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Insulting religion or Egypt's president?

Bassem Youssef, the satirist, appears once a week on the CBC channel in Cairo. But it seems this one time was enough to anger Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi who came to power following a revolution entitled "freedom and dignity!" Mursi has turned revolutions into material mocked by other regimes, which must be saying: "Look, the man is busier than Mubarak; chasing journalists and TV channels...What type of revolutions are these, in which their leaders cannot tolerate a weekly television show"

The paradox

The paradox is that President Mursi previously made excessive promises. He has sometimes pledged to protect freedoms. During a television interview, he used Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab's famous quote "if I deviate from the right path, correct me." Back then, a man responded to Khattab saying "(We swear), Omar, if you do, we will correct you with our swords." President Mursi said "if I make a mistake, correct me."

Then later during one of his speeches, he voiced graciousness saying "there is a daily wronging me and I have not shut it down until now!" But it seems he ran out of patience given that the "president's (complaints) against journalists have within half a year reached four times what the 30 years of reign of deposed president Hosni Mubarak reached. They have also reached 24 times the number of cases witnessed during the era of former president Anwar al-Sadat."

It has become clear that the presidency's skin is soft, and it does not tolerate criticism, and perhaps it is on the verge of upcoming fierce battles.

Religion used to terrify rivals

Youssef was accused of disrespecting both Islam and the president. Will the public believe this lawsuit? The difference is huge between a movie that is not played or a book that is not read and a popular show that millions watch. Perhaps Youssef has become more popular than the president himself. Arresting Youssef, or preventing him from doing his show, will destroy this president's image, as Mursi appears to normal men as the good father figure. Bassem Youssef did not disrespect a religion, but he has practiced what the Egyptians are known for, their love of ridiculing people from their society.

Using religion to terrify rivals will not be believed by anyone, and it will not put an end to criticism. Even if Mursi oppresses the Egyptian media, he will not stop people from ridiculing. Deposed president Hosni Mubarak has failed to do so. Mubarak has tried in the past years to achieve this aim by resorting to the judiciary, terrifying people and offering materialistic temptations, and his information ministers failed to silence journalists and writers. Finally, the then-information minister came up with an idea. It was to compete with local media instead of suppressing it. But now, the situation is harder due to the presence of social networking websites and due to the increase of freedom's ceiling given by the revolution.

The number of new channels launched in Egypt after the revolution has reached more than 16. Half of these channels are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood which Mursi belongs to. So why does he get angry when he is in control of state channels and when there are Brotherhood and Salafi channels with him?! The reason is that media figures are attracted to the opposition more than they are attracted to government. And it is that Mursi now sits on Mubarak's chair, in his palace, using his television channels and thinking in the same manner on how to lock up journalists and prevent criticism in general. He added one feature to Mubarak and that is he linked between himself and religion!

Mursi has done it all for observers of revolutions to mock them. Nothing has changed since the fall of Mubarak except that there is another Mubarak now called Mursi!

This article was first published in Asharq al-Awsat on April 3, 2013. _____ Abdulrahman al-Rashed is the General Manager of Al Arabiya News Channel. A veteran and internationally acclaimed journalist, he is a former editor-in-chief of the London-based leading Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat, where he still regularly writes a political column. He has also served as the editor of Asharq al-Awsat's sister publication, al-Majalla. Throughout his career, Rashed has interviewed several world leaders, with his articles garnering worldwide recognition, and he has successfully led Al Arabiya to the highly regarded, thriving and influential position it is in today.