July 2014 marks the first anniversary of the overthrow of the first openly elected Egyptian government since 1950. Whether the military intervention of 3 July constituted a coup d’état or a “corrective revolution” has been hotly debated—and in some venues satirized—ever since. This essay went to press within months of the election of General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as president, with the population divided on whether this would constitute forward or backward motion. With a focus on one particular colloquial text, I want to revisit the creative energies of an Egypt between January 2011 and June 2013 in which political satire, long a staple of the street, moved with relative impunity into a fast-changing mediascape, not without constraints, but with far more latitude than during the five prior decades of military rule. It was a period, however brief, that I suspect we may look back upon as far freer in terms of public discourse than that which has followed.

The text I highlight is a musical revue from Bassem Youssef’s Friday night smash-hit comedy show, Al-Barnamig. It aired during the last show prior to the massive street demonstrations of 30 June 2013. The musical revue, which is available on YouTube, spoofs the great anthems of the Nasser era. But rather than singing the praises of the president, Mohammad Morsi, as in the song that
inspired it, the satire blasts the standing president as inept and incoherent. When I first sat down to translate the song last summer I was struck instantly by the satirists’ clever barbs as well as the send-up—not harsh, but clearly tongue-in-cheek—of the surging public nostalgia for Nasser, the towering figure who had ushered in the authoritarian state whose fall Egyptians had seemingly celebrated in such unity only two years earlier. By the time I had finished my translation and sat down to consider the text’s potential import, that unity had fractured. Morsi sat in prison and the crackdown on his movement had begun to gain speed. Bassem Youssef’s show had also been discontinued. Over the course of the past year I have pondered whether his satirical send-up of Morsi and Nasser, a window into popular humor and its public emergence, might well have been the Egyptian revolution’s last laugh.

**Egypt’s Jon Stewart**

Bassem Youssef, widely known as Egypt’s Jon Stewart, is by now internationally recognized and applauded for his daring political satire. A cardiac surgeon by profession, he took his video camera into Tahrir Square during the heady days of January-February 2011, set up a small studio at home, and in March began posting shows on YouTube that he called *B+* (after his blood type). After some 100 episodes and five million hits, he was invited to broadcast a new show—*Al-Barnamig (The Show)*—on ONTV, a private network owned by Egyptian tycoon Naguib Sawiris. As the show caught on, Youssef switched to a live audience format filmed in a studio that some have likened to Radio City in Manhattan. In November 2012, Youssef switched to another private network, CBC.

*Al-Barnamig* is, unabashedly, a spin off of *The Daily Show*—not the only one internationally, but its closest clone, from props to content, especially the quick edits of snippets from news and interview shows. Youssef also mimics Stewart’s body language, facial expressions, and comic timing to a disarming degree.

Youssef has appeared twice on *The Daily Show*, and in May 2013 Stewart returned the favor during a stopover in Egypt. Youssef was also the subject of a memorable Stewart routine in April 2013 in which the American comic castigated his arraignment, a month earlier, on charges of maligning President Morsi and Islam. After a series of quips, Stewart turned uncharacteristically serious: “What are you worried about, Mr. President, the power of satire to overthrow the status quo?...For someone who spent time in jail yourself under Mubarak, you seem awfully eager to send other people there for the same crimes. And just like you, they will emerge from prison stronger and more determined.” Stewart’s critique and his comments this past December 2013, when Youssef was awarded the International Press Freedom Award by the
Committee to Protect Journalists, cut to the heart of the matter: “He hosts his program in a country where freedom of expression is not settled law. He helps carve out space through his show to help that country understand the importance of dissent and satire’s role.”

Stewart might have asked how far, or high up the chain of command one can mock power before the axe falls.

**Anthems for Two Eras**

In Egypt the Nasser-era wataniyat (nationalist anthems) are still often recalled with great fondness and an ever-present nostalgia. They represent an era of great optimism, national purpose and pride, and hopes, at least, for great achievements. The most famous—and lasting—were sung by the greatest voices of the era, particularly Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Umm Kulthum. There are others, still in the vaults of Egypt’s Radio and Television building, by Layla Murad, Farid al-Atrash, Muhammad Qandil, Fayda Kamil, and a host of fellow vocal stars. The greatest anthems premiered annually on Revolution Day (July 23) or at special gala events and were penned most often by Salah Jahin and scored by Kamal al-Tawil, although Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, Ahmad Shafiq Kamil, and Abd al-Rahman al-Abnudi also produced major works. The refrains are simple and the tunes combine martial and folk elements, so they are easily sung and memorized by audiences.

Many of these tunes disappeared from the airwaves during Anwar al-Sadat’s rule, but they came back, punctuated by the spread of cassette technology, in the early 1980s. And they have been resurrected by state officials from time to time when a dose of nostalgia was needed for national pride and/or Arab unity—clear recognition that the anthems of later eras never stood the tests of time, emotionally or musically. There are no anthems from the Sadat or Mubarak years really worth rebroadcasting, or remembering.

These Nasser-era anthems have received much airplay since the 2011 “revolution” that toppled Mubarak, and especially in the far more divisive period following the arrest and dismissal of Morsi. Nasser’s iconic figure has been present from the outset, a dynamic shadow of a complicated past. For Nasser could be seen—and not just by the Islamists who understandably continue to hate him—as both the progenitor of a persistent and discredited authoritarian military-based order and as the last great populist leader who, for all his and his regime’s shortcomings, embodied the spirit and desires of the people. The meaning of these iconic images and anthems has surely changed over successive phases since the ouster of Mubarak, especially in the year in which Morsi ruled and that which has followed.

Since my focus here is the end of Morsi’s rule, it is important to remember that for a full year, Bassem Youssef’s bread and butter was criticism of Morsi
and a standing government. Egyptians not only freely elected a president, however disappointed many may have been in the ultimate candidates, but they also could now openly criticize, and even mock, him on television. Morsi proved to be more thin-skinned than he promised, but he never shut Bassem Youssef down. It is also important that however iconoclastic Bassem Youssef may at times appear or however broad his comic sweep, his orientation is clearly secular. He and his show did not fuel the march toward 30 June, but it certainly spoke to and validated the growing frustrations that brought so many people back into Tahrir Square. And while neither Youssef nor many in the square necessarily sought military intervention, their actions ultimately provided the army with this opportunity.

This is where the invocation of the Nasser-era *wataniyat* becomes so messy. For, while Youssef’s comedy may poke fun at the classic anthems, any overall positive invocation of the Nasser-era remains for the Muslim Brothers salt rubbed in a very deep wound—especially with the army’s current blatant self-identification with the Free Officers and Sisi with Nasser. 4

The text I highlight was not the first time Youssef and his writers invoked the classics. Earlier that spring, to spoof the growing financial support of Qatar for the Morsi regime, they had turned to the most famous anthem, *Al-Watan al-Akbar*, penned by Abd al-Wahhab to mark the laying of the foundation stone for the Aswan Dam in January 1960. One of the most elaborate production numbers filmed and still occasionally rebroadcast on state television, the song features solo leads by Abd al-Halim Hafiz and a number of female stars (Warda, Sabah, Fayda Kamil, Najat al-Saghira) representing the breadth of the Arab world. The chorus is famous:

*Watani habibi al-watan al-akbar—Yawm warā' yawm amgādūh btikbar
Wa intisharatuh māliya hayātuh—Watani byiṭikbar wa byiṭharrar—Watani, watani*

Beloved homeland, the greater nation—Day by day its glory multiplies
Triumphs are its lifeblood—My homeland grows larger and becomes free—Homeland, my homeland

Aping Abd al-Wahhab’s familiar stoic demeanor, Youssef conducted a chorus that was led by a male singer dressed and wigged as Abd al-Halim Hafiz. The new chorus went:

*Qaṭarī habibi al-akh al-asghar—Yawm warā' yawm amwālūh btiktar
Istithmaratuh māliya hayātuh—Qaṭarī byiṣrāf wa byiftashkhar—Qaṭarī, Qaṭarī*

My Qatar, beloved little brother—Day by day its wealth multiplies
Investments are its lifeblood—My Qatar keeps throwing its money around—Qatar, my Qatar
This spoof, directed more at the foreign power than the Egyptian government, proved to be a warm-up for the more elaborate number that presaged Morsi’s downfall in early July.

The musical number I highlight—and which I have titled “Stuck with Him”—also reprises Al-Watan al-Akbar in form. It features five solo singers and a cast of twenty who, parodying the gala production numbers of the 1950s and 60s, are dressed as peasants, workers, soldiers and police, a construction worker, a fisherman, and a bureaucrat sporting the tarbush (fez) that went out of style with the 1952 Free Officers revolution. But its lyrics reference an earlier anthem, Ihnā al-Sha’b, the first collaboration between Salah Jahin, Kamal al-Tawil, and Abd al-Halim Hafiz that premiered in June 1956 on the occasion of Nasser’s election as president. The opening line to the chorus of the original anthem is:

Ihnā al-sha’b, ihnā al-sha’b—Ikhtarnāk min qalb al-sha’b

We’re the people—We chose you from the heart of the people

And the last line is:

Wa ihnā ikhtarnāk wa ḥanimshi warāk—yā fātiḥ bāb al-ḥurriyya yā rayyis yā kabīr al-qalb

We chose you and will march in your footsteps, you who threw open the doors of freedom, o big-hearted leader

The comic turn in the Al-Barnamig production plays off these lines as each stanza starts Ikhtarnah wa akhdanh—“We chose him and we took him” or, more to the point, “We chose him and we’re stuck with him.” For those who recognize the original, this is a clever play on two very different historical electoral moments, 1956 and 2012. For most, the specifics give way to broader political satire rooted in the familiar genre of wataniyat. There are numerous barbs, all underscored by colloquial phrasing and puns, some of which are vulgar. Specific phrases mock Morsi’s stature as a substitute candidate, his exaggerated academic credentials, and his awkward oratory. Religious references lampoon the president’s affiliation with the Muslim Brothers.

**Humor after 30 June 2013**

Youssef’s spoof captured the feeling of many Egyptians, fairly or not, that Morsi’s first year of tenure had been disastrous. It is important to remember that many of those who supported him may also have enjoyed the satire. The song reflects the moment right before the country divided in two as Egyptians decamped to separate city squares, Tahrir and Rabā’a al-Adawiya. Youssef’s show also fell victim to the censorship imposed after 3 July. In a pointed, if
typically sarcastic, column published in al-Shorouk on 16 July (translated for
the website, tahrirsquared.com and posted by CNN on 20 July), Youssef warned
Egyptians in the secular opposition against treating the Muslim Brothers
exactly as the Brothers had treated them.⁵

Al-Barnamig returned to the air on 25 October for one infamous episode,
during which Bassem Youssef resolutely, if somewhat cautiously, pushed the
bounds of permissible political satire. His opening sketch involved a nightmare
vision of the comic preparing for his first new show only to be handed a blank
script. In his opening monologue Youssef mocked the confused discourse
over whether the military intervention had been a revolution or coup, as
well as the inflated numbers of people in the streets generated by supporters
on both sides. His gaze later widened to include not General Sisi himself, but
his acolytes—shades of pre-2011 censorship at play. A ribald skit that drew
wide public criticism depicted a lusty woman (played by a male member of
Youssef’s team) who was ready to trade one lover (Morsi) for another (Sisi). He
then turned his barbs toward the exaggerated displays of loyalty toward the
general, including pastries with his visage that had appeared in sweet shops.
Youssef and his crew went back the following week to film a follow-up, but
an hour or so before broadcast, CBC announced the show had been cancelled
due to “editorial policy and contractual differences.”⁶

Youssef’s star had perhaps turned. Or the state had grown far less tolerant
of his pranks. When he appeared before the magistrate in March 2013, the
mood had been festive. Supporters carried banners reading, “We are all Bassem
Youssef,” and one man in the crowd wore a replica of an oversized hat that had
been a prop to poke fun of Morsi. Now, after his mockery of Sisi-adoration, the
crowds gathered outside his studio, real or manufactured, burned his picture
or beat it with sandals, and denounced him as a traitor. In television interviews
Youssef adopted a more demure posture. Accepting the International Press
Freedom Award in December 2013 he noted the irony of his new position:
“so the same people who defended our freedom a few months ago, as I was
taken for questioning on the accounts of blasphemy, insulting the press, and
threatening national security, those people are now quite indifferent when I
am faced with charges like disturbing the peace, grand treason, and of course,
the gift that keep on giving—threatening national security.”⁷ In February 2014
he returned to the air, on a new network. He is clearly testing the boundaries
of what is acceptable and struggling to keep his satirical edge, but the hour
is now filled in part by musical numbers and guest interviews.

Youssef’s wit—and his undeniable pluck—raise questions as to whether
the moment for humor has passed, especially when directed at a leader who,
while fair game in office, now sits in prison, or at his followers, labeled by
the state as terrorists and thus made fair targets for repression. Or we might ask whether Egypt has in fact become an even more absurd state since July 2013, now open to a wider, sharper comic gaze, but in which due to renewed broadcast censorship, social media have again become the real outlet for satirical (as well as more serious) political creativity. At a press conference on 2 June, Youssef announced that he was cancelling Al-Barnamig: “We’ve gone as far as we can. We are tired of moving from one network to another network and being under emotional pressure.” MBC “tried as much as they could,” he said, “but the pressure was immense.” That said, Bassem Youssef’s musical routine from late June 2013 may well turn out to be reflective of a moment that comics like Youssef look back upon—as many now do the anthems he parodied—with a degree of nostalgia.

Appendix: “Stuck with Him”

*Ikhtarnāh wa akhādīnāh*

We chose him and we’re stuck with him¹¹

(Two women, one in a white wedding dress, the other in a black party dress, sing alternate lines)

*Gībnā il-lamūn wa ʾašrānāh*

We knew we got a real lemon, but went ahead and bought it¹²

*Ikhtarnāh wa akhādīnāh—Ruḥnā al-lagnā wa ʿulnā il-āh*

We chose him and we’re stuck with him—Went to the polls, said ‘aye’ and got burned¹³

*Ikhtarnāh wa akhādīnāh—Fāḍlānāh ʿa al-rāqīl iyāhu*

We chose him, we’re stuck with him—We favored him over the other bum

*Ikhtarnāh wa akhādīnāh—ʿAla thawrītīnā ʾistaʿāmnāh*

We chose him, we’re stuck with him—Entrusted him with our revolution

*Tāʾlim nāsā dimāḏī hu ḥassāsā—ʿUqr wa ʿārif al-bīr wa ghaṭāh*

NASA trained, sensible¹⁴—A Superman who’s cunning, can’t be fooled

*Guwwa qālibhā wa barra khāribhā—Wa al-dunyā kullāhā ʿārifāh*

We thought he’d turn the world topsy-turvy—The whole world knows him

*Wa ihnā māʾāh wa amarīnā lil-lāh—Ikhtarnāh, ikhtarnāh*

And we’re stuck with him, whatever God wills—We chose him, we chose him

(Solo: Bride)
Kāna ḍala dikka wa mishi fil-sikka—Rabbinā karamuh wa akhad al-tirka
He was sitting on the bench, but got a chance to play—God blessed him and he took on the [Mubarak’s] legacy

Katab dustūrhu qālīnā ghūrū—Shamīta finā, khalq Allāh
He wrote his constitution and told us to bugger off—He made all of God’s creations rejoice at our misery

Wa ṣāḥīn kida ihnā akhadnāh—Ikhtarnāh wa akhadnāh
For all that we got him—We got him and we’re stuck with him

Wa ihnā maʿāh wa amarinā lil-lāh—Ikhtarnāh ikhtarnāh
Stuck with him, whatever God wills—We chose him, we chose him

(Solo: Peasant in galabiyya and scarf turban)

Wa fi khitabātuh wa fi liqaʿātuh—Mahadish fāhim mustalāhātuh
In all his speeches and interviews—No one understood his utterings

“Nās mazqūqa” wa “ḥārā maznūqa”—Wa māfīsh mara ihnā fāhimnāh
“Soliciting people” and “narrow alley”—We never understood him, not once

Wa ṣāḥīn kida ihnā akhadnāh—Ikhtarnāh wa akhadnāh,
For this we got stuck with him—We chose him and we’re stuck with him

Wa ihnā maʿāh wa amarinā lil-lāh—Ikhtarnāh ikhtarnāh
Stuck with him, whatever God wills—We chose him, we chose him

(Solo: Man in tuxedo holding red jerry can)

Lā byaghdīnī wa lā yaʿishīnī—Wi wazīruh bāsīs lī fī benzīnī
He doesn’t feed me lunch or dinner—While his minister eyes my petrol

Shaʿbuh ifṣaraq baladhu bitgḥaraq—Wa haqūlahā wa rizqīʿala Allāh
His people are divided, his country is drowning—I’ll tell the truth, leaving my fortune in God’s hands

Shaklūkh khāzūqān wa ihnā libīsnāh
He’s like a sharp pole rammed up our backsides

Ikhtarnāh wa akhadnāh—Wa ihnā maʿāh wa amarinā lil-lāh
We chose him, we’re stuck with him—Stuck with him, whatever God wills

Ikhtarnāh ikhtarnāh—Ikhtarnāh wa akhadnāh
We chose him, we chose him—We chose him and we’re stuck with him

(Solo: Bearded man in suit and caftan)
Kunā ghalāba wa šadaqānāh—Ikhtarnāh wa akhdānāh
We were wretched and believed him—We chose him and we’re stuck with him

Haqīnā bil-ʿard—Akhdānāh
Asserted our right—We’re stuck with him

Ikhtarnāh wa akhdānāh—Mashruʿ al-naḥda libisnāh
We chose him, we’re stuck with him—We got the Nahda plan, a real lemon

Ikhtarnāh wa akhdānāh—Wa al-shaʿb ʿitsāk ʿala qafāha
We chose him, we’re stuck with him—The people got smacked on the nape of the neck

Mish tawrlīth wa la talbis—Baa reus bimayurdull Allāh
It’s not a bequest or a trap—He was elected fair and square

Wa qulnā amin laqaynā kamīn!
We hoped for a blessing, instead got ambushed!

Gāy wa gāya gamāʿ atuḥ warāḥ—Gībnā ʾākhīnā wa binqūl “āḥ....”
He came with his gang right behind him—We rushed headlong into a wall and now cry out “aaaaaah....”

End Notes

1http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhCUSQ1cr00&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PLblwm gOZDF8ltBPW8TYhA9anmcRe2hwu..  
2http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyDOAQNsTrI.  
3http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-ojkqTHmW0.  
6Memorandum from Board of Directors of CBC Network, 27 October 2013, displayed on air during an interview with Bassem Youssef by Yousry Foda on “Akhar Kalam” (ON TV), broadcast on 4 December 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewl5x5ajvU.  
7http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-ojkqTHmW0.  
9For example the recent viral Twitter hashtag intakhībū al-ars (elect the pimp) directed at Sisi.  
"Literally (as noted in the text): “We chose him and we took him.”

 Literally, “We took the lemon and squeezed it.” The clear implication is that people knew they were getting an inferior product, but still opted to vote for Morsi (Hendawi 2014).

 Il-āh has the double meaning of affirmation and a cry of pain.

 Many believed, or were led to believe, that Morsi had worked for NASA in the United States. The implication is that “we bought into the lie.”

 A reference to Morsi being the alternate candidate for the Freedom and Justice Party after Khayrat al-Shatir was disqualified due to electoral rules.

 Ghūrū min hina means, for example, “Get out of my sight,” but with vulgar force.

 Literally, his terminology, a classical/technical term satirizing Morsi’s idiosyncratic vocabulary, such as the two phrases that follow in the next line, translated as well as possible but originally in context that was considered strange.

 This could be read as even more vulgar.

 The implication is that “we chose to assert our right and it rebounded in our face.”

 The Nahda (Renaissance) plan was Morsi’s electoral program.

 A smack on the nape of the neck is a real insult, designed to provoke a fight or assert dominance.

 Bimā yurđī Allāh here connotes being treated fairly, in a way pleasing to God. Literally, “He became president in a manner pleasing to God,” another poke at Morsi’s Islamist affiliation.

 More literally, “We said ‘Amen’ and fell into a trap!”

 Gamā’atuh, his crowd, is a play on the proper parlance for the original Muslim Brotherhood, which remains officially a social organization and which has since been outlawed. The implication is that while Morsi claimed that as candidate of the Freedom and Justice Party he would be president of all Egyptians, many feared he would represent more narrow interests of his base in the Brotherhood. Warāḥ (behind him) is a play on the chorus line of Ḥna al-Shaʾb, Wa ḫnw̱ ikhtarnāk wa hanimshī warāk, as noted in the text.

 Gibnā ākhīr implies pushing it to the highest gear. This last word, āh is drawn out for comic emphasis, even longer than prior occasions when Allāh was drawn out, spoofing religious chanting.