47-journalists-in-jail-iran-sets-notorious-re.php> (accessed October 5, 2012).

Political Satire in the Satirical Press

With the exception of a few short periods, newspaper publication in Iran has always required a license from the state. Since 1837, when the first, official Persian language Iranian newspaper was published until the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, for nearly seventy years, all Persian language newspapers in Iran were owned or supervised by the government. In this era a license to publish a newspaper usually required the shah's personal signature.²⁹

In early 1907, the Ministry of Publications, which had been established by the order of Nasereddin Shah in 1871, was abolished and part of its duties which concerned the supervision of printing-houses and issuing of licenses for newspapers passed to the Ministry of Sciences.³⁰

The first Iranian press law approved by the Majles in February 1908 was based on the 29 July 1881 French Press Law that stressed general press freedom and prohibition of press censorship and restrained the need for obtaining permission for the publication of newspapers. Nevertheless, ten years after the Constitutional Revolution, and in accordance with a decree approved in 1918 by the council of ministers, the principle of free press publication was limited and made contingent upon permission obtained from the council. The restrictions were tightened during the reign of Reza Shah (1925–41).³¹

After Reza Shah's fall, an appropriate climate for freedom of the press arose and newspapers could be published without permission from the government. This openness was short-lived, however, and following a public revolt in Tehran in the autumn of 1942, all newspapers were banned and in accordance with the Revision of the Part of the Press Law, approved on 24 December 1942, in which the 1908 Press Law was revised, publishers were required to obtain permission for the publication of newspapers.³²

In later laws, approved in February 1952 and August 1955, this obligation was preserved. Therefore, during the thirty-seven-year reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, with the exception of a few years in the 1940s, Iranians needed to have a license or permission to print newspapers.

At the fall of the shah's regime in 1979, though there had been no new law saying no license was needed, numerous newspapers were published without any permission or license in the brief period of *Bahar-e Azadi*. But in August 1979, six months after the victory of the Revolution, Prime Minister Bazargan's interim government (12 February 1979–6 November 1979) announced the requirement of a license from the

²⁹Ali Akbar Saedi Sirjani, "Constitutional Revolution vi. The press," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, VI, Fasc. 2: 202–12.

³⁰Seyed Farid Qasemi, *Rabnamaye Matbou'at-e Iran: Asr-e Qajar* [A glossary of the press in Iran: the Qajar era] (Tehran, 1993), 28.

³¹K. Mo'tamednezhad and N. Badii, "The Problems of Press Freedom in Iran: From the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution," in *Religion, Law, and Freedom: A Global Perspective* (Westport, CT, 2000), 49.

³²*Ibid.*, 56.

Ministry of National Guidance to print press publications. This obligation was preserved in the two later press laws approved by the Majles in 1986 and 2000.³³ Hence, since August 1979, in the Islamic Republic of Iran anyone wishing to publish print media (newspapers, magazines or even scientific journals) has to apply for a license from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

The field/topic area in which a publication is classified must be clear. Some are politics, sports, social, and satire, or *tanz*, although in recent times the term *tanz* has been used to refer also to the concept of humor, or *fokahi*. The last Persian magazine that used *fokahi* in its name was *Fokahiyoun* (Humorists), which was published in the 1980s. Elsewhere, *tanz* has been to describe any kind of humor, even TV comedy series, probably because the word has a positive implication, referring to literary values, an intention of improvement, and social commitment. While one of the best political satirical magazines in the history of the Persian press, *Towfiq*, always described itself as a “humorous paper” (*Rouznameh-ye Fokahi*), none of the satirical papers published after 1990 in Iran has described itself as “humorous” (*fokahi*), instead using the description “Satirical” (*Tanz/Tanz-amiz*). Therefore, although in this article satire will be used for *tanz* as understood in English, it must be kept in mind there is now a conceptual confusion between satire and humor in Persian.

During the 2000s, whether under the reformist President Khatami (1997–2005) or the anti-reformist President Ahmadinezhad (since 2005), the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance rarely issued a license for a *tanz* (satiric/humorous) publication. Instead, one of the lucky few, *Gol Agha*, the most prominent satirical paper after the 1979 Revolution, announced its closure on its twelfth anniversary in October 2002. *Gol Agha*’s publisher, Kioumars Saberi, always had influential friends among the authorities, including the leader, Ali Khamenei. Saberi’s position even improved when Khatami was elected president because of their long-term friendly relationship. Therefore, Saberi’s announcement in 2002 that the *Gol Agha* weekly, the main magazine of the *Gol Agha* group of publications,³⁴ would cease publication on 24 October came as a shock. Saberi died of cancer in 2004 and never did explain the reason for his decision to close down *Gol Agha*. However, after his death Ebrahim Nabavi, the well-known political satirist and the first executive director of *Gol Agha*, wrote that Saberi “on the one hand was disappointed by the reformists’ way and on the other hand, he was sure the Leader expected him to play a role that he didn’t want. For a long time, he would get messages from security services that made him worried. For that, he closed the paper down.”³⁵

³³Ibid., 57–8.

³⁴The institute also published Monthly, Yearbook, and *Bachcheba ... Gol Agha* (Kids ... Gol Agha).

³⁵Ebrahim Nabavi, “Kioumars Saberi (Gol Aqa) Be Revayat-e Ebrahim Nabavi” [Kioumars Saberi (Gol Aqa) in Ebrahim Nabavi’s words], BBC Persian, April 30, 2004, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/story/2004/04/040430_pm-nabavi_saberi.shtml (accessed October 14, 2012). After Saberi’s death, his only offspring, Poupak Saberi, who inherited the title, published the weekly as well as a new comic magazine with the name *Gol Agha Comic* but was unsuccessful. Finally Poupak officially announced in January 2008 that Gol Agha institute would not publish any print media and would only be present on the Gol Agha website (<http://www.Golagha.ir>).

Kayhan-e Caricature (Cartoon Kayhan), was a monthly publication that would often publish professional cartoons by Iranians and non-Iranians accompanied by essays and articles about the cartoons. Although *Kayhan-e Caricature* was one of the journals published and funded by the state-owned Kayhan institute, Mohammad Hossein Niroomand, the then chief editor of *Kayhan-e Caricature*, explained financial issues and lack of government support as main reasons for its closure in 2003.³⁶

In an apparently self-imposed action, *Khorjin*, *Tanz-e Farsi*, and *Donyaye Tanz* had already closed down in 2000.³⁷

Tanz Va Caricature (Satire and Cartoon) was the only humorous magazine published on a national scale the whole of the first decade of the twenty-first century. This monthly was published by the cartoonist, Hossein Alizadeh, from 1990, the same year *Gol Agha* was published for the first time, but never achieved *Gol Agha*'s popularity. Critical political satire was rarely published in *Tanz Va Caricature* and though he did not ban politics, Alizadeh preferred pieces from fields such as cinema and football.

On a smaller scale, some satirical journals were published with limited success, like *Sotun-e Azad* (Free Column), published by students at the University of Ferdowsi, Mashhad. The monthly began as a black and white photocopied student journal in 2003, but gradually turned into a color newspaper with high-quality paper, print, and content. It covered political subjects as well youth matters and was distributed to many universities across the country. *Sotun-e Azad* claimed a readership of more than 20,000 in the late 2000s, a record for a student journal in Iran.³⁸

Political Satire in the Non-Satirical Press

As previously stated, satirical columns have existed as a venue for political writers in the serious Iranian newspapers since the very early days of the free press in the country. In fact, much of the best Persian satire in the modern era, particularly during the Constitutional Revolution, was printed in mainstream newspapers.

Indeed, many prominent Iranian satirists like Dehkhoda, Iraj Pezeshkzad, Omran Salahi, Manouchehr Mahjoubi, Hadi Khorsandi, Kiumars Saberi, Ebrahim Nabavi, and Abolfazl Zaruee Nasrabad have written famous satirical columns in the serious press.

From President Khatami's election in 1997 until the crackdown on the media in 2000, some of the best political satire was published in Persian newspapers and magazines in a section titled *sotun-e tanz* (Satire Column). No doubt, the most prominent and effective political satirist in those years was Ebrahim Nabavi, who wrote

³⁶ISNA, "Sardabir-e Nashriye-ye Kayhan-e Caricature Elale Tavaqqof-e Enteshar-e in Nashriye Ra Tashrih Kard" [Editor-in-chief of Kayhan Caricature explained the reasons for closure], November 4, 2003, <http://www.magiran.com/article.asp?AID=194> (accessed October 19, 2012).

³⁷Sadr, *Bardasht-e Akher*, 34.

³⁸The archives of *Sotun-e Azad* are available on its website: <http://sotooneazad.ir/main/>.

political satire columns in popular reformist newspapers including *Jameah*, *Toos*, *Arya*, *Hayat-e Now*, *Nesbat*, *Asr-e Azadegan*, among many other publications, sometimes simultaneously. Nabavi wrote in various styles and forms applying a wide range of techniques. Some of his most impressive works were parodies of the ideological and revolutionary discourse of the ruling regime, including the Supreme Leader himself, albeit indirectly. For instance, Ayatollah Khamenei and his supporters were well known for dire warnings about an “Enemy” and numerous “enemy conspiracies” which Nabavi courageously parodied using the Ayatollah’s own words in articles on topics apparently “unrelated” to the leader. Soon Nabavi became an important columnist whose satire was not only popular but also influenced the political sphere. His fame and influence in the first year after Khatami’s election encouraged other newspapers to establish satirical columns, though the radical anti-reformist state newspaper *Kayhan* had established a satirical column by May 1997. Though the then Press Law, in the late 1990s, stated that only the license holder of a newspaper could be held legally responsible and punished for the published content, Nabavi was arrested twice for his satirical writings. The second arrest came soon after the Press Festival on 7 August 2000, where he was named by the jury as the best satirist in the Iranian press.

Nabavi was released after seven months of imprisonment on the charge of “insulting the state authorities and the Islamic regime.” He apologized in court in front of TV cameras in 2001, albeit in a humorous tone.³⁹ After that he would write social satire for moderate conservative newspapers such as the daily *Jam-e Jam* and the biweekly *Mehr*, before leaving the country in April 2003.⁴⁰

After 2000, a new dilemma was presented by the new Press Law, not just for satirists, but for all whose work was published in the press. The new press law that was passed by the conservative-dominated Majles during the last days of its term, on 26 April 2000, included holding responsible not only the publishers, but also individual writers, for any offences caused by their work (Article 9, Note 7).⁴¹

Hence, following the spring of 2000, the relative freedom of the press experienced from 1997 to 1999 was not repeated, nor was regime-challenging political satire seen again in the official press. This does not, however, mean that political satire completely disappeared in Iran.

Abolfazl Zaruee, a well-known creative political satirist wrote several columns for various newspapers, the most popular being his satirical column in verse, *Asl-e Matlab* (The Crux of the Matter), in Tehran Municipality’s daily, *Hamshahri*.⁴²

³⁹Nabavi defended himself sometimes by sarcastic comments, particularly about one of his plaintiffs, Hamid Reza Taraqqi, a former MP. He also told a few jokes which drew laughter from the judge, Saeed Mortazavi, and others in the court. Defending himself, once he said “Mr. Taraqqi has sued me for naming him ‘shameless’ (*bi haya*), I ask you, what can we call a man who sues people for just for a word?” See a report of the trial in Nabavi’s book *Salon-e Shomareye 6* [Hall No. 6] (Tehran, 2005), 290–302.

⁴⁰Nabavi’s autobiography is on his website: <http://www.doomdam.com/archives/000126.php> (accessed October 29, 2012).

⁴¹Mo’tamednezhad and Badii, “The Problems of Press Freedom in Iran,” 125–6.

⁴²It was published later as a collection in *Rofuzeba* (Tehran, 2010).

Zaruee sometimes chose political subjects for his satirical poems but usually preferred social subjects to criticize. Once he read one of his poems published in *Hamsbahri* criticizing the administrative bureaucracy in front of Ayatollah Khamenei. The Ayatollah smiled and praised the poet.⁴³

Abolfazl Zaruee, Ali Mirfattah, and Reza Rafi'e wrote (sometimes political) satire in *Jam-e Jam* for a while. Rafi'e also wrote sometimes in *Ettela'at*. None of these satirical columns became as popular as Nabavi's, maybe because these newspapers were conservative in practice and the satirists had to observe the policy of the papers.

Ebrahim Raha (Ali Mirmirani's pseudonym) would write fairly explicit short political satirical pieces in the daily *Etemad*, which several times caused problems for the newspaper and finally his column was closed down.

Ali Mirfattah wrote social and political satire in a popular column called *Qalandaran-e Pijameh Poosh* (Pyjama Wearing Mendicants) in the daily *Sharq* (2004–6). He states in the introduction to a published collection of his work that he got the idea from a humorous short story by Iraj Pezashkzad, entitled *Angur* (Grape), which was about a few old men smoking opium and talking about their memories. In Mirfattah's column some old men, smoking opium, discuss various apparently irrelevant topics, masking hidden political and social critique. *Sharq* was banned several times and, though this was not caused by the column, the column was finally removed.

Roya Sadr was the most prominent among the rare female satirists active at the time. In addition to publishing several books and articles about satire in the contemporary history of Iran and Persian journalism, she wrote political satire periodically in some reformist publications like *Etemad-e Melli*.

In May 2009, as usual before a presidential election, the state gave the press a little more freedom to encourage voting. The reformist newspaper *Etemad-e Melli* announced that it would publish a whole page of satire on a daily basis. Two young satirists, the cartoonist Hadi Heidari and the columnist Pouria Alami, organized the page with the help of other satirists. The page, named *Shabnameh* (Night Letter), was printed until 17 August 2009 when the newspaper was closed down by the judiciary. On the same day, the head of the judiciary was humorously criticized on the satirical page of *Shabnameh*, one of the most prominent works in a newspaper concerned with political satire during the decade.

During these years when barely a few reformist papers could publish political satire some satirists tried to work in a new way by publishing in the conservative press, hoping to protect their views and themselves from bureaucratic repression. Shahram Shakiba and Mahmud Farjami wrote critical satire in two moderate conservative newspapers. Shakiba wrote for *Khabar*, a newspaper supported by Ali Larijani, the speaker of parliament, and Farjami wrote for *Tehran-e Emrouz*, supported by Baqer

⁴³The video showed by National TV (IRIB) can be seen on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roFXIo0ZtGk> (accessed October 29, 2012).

Ghalibaf, the mayor of Tehran. Both Larijani and Ghalibaf were Ahmadinezhad's rivals in the 2005 presidential election and, though conservatives, they have been powerful opponents of his in the subsequent years. Farjami wrote in *Tehran Emrouz* from 2009 to 2010, and then left the country. Shakiba wrote for *Khabar* until its closure in November 2009.

The political satire column of the *Kayhan* daily, *Goft-o Shenud* (Dialogue), which was established in 1997, was the only column which was published for the entire decade. Most believe this column was written by Hossein Shariatmadari, manager and editor-in-chief of *Kayhan*, appointed by the Supreme Leader. The satirical pieces, always in the form of a dialogue between two people, were short (mostly 100–150 words), harsh, with a lack of elegance, directly attacking persons who were labeled enemies of the revolution and Islam, usually ending with a joke or anecdote. The press was strictly forbidden to print insults in Iran and the judiciary warned or banned the reformist and independent press numerous times on charges of “insulting.”⁴⁴ However, it was not unusual to see words like stupid (*abmaq*), traitor (*khaen*), spy (*jasus*), corrupt (*fassed*), brazen (*por-ru*), hideous (*ikbiri*), mercenary (*khod forukhteh*), hack (*qalam be mozd*), etc. in *Goft-o Shenud*, used to describe and humiliate individuals, groups, and politicians (sometimes using their real names). And, while the process of closing a newspaper for wrongdoing is very quick and simple, requiring only a letter from the judiciary, Shariatmadari has never been in serious trouble for these irreverent remarks.⁴⁵

Political Cartoons: Little Crime and Huge Punishment

For the whole decade, political cartoonists worked hand in hand with writers of political satire. Indeed, newspapers were more interested in cartoons than satirical columns, probably because cartoons have more potential to be indirect and equivocal than satirical texts, and what is seriously needed in an atmosphere of oppression is discretion and flexibility. Most political cartoons published in this decade were symbolic, abstract, and surreal rather than blatant, realistic, and literal to send a critical message more safely. For instance, in July 2009, at the height of clashes between the protesters and the police, while thousands of dissidents were arrested and numerous newspapers suspected of supporting the unrest were shut down, Hadi Heidari depicted a singing bird, being bound by musical notes and unable to sing, in a cartoon to reflect the current events in a conservative tone. This was published in *Etemad-e Melli*, the newspaper with ties to Mehdi Karoubi, a defeated candidate and one of the harshest critics of the election results.

⁴⁴One of the accusations against Ebrahim Nabavi, for which he had to apologize in court, was labeling a former conservative MP, Hamid Taraqqi, “shameless” (*bi haya*). A report of the trial is published in Nabavi's memoirs of jail, *Salon-e Shomareh-ye 6*.

⁴⁵He only had to apologize on a few occasions once when some of the sixth Majles' reformist MPs were described as “cows” in a *Goft-o Shenud* published on 1 June 2003.

Figure 2. Applying Symbols to show Crisis Conditions in an “Editorial Cartoon Box,” where Political Cartoons with a High Level of Criticism, Humor, and Perspicuity are Usually Expected



Source: Hadi Heidari, *Etemad-e Melli* Daily, July 4, 2009.

In spite of the “Spring of the Press” (1997–99), most of the cartoons published in the press during the 2000s were non-political and about social subjects, sports, arts, etc. But, despite all the precautions and discretion, during the 2000s, most trouble regarding humor and satire were caused by cartoons. In February 2000, a cartoon was published in the *Azad* daily, drawn by Nikahang Kowsar, who was the best-known political cartoonist of that time, and who worked hand in hand with Nabavi. The cartoon showed a crocodile labeled as “Master Crocodile” (Ostad Temsah) stifling a man and crying out for help simultaneously.

The cartoon sarcastically mentioned Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, whose name, Mesbah, rhymes with the Persian word for crocodile, *Temsah*. Reformists believed he was the most important cleric in Qom whose religious/political decrees, or *fatwas*, encouraged state officials and pressure groups to violently attack reformists. A few days earlier, Mesbah Yazdi had claimed that the former CIA head came to Iran secretly with “a suitcase full of dollars” to share with some newspapers and cultural organizations. The cartoon caused uproar among Mesbah’s students and followers in Tehran, Qom, and elsewhere.

Figure 3. Master Crocodile: “Isn’t there anybody to save me from this mercenary alternative writer?!” The Man (Icon of Journalists in Kowsar’s Cartoons): “Help!”



Source: Nikahang Kowsar.

Azad was banned and Kowsar was arrested. Though he was released on bail six days later and subsequently fled to Canada, he was tried in absentia and sentenced to four months in prison in 2005.⁴⁶

Tensions caused by cartoons were not always caused by the cartoonists. In early 2003 Alireza Eshraqi, a member of the editorial board of *Hayat-e Now*, was arrested and spent 53 days in solitary confinement for printing a cartoon whose character was claimed to have some similarity to Ayatollah Khomeini.

Although *Hayat-e Now* denied any knowledge of the alleged similarity and proved the cartoon had been drawn around 65 years earlier by an American cartoonist to depict Franklin D. Roosevelt, some conservative supporters of the regime held demonstrations and the newspaper was soon banned.

However, the most severe reaction was to a cartoon with no obvious political content. On 12 May 2006, in a special section for children in the *Iran Friday* paper, a humorous essay about cockroaches was published accompanied by a few small cartoons by Mana Neyestani. In one cartoon, “cockroach grammar” was discussed, with a cockroach saying “*Namana?*,” which means “what?” in Turkish.

In fact, in the cartoon series titled “What should we do so cockroaches don’t turn us into cockroaches?” the only thing that the cartoon was showing was a

⁴⁶A detailed report from the story can be retrieved from: “Majaraye Ostad Tamsah” [The story of Professor Crocodile], <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/opinion/opinion-article/archive/2006/november/22/article/-3807acb111.html> (accessed October 28, 2012).

Figure 4. The Page of *Hayat-e Now* which caused Controversy



Note: Some claimed the person drawn under the pressure in the cartoon looks like Ayatollah Khomeini. The text is an interview about social capital with Dr Tavassoli, a professor at Tehran University.

boy saying “cockroach” in different ways in Persian to an uncomprehending cockroach, and the latter replying, “What?” in Turkish but written in the Latin alphabet.

Very soon some Turkish-speaking Iranian Azeris protested against the cartoon, claiming it had been meant to insult the Turks, making them appear as stupid beetles with a foolish language. They claimed this was not just a simple mistake by one cartoonist but represented general policies. Mana Neyestani vigorously denied the accusation but it was useless. The *Iran* daily was banned temporarily and the then prosecutor general, Saeed Mortazavi, had the cartoonist and the Friday supplement’s editor, Mehrdad Qasemfar, incarcerated in Evin Prison. Riots were sparked and some were killed and injured during violent demonstrations in Azeri cities like Tabriz, Orumieh, Abhar, and Zanjan.⁴⁷

Although seemingly only a social and cultural issue concerned with an ethnic group, there is evidence that the event was deeply rooted in politics as well. First of all, by this time the protests were already taking place at some universities, particularly the

⁴⁷BBC Persian, *Bazdasht-e Tarrab-e Karikator-e Janjali Va Toqif-E Rouzname-Ye Iran* [Detaining the cartoonist who drew the controversial caricature and the banning of *Iran* newspaper], May 23, 2006, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/05/060523_mf_cartoon.shtml (accessed October 29, 2012).

Figure 5. Page from *Iran Friday*



Note: In the top right-hand cartoon by Mana Neyestani, a boy says “cockroach” in various different ways in Persian to an uncomprehending cockroach, and the latter replies, “What?” in Turkish, *Namana*. A very notable case which showed that ethnic issues can be as dangerous as political ones, if not more so.

University of Tabriz. Secondly, it was used as a pretext by security forces for suppressing Azeri activists.⁴⁸ Ayatollah Khamenei blamed the unrest on the enemies of the Islamic Republic.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Also some evidence reinforces the speculation that some state forces provoked demonstrations and chaos. Gholamhossein Eslamifar, the then manager of *Iran Friday*, claimed in court that, while circulation of *Iran Friday* is usually at most 30,000 and only 3,000 are sent to the Azeri regions, 300,000 copies of the issue was printed in a short period and sent to the Azeri regions. Eslamifar was acquitted (BBC Persian, “Modir-e Mas’ul-e Ruzname-ye Iran Bigonah Shenakhteh Shod” [Managing editor of *Iran* newspaper was acquitted], August 27, 2006, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/08/060827_mf_iran_jury.shtml (accessed October 5, 2012)). The printer(s) who could print this number of papers have never been found by the Iranian security forces, although they control all printers’ offices in Iran.

⁴⁹BBC Persian, “‘Doshmanan’ Amel-e Taharrokat-e Qowmi-ye Akhir-e Manateq-e Tork Neshin-e Iran” [“Enemies’ directed recent ethnic unrest in the Turkish regions of Iran], May 28, 2006, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/05/060528_y-khamen-ethnic-issues.shtml (accessed October 9, 2012).

The event can be seen as a dramatic example of how working as a satirist can be unpredictable and dangerous in Iran. When one works as a humorist one must always be careful not to cross “red lines” and tread very lightly on sensitive social, regional, ethnic, cultural, and political matters. However, while cartoonists and writers in the reformist or independent press era were faced with numerous pressures and threats, especially by the judiciary, there were some like Maziar Bijani of the *Kayhan* newspaper, the only political cartoonist who worked for two decades, publishing political cartoons against reformists, facing almost no limitations. The others, mostly reformists, such as Nikahang Kowsar, Touka Neyestani, Mana Neyestani, Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, Hadi Heidari, Hassan Karim Zadeh, Ali Derakhshi, Jamal Rahmati, Firoozeh Mozaffari, and Keyvan Zargari, were not so lucky. The best Iranian political cartoonists worked for many banned publications including *Aftab-e Emrouz*, *Azad*, *Bahar*, *Bonyan*, *Doran-e Emrouz*, *Eqabl*, *Etemad-e Melli*, *Hayat-e Now*, *Mosharekat*, *Nowrouz*, *Sobh-e Emrouz*, *Tavana*, *Vaqaye’ e Ettefaqiye*, and *Yas-e Now*. Many papers were warned not to publish particular political writers and cartoonists.

Satire and New Media, Amusing from a Distance

The decade saw a wave of emigration by journalists from Iran that began with the closures of publications in 2000 and reached its climax in 2009. According to a Reporters Without Borders’ report published on 22 April 2010, “facing arrest and prevented from doing their job, more than 50 Iranian journalists have had to flee the country since President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad’s disputed reelection on 12 June 2009.”⁵⁰

In addition to some opposition satirists like Hadi Khorsandi, who has been in exile since 1980, some of the best satirists who were not known as opposition figures and would work in a regime-regulated framework had to leave the country in the 2000s. The deaths of some of the best Persian political satirists also had a negative impact on political satire during this period. Among them Saberi. Omran Salahi,⁵¹ and Manuchehr Ehterami⁵² are most notable. All had a huge influence on younger satirists, especially those who wanted to write political satire with Persian literary values;

⁵⁰Reporters Without Borders, “Overview of Reporters Without Borders Financial Aid to Journalists and Media in Danger in 2009,” April 22, 2010, <http://en.rsf.org/overview-of-reporters-without-22-04-2010,37122.html> (accessed October 9, 2012).

⁵¹Omran Salahi, a well-known satirist, poet, cartoonist and scholar of satire died from a heart attack in 2006 when he was 60. Though he was Saberi’s friend and would write in *Gol Agha*, he had numerous problems with the state, mainly because of his satire in some intellectual magazines like *Donya-ye Sokhan*, *Adineh*, *Karnameh*, and *Bokhara*, where he apparently wrote about literature but usually mocked the cultural policy and ideology of the Islamic regime. Once Massoud Dehnamaki, a leader of Ansar Hezbollah pro-government pressure group, even accused Salahi of “insulting Prophet Adam.”

⁵²Manuchehr Ehterami, another prominent satirist, poet, and satire scholar died in 2009, aged 67. He wrote prose and verse satire in *Toufiq* from the age of 17, wrote humorous scripts for Radio Iran in the 1970s, and was always one of best satirists of *Gol Agha* until the last issue. Through his knowledge of Persian literature, during half a century, he created several satirical styles. For instance, in a series of poems under the name “Jame’-ol Hekayat” (Compendium of Fables), Ehterami applied the style of Persian mystical poetry and apparent wisdom anecdotes to the criticism of recent political and social

and their deaths along with the other social and political factors mentioned earlier had a chilling effect on political satire in the Persian press in the 2000s.

In spite of all the negative factors regarding political satire in the Iranian press, new media and the fast growth of access to the internet in this decade have provided a wide and far freer domain for Persian satire. While there were at most 250,000 internet users in 2000, it was estimated that around 8 million Iranians had access to the internet by 2009.⁵³ Although access to the internet for Iranian users has never been as cheap, fast or safe as in much of the rest of the world,⁵⁴ this access to new media has deeply affected Iranian journalism.

One of the most important facilities of the internet for those who work for Iranian audiences was the potential of being outside of the country but in connection with audiences inside. Among the famous political satirists, Ebrahim Nabavi⁵⁵ and Hadi Khorsandi⁵⁶ were the first to establish their own humorous websites at the beginning of the 2000s. Settled in Belgium since 2003, Nabavi continued his work as a Persian political satirist on Persian websites, including *Gooya news*, *BBC Persian*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Entekhab*, and *Radio Zamaneh*, the most stable being his daily satirical column on *Roozonline.com*, since 2005. He also made political satirical TV and radio programs for Voice of America (VOA) Persian TV and Radio Zamaneh.

Nikahang Kowsar left Iran a few months after Nabavi. He moved to Canada and would publish his political cartoons on Iranian and occasionally on non-Iranian websites. Like Nabavi, Kowsar has worked for *Roozonline.com*. He also ran his Persian-language weblog from June 2004.⁵⁷ Kowsar wrote and performed a humorous political radio program named *Kalaghastoon* (Crowland) for Radio Zamaneh from 2006 to 2009, three times a week. Finally, he launched *Khodnevis*,⁵⁸ a political website in which political satire and cartoon have a prominent role.

Mana Neyestani, after fleeing to Malaysia, began publishing his cartoons on the *Radio Zamaneh* website. Soon, his works, mostly black and white with a special aesthetic look at political issues, drew attention.⁵⁹ He also created a series of cartoons

issues. He was also a famous children's poet and his *Hasani Nagu Yeh Dasteh Gol*, published in the early 1980s, is a classic.

⁵³These figures are the author's calculations based on data published by the Statistical Center of Iran, "Natayej-e Amargiri Az Karbaran-e Internet-1389" [The results of a survey of internet users 2009–2010], http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/0/Files/abstract/1389/n_IT_89.pdf (accessed October 26, 2012).

⁵⁴According to authoritative reports, Iran is ranked well concerning the quantity of users of the internet in the Middle East but has one of the worst ranks concerning the quality of connection (price, speed, freedom) in the world. An online status of speed to access the internet can be seen on: <http://netindex.com/download/allcountries/> which shows the speed at 1.70 Mbps for Iran, and a rank of 161 out of 178 countries, at the time of revising this paper, October 30, 2012. Official media in Iran reported the same. Also see a report in Persian in Aftab news, "Iran Az Nazar-e Sor'at-e Internet Dar Radif-e Kam Sor'attarin Keshvarha-ye Jahan Qarar Darad" [Iran is one of the worst countries regarding speed of access to the internet], <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcci1sqss2bq1e8.ala2.html> (accessed October 28, 2012).

⁵⁵<http://enabavi.com>.

⁵⁶<http://asgharagha.com>.

⁵⁷<http://nikahang.blogspot.com>.

⁵⁸<http://khodnevis.org>.

about an Iranian family with typical characteristics, named “Khanevadeh-ye Dargir” (The Involved Family). The series has been published on *Mardomak* news website since 2009.⁶⁰

Numerous political satirists, living in Iran or outside, have also tried to publish their works more freely by establishing weblogs or personal websites. They include Abolfazl Zaruee, Afshin Sabooki, Ali Mirfattah, Alireza Rezaee, Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, Ebrahim Raha Jalal Samiee, Mahmud Farjami, Roya Sadr, Touka Neyestani, and Vahid Nikgoo.

Laughing Trojan Horses: Injecting Satire into the Serious Press

The other notable development concerning satire and humor in the Persian press in Iran was the injection of humor into the serious press. As noted above, according to the Iranian press law, papers can cover one or a few specific fields and have to announce their field(s) on the front page of every issue.⁶¹ Satire is one of the fields. Therefore, a paper with a license that does not mention “satire” cannot be wholly satirical or humorous. On the other hand, being strict on humor and satire, hardly any licenses for this field have been issued. Therefore, some tried innovative ways to apply satirical content in papers with a license in fields other than satire, most notable among them *Tavana* and *Chelcheragh*.

Tavana, a serious weekly, changed in form and content since 1998/99, and by the time of its closure in 2000 was a popular social and political comic strip weekly that published some serious essays too. By then, some young pioneering cartoonists had been gathered by cartoonist Jamal Rahmati along with some prominent cartoonists⁶² who would work as cartoonists as well as journalists and editors for *Tavana*.

Tavana was closed down by the judiciary in late 2000, after it had published a cartoon of President Khatami on its front page. Though it was a supportive image, and neither Khatami nor any other reformist complained about it, *Tavana* was banned by the judiciary on charges of “insulting the clergy.” In the cartoon, President Khatami, who was preparing for election for a second term, was drawn without his usual clerical habit (robe and turban) on a chair supported by people, reciting a famous Persian verse from Rumi: “I didn’t come here of my own accord, and I can’t leave that way.” Hosseinpour’s signature was seen under the picture.⁶³

⁵⁹To see a collection of Mana’s Cartoon on Radio Zamaneh visit <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/zamtoon>.

⁶⁰To see a collection of Mana’s Cartoon on Madomak visit <http://www.mardomak.org/cartoons>.

⁶¹In chapter 4, article 7, note B of the law of press, it is emphasized that it is an offence to publish contents in the fields different from what publisher has been given a license for (a full version of the Law of Press (Qanun-e Matbou’at) is available on <http://www.magiran.com/article.asp?AID=34>). See also a related critical view of this part of the press law in Mohsen Esmaili, “Hoquq va Vazayef-e Darandeh-ye Mojavez” [Rights and duties of a license holder], *Rasaneh Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 53–60.

⁶²Among them Kiarash Zandi, Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, Nikahang Kowsar, Ali Derakhshi, and Mana Neyestani.

Figure 6. President Khatami, Who was Preparing for Election for a Second Term, on the Front Page of *Tavana*



Note: In the balloon there is a famous Persian verse by Rumi: "I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way."

Source: Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour.

Chelcheragh, a new magazine for Iranian youth, was published under the management of the reformist Fereydoon Amoozadeh Khalili in June 2002. *Chelcheragh* called its audience *Nasl-e Sevvom* (The Third Generation), the youth born after the 1979 revolution, generally in the 1980s. Amoozadeh and his young colleagues in *Chelcheragh* injected humor into almost all content instead of the tradition of having a separate humorous section. By their intent, it was still a serious magazine with content in various subjects like technology, history, literature, politics, and youth culture

⁶³On July 2003, two years after the closing of *Tavana*, the publisher, Iraj Rastgar, was imprisoned after being summoned to the court (Yas-e Now, "Modir Mas'ule Hafteh-nameh-ye Tavana Bazdasht Shod" [Editor-in-chief of the weekly *Tavana* was arrested], July 15, 2003).

accompanied by playfulness and humor in most of the content. For example, not only did Hosseinpour draw cartoons on the last page every week, but Nima Akbarpour also wrote scientific essays with a humorous tone about computers and technology in his pages. The experiment was successful and soon *Chercheragh* became one of the best-selling magazines in Iran. The style became popular and has been imitated by other publications. A few years later *Hamsbahri-ye Javan* (Young Hamshahri), one of the papers funded by the Tehran municipality, after an unsuccessful bid to become popular, applied this style and soon flourished. *Chelcheragh* was banned in November 2010 but reopened later.⁶⁴

2000s and Satire, Horrors and Hopes. Political satire is often one of the first targets in press crackdowns and attempts to limit political freedom due to its commonly critical examination of power and authority. From this point of view, political satire can be counted as an index of freedom of speech in Iran. Persian political satire in the Iranian press suffered great setbacks during the decade investigated. Among the very few license holders for a humorous or satirical paper, none could publish for long and only one monthly (*Tanz Va Caricature*) was published for the entire decade. *Gol Agha*, the most prominent satirical publication of the time, was closed down by its publisher. Almost none of the satirical political columns were able to continue. The new Press Law, passed in the spring of 2000, made the arrest and punishment of satirists as well other journalists and press-related writers even easier. Some of the best political satirists and cartoonists left Iran for other countries and many became jobless. At least four satirists were detained (Kowsar in 2000, Nabavi in 2001, Neyestani in 2006, and Heidari in 2009).

By contrast, political satire in cyberspace boomed. Almost all satirists who left the country continued publishing their works in various electronic media, with more freedom to be explicit in their criticisms. Particularly, some, like Nabavi and Kowsar, began to make Khomeini and Khamenei, the two supreme leaders of the Islamic Regime of Iran, the subjects of their works, breaking a more than thirty-year taboo.

⁶⁴To read a sample of Iranian political satire in late 2009 in English, see Letter to Hussein, by Ebrahim Nabavi here, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/11/letters-to-hussein-iran-has-changed.html#ixzz1keUNhjFp>.