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Comics stand up to view

Comic magazines are a new genre in the world of art and journalism in today's Egypt. However, the history of cartoons in Egypt dates back to the early twentieth century, and Egypt was famous for its pioneering cartoonists such as Rakha, Salah Gahin, Hassam Hakem and Hegazi.

Caricature as an art genre has always been very popular in Egypt, and political cartoons even helped topple several governments in the 1930s and 40s. *Sabah al-Khier* (Good Morning) and *Rose al-Youssef* magazines have along generated brilliant Egyptian caricaturists. In the 1990s came *Caricature magazine*, a unique attempt to bring to the newsstands a specialised monthly publication, but it failed to survive for more than a couple of years because of financial and administrative problems. The new comic magazines that began appearing just a few months after the 25 January Revolution followed on the heels of comic books that made their appearance in the last few years, such as *Metro* by Magdi El-Shafie (2007) and a translation of Kafka's *The Trial* (2009) published by Al Shorouk, which were early motivators of the yet promising artistic phenomenon.

Tuk Tuk, *Autostrad*, *al-Thawragiya* and the most recent, *Al-Doshma*, are four comic magazines that saw light this year. *Al-Thawragiya*, a slang term in Arabic meaning "revolutionists", has so far published three issues. The editor is a young illustrator, Tamer Youssef, and the magazine has taken on the mantle of "The official sponsor of the Arab revolutions' file".

Al-Thawragiya is unique in that it includes cartoons from other Arab countries, among them Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and Morocco. Printed in black and white, *al-Thawragiya* contains a variety of journalistic forms including satirical columns, fiction, cartoons and comic strips. While the four magazines have, in a way, something in common, *al-Doshma* shows a more distinctive editorial policy. The 65-page black

and white magazine focuses mainly on human rights. *Al-Doshma* means "the building" in the literal sense, in other words a place where one can find shelter and protection. The word is not often used, and it is less widely known that it also refers to a hangar that protects tanks in war time.

Bluntly subtitled "Know your rights", the magazine is sponsored by the Hesham Mubarak Law Centre. This is a fairly new phenomenon to the cultural scene, but there is a story behind it that deserves to be told. When Shafie published his comic book in 2007, it drew the attention of censorship for vague reasons.

Metro tells the story of a depressed young man who strives to change his social status, but is driven further into depression by the negative aspects he perceives in Egyptian society. With the help of a friend, he plans to rob a bank. Meanwhile, they witness a murder in the street and discover that the killer featured in the media is not the real murderer. As the friends try to unveil the truth, the novel looks at everyday life in Egypt and the suffering of the poor and disadvantaged. Their quest for truth is pursued by a journey in the Metro (subway), and each of the book's chapters is given the name of a station. Obviously, as any native knows, the big mistake of the artist here was using the actual names of the Metro stations, the most famous and important of which were plain: Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak.

Ahmed Ragheb, a lawyer and director of the Hesham Mubarak's Law Centre, said in the magazine's inaugural article that in case number 4732 for the year 2008, the Qasr Al-Nil court had decided to confiscate the *Metro* novel and to order Shafie to pay a fine of LE 5,000. Ragheb, who was the legal representative in the court, noted that this incident shed much light on the significance of comics as a very effective genre of art. This was when the idea of publishing *al-Doshma* flashed through their minds as a means of illustrating,

in an artistic way, the rights of people to tell stories about their suffering, victories and defeat, and in the same vein increase the number of human rights supporters. Egyptian human rights organisations have long tried to publicise through different means – including reports and research studies – such rights as the right to demonstrate and the right to live in a clean environment. "Comics are, I believe, more effective in many ways," Ragheb says. "After the success of the first wave of our revolution, we should be more adamant about preserving our right to demonstrate, and the right to work in a safe working environment, so that we can all live in a country that respects and ensures human rights of its citizens."

The bi-monthly magazine includes comics, articles, and mini strips by a number of cartoonists and writers. "Our magazine is unique in many ways; it is the first time for a comic magazine to address readers on a tough subject like human rights in such a satirical yet artistic way," Shafie, a cartoonist and the editor of *al-Doshma*, told al-Ahram Weekly. "However, it is not a rule that we should discuss human rights in every issue. We are totally free to choose whatever angle we pick to address our readers. It is a spontaneous process after all." To prove this point, the theme of next issue will be, "I am a human being too!"

The magazine is the product of a series of comic workshops. "We have three groups of comic strip illustrators and writers in Cairo, Alexandria and Mansoura. The workshops include both male and female cartoonists, and they all work on the theme that we pick for each issue." The title of the first comic story is *Three in the Revolution*. Written by Islam Abu Shadi and illustrated by Abu Shadi, Ahmed Omar and Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, it is serialised in several parts. The thinking behind the first part is rather unclear. It tells the story of two lovers: Nevine, a Coptic woman, who happens to form a relationship with Mustafa, a young Muslim, and falls pregnant. The story addresses the unity between Muslims and Copts in the early days of the revolution, but the storyline is obscure and far from amusing. Should a 65-page magazine include serialised comic stories? If the answer is yes, then the story should be clearer and more exciting, otherwise what is the point of publishing a comic magazine? Although some contributors to the magazine are excellent writers like Nael El-Toukhi, a

promising young novelist, readers may be surprised to find that not all the artists are professional. A stark example of this is *The Smoke*, a story by Mona Ki. The script is at best incomprehensible and the drawings are amateurish. "I know this is a disadvantage, but the magazine is like a workshop, and our level of perfection is increasing with time," Shafie said. "Comics are one stream of international popular culture. In the age of the Internet, there are no longer any borders between peoples in the world. Hence, like caricature, which was a brand new art in Egypt in the early part of the twentieth century I expect that comics will gain an increasing popularity with time in our community."

Shafie believes that the increasing number of comic magazines in Egypt is a good sign. "The spread of comics will help convey cultural and educational messages more rapidly compared with traditional cultural media," he says. However, he noted that the origin of comics as a visual art could be found on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples. "The sequence of some ancient Egyptian drawings is the origin of our contemporary art. This sequential art is also the base on which film-making was first created," he explained.

Since the revolution, censorship has decreased to a minimum, especially in popular arts, or so we hope. Shafie himself is pushing the boundaries: "Every subject is there to be tackled. The problem is that some comic artists are not yet used to unconditional freedom," and he winked. "My aim is to increase awareness of the meaning of freedom and liberalism among the youth. Because of our suppressive culture which supports values of loyalty and obedience, we have not learnt the value of freedom. This is what I really care about – more than reaching the point of perfection."

After the publication of the first issue, three different publishers made Shafie an offer to sponsor the magazine. It seems, indeed, that this may be the start of a new, liberal age in Egypt. But fears of impending political and cultural gloom are looming over the scene, and if the Muslim Brotherhood takes hold of authority in Egypt things could change again. "Personally, I am not worried about this possibility. The role of intellectuals and artists is to work on widening this space of freedom we have already seized because of the revolution," Shafie said.

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