# Living in darkness:

# Internet humour and the politics of Egypt's electricity infrastructure

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Abstract: Power cuts have become a lively subject of discussion in Egypt, and they have been extensively mocked in internet memes. Based on a selection of images from the popular Asa7be page, this article examines the visual techniques and joking conventions employed in online memes in order to criticize the Egyptian state's management of the country's electricity infrastructure.

From the 2012 to the 2014 presidential elections in Egypt, the talk of the town was about the recurrent failures in Cairo's electricity infrastructure. While the city was no stranger to infrastructural breakdown under Mubarak, the length and frequency of breakdowns, compounded by equally lengthy and frequent state-planned power cuts, had made electricity (*el-Kahraba*) a lively subject of discussion in everyday life. While power cuts seemed to be at their height in the summer of 2014, a news item surfaced concerning the anniversary of 31 years without a single power cut in Germany. One may imagine that the reception of this news was rather underwhelming to the average German citizen, who presumably takes for granted the wide availability and uninterrupted flow of electricity. To contemporary Egyptians, however, this news was quickly seized upon to mock the failures of the Egyptian state online. Much as Brian Larkin shows in the Nigerian case (2008), infrastructural problems have become material evidence – both to the anthropologist and the Egyptian citizen – of the state's inability to effectively service its citizens, thereby tying technology and governance together in a way which is arguably underplayed in mainstream anthropology (see Larkin 2013). I experienced – and discussed with my interlocutors – several power cuts while conducting my doctoral fieldwork in

2013-2014, yet grew increasingly interested in online jokes about infrastructural breakdown, specifically internet memes shared on the popular Facebook page Asa7be.[1]

While internet humour is produced by a variety of anonymous users, popular pages like Asa7be or Egypt's Sarcasm Society tend to have regular contributors, as evidenced by their signatures on memes (see Figs 1, 9 and 10). These contributors are largely young males, and according to a caricaturist friend, many tend to be integrated in the offline circuit of press illustrators and designers. In general, internet humour appears to be a young male hobby in Egypt: the vast majority of my interlocutors who regularly share memes on their personal Facebook pages are 15- to 35-year-old males. This impression may be influenced by my own positioning as a young Egyptian male without extensive access to female sites of internet consumption, but the content of the humour suggests that these memes are mostly targeted towards – if not consumed by – young urban males. Thus, the extensive references to popular movies (*effehat*) are not likely to be understood or enjoyed by an audience above the age of 40, who presumably would not recognize many of the late 1990s and 2000s blockbusters referenced in online jokes. Similarly, as Armbrust (1998) has already argued, moviegoing in Cairo is largely a young male activity, and riffing on popular movie references can reasonably be associated with a similar online demographic. This is indeed how the 'Facebook youth' (*shabab el-Face*) are stereotypically imagined in Cairo – as an insolent, cynical, and tech-savvy group of young urban males – and they are therefore usually seen to be the main audience of internet humour.

[1] Asa7be translates as 'hey my friend!', but visibly spoken in popular (*shaabi*) Egyptian dialect. The Facebook page currently gathers over 800,000 followers, while its daily posts are archived in various online albums and widely shared by individual Facebook users.

Since internet memes can take a variety of forms – from captioned images to subtitled videos – communication scholar Limor Shifman proposes a simple definition of 'memes' using three criteria: (1) memes are units of 'cultural information that passes along *from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon*'; (2) memes reproduce '*by various means of imitation*'; and (3) memes diffuse through '*competition and selection*' (2013: 364-365). Shifman duly notes the uneasy conceptual proximity between the spread of internet memes and various biological metaphors (including the 'viral' one), yet what should concern the anthropologist is the way in which they are easily shareable, potentially transformable units of digital content. This is the case with all internet memes, but in the Egyptian case, digital content is transformed according to local joking conventions and arranged in recognizable joking genres, including gags (*nokta*, pl. *nokat*), caricatures (*karikateir*), funny movie lines (*effeh*, pl. *effehat*), and comic strips (*comix*). All these are not always intelligible to the non-Egyptian viewer, since they make extensive reference to current events in Egypt as well as popular Egyptian movies and plays. This makes online memes continuous with ongoing political events and everyday political conversation in Cairo, which is especially evident among my digitally plugged interlocutors.

In this article, I will not discuss how specific memes are produced and circulated in Egypt since I do not have sufficient evidence to address the matter; rather, I would like to explore, with examples selected from Asa7be's page, the way in which memes condense various visual techniques and joking conventions to deliver a political point concerning Egypt's electricity infrastructure. This satirical viewpoint is largely absent in state-sanctioned media platforms (e.g. newspapers, satellite television), which is why the digital transmission of memes matters in

today's Egypt as a space where alternative political opinions can be expressed outside the state's immediate sphere of influence.[2] Though my analysis will focus on memes as 'texts', one needs to bear in mind that any understanding of Egyptian popular culture 'requires a familiarity with popular texts that is more like what Orientalists do with medieval texts – relating them to each other, comparing them with other textual traditions, juxtaposing them, classifying them – than like the anthropologist's fantasy of spending a year with "informants", "picking up the language in the field", and relying on "theory" to do the rest' (Armbrust 1996: 6). To add another caveat, the selection of memes that I will discuss – indeed, the very choice of selecting from Asa7be's page – should not lure the reader into thinking that all Egyptian memes are political in nature. This is not the case. But on the topic of electricity infrastructure, the meme's entertainment value is compounded, in various instances, by overt political commentary.

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Starting with an accessible example, unusually written in English (see Fig. 1), one can observe several conventions in Egyptian memes at play: the overlaying of Asa7be's logo with the author's signature in the bottom right corner; the use of captions and screenshots from popular movies; and the use of a 'reaction shot' as a visual punchline. When Batman is seen speechless in the last frame, his speechlessness underscores the pun made by Catwoman about his dwelling

[2] This is not to say that the state has no influence over the internet in Egypt: major telecommunication companies were effectively forced to shut down all networks during the 2011 revolution, while online surveillance has become an increasing part of the security apparatus's strategy in Egypt (as mocked by some of Asa7be's contributors, in fact). With this caveat in mind, the latitude in overt political criticism allowed on Facebook since Sisi's ascension to power is well above what can be seen in newspapers, on television, or on radio.

in a 'dark' place – i.e. Egypt without electricity. Such reaction punchlines work, thanks to the image's affective charge, which sometimes has little to do with its original context. When Khaled Saleh cries in response to Ahmed Ezz's question (see Fig. 2: 'How many hours do you get electricity, Moataz?'), the meme communicates the lamentable electricity service through Saleh's tears, without requiring detailed knowledge of the scene in *Mallaki Eskendereyya* (*Alexandria private licence*) where Saleh's character (who is actually called Montasser, not Moataz) reveals a crime to Ahmed Ezz, the detective. A similar affective play is visible in Fig. 3, which shows an anxious character watching over his computer, in visible fear of the electricity supply shutting down midway through his ongoing download: the effect is achieved without reference to the scene in *X-large* where Ahmed Helmy is anxiously awaiting his love interest's reply. To be sure, the purportedly young male Egyptian target of these memes will be able to immediately identify the pop culture references made by these images, thereby increasing the humour of the juxtaposition between a caption, a reaction, and a memorable *effeh*; but the message about the electricity service is put across very effectively by the image of Saleh's head buried in his hands (Fig. 2) or Helmy's anxious perambulation (Fig. 3).

In addition to using images to illustrate a captioned point, some memes dim the image's brightness in order to visually inscribe the darkness occasioned by power cuts. When Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab asserts that the Egyptian energy authority is among the best in the world (see Fig. 4), he is immediately ridiculed by Fouad el-Mohandes' cry in a visibly darkened theatre. The original scene is from *Sokk 'ala banatak* (*Close on your daughters*), a popular play where el-Mohandes is a single father trying to raise his somewhat eccentric daughters 'on his

own hands', with comically disastrous results, however much he might scream about it. The correspondence between the minister's attempt to manage the electricity infrastructure 'on his own hands', and the uneven results obtained, is what makes Fouad el-Mohandes' cry in a dark theatre funny. Fig. 5 uses a similar visual effect to a somewhat different end: Mohammed Saad (left) and Ahmed Helmy (right) stand in front of a portrait of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, marvelling at his beauty and the 'light of his eyes' (*nour 'eneih*). When Helmy asks Saad whether he sees 'the light of Sisi's eyes', Saad replies, 'Of course, they're lighting the whole world!' at which point the power is cut, thereby making the whole world literally dark. The reaction punchline is evident again, but there is a more complex web of meanings at play here. The meme references a popular movie entitled *55 esaaf* (*Ambulance #55*), where the two main characters are rather incompetent ambulance men who fall in love with their emergency doctor. In the original scene, Saad and Helmy praise the doctor's beauty in front of her portrait, hanging in their living room. In the meme, the doctor's portrait is replaced by Sisi's portrait, and the seemingly innocent dialogue about the woman's/Sisi's beauty undermines the president in an ironic twist: 'the light of my eyes', an expression which one might use in romantic contexts, was *actually* used by Sisi in his official addresses in order to express his care for the nation.

What seems striking in Fig. 5, in contrast to all previous memes, is the direct link established between the power cut and the head of state. The joke lies not only in the visual and textual effects of the meme, but also in the fact that despite the Egyptian people's praise of him (exemplified by Saad and Helmy), Sisi is unable to avert power cuts. This is even more directly shown in Fig. 6, where Sisi poses as a 'thug' (*baltagi*) who hustles an ordinary citizen 'for the

sake of Egypt' – another expression used by Sisi in his official addresses. The citizen answers that he has to go home quickly because he needs to put meat in his fridge, but Sisi assures him that the meat will rot in any case, because he will cut the power in the whole neighbourhood. The joke is more striking when one knows that Sisi almost literally repeats the dialogue in the now classic comedy *el-Lembi*, where Mohammad Saad (Sisi in the meme) plays a drugged-out working class buffoon trying to extort some unsuspecting neighbour in one scene. What is striking beyond the movie *effeh*, I would argue, is the clever identification between two scales of analysis: on a micro-level, the thug hustles money and terrorizes the neighbourhood; on a macro-level, Sisi demands public donations for the sake of Egypt, yet still cuts all the electricity in the neighbourhood.

Sisi is not the only metonymical representation of the state's unwanted electricity cuts. In Fig. 7, the minister of electricity is responsible for cutting the power since, as he says, 'Egypt is lit by its people' (a metaphorical expression which should mean that Egypt is lucky to have its people, as though it were a benevolent host, though the minister seems to retain the literal meaning). In Fig. 8, a generic military man shuts down the main character's 'good idea' lamp – and, by extension, his access to electricity. In addition to showing how various incarnations of the state (the president, the minister, the army) are directly criticized for the power cuts, these images represent the wider range of visual expressions and joking conventions used in Egyptian memes. Fig. 7 is a plainly written joke (*nokta*), which could have been told by anyone sitting in a café or in any Cairene street (and indeed, I have actually heard variants of the wordplay about 'lighting' very often). Fig. 8, in turn, uses conventional figures from Western meme websites

such as 9Gag, thereby pointing to the interconnectedness between Egyptian and global internet-based meme conventions. These include 'derp', the candlestick character who features variously as the expressive male protagonist in a comic, as well as the smiling Yao Ming, an iconic photo-turned-drawing-turned-meme of retired basketball player Yao Ming, who is posing as a military officer in Fig. 8. While 'derp' faces are generally appropriated in similar ways in Egypt as in Western meme websites (i.e. to denote the various expressions of a comic strip's main male character), the expressions denoted by 'derp' – or, indeed, by the smiling Yao Ming – are not straightforwardly translatable between Egyptian and non-Egyptian memes. Thus, there is a specifically Egyptian use of Yao Ming icons, which very often work as performative indicators that 'this meme should be funny' (as evidenced in his overlaying in Fig. 8), rather than the more common use n Western websites, where Yao Ming's icon occurs mostly in mocking a situation.

I would further argue that in some memes, the criticism of the state's failure in governing the electricity infrastructure is implicitly associated with an overarching failure in governance. In Fig. 9, the well-known el-Qarmouti character, an old babbling café owner in Cairo, asks his interlocutor to find a job for his son Wahid: he tells him that anything will do, even seating people in a movie theatre (still a common practice in Egypt's commercial theatres), adding that his son is great at holding flashlights. In the original scene from *Maalesh ehna bnetbahdel* (*Sorry, we're getting slandered*), el-Qarmouti's son is set on going to America, where he manages to secure a job as the White House's gardener thanks to John's help (the interlocutor in the meme). By juxtaposing Wahid's story with a reference to the failure in electricity provision, I would argue that the meme simultaneously criticizes the state for its inability to maintain an

electricity service *and* to provide gainful employment opportunities for the educated youth in the country. Similarly, in Fig. 10, George Sidhom (impersonating Libya, as shown by the flag on his shirt) asks Samir Ghanem (impersonating Egypt) to give away electricity to Libya, but Ghanem replies that he wants electricity too. The international communication between Egypt and Libya is reduced to an absurdist skit, thereby ridiculing Egypt's international policies as well as its inability to service its own citizens, let alone Libyans.

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In this article, I have only discussed a very small fraction of Egyptian memes on electricity, let alone Egyptian memes in general. What I hope to have shown, very briefly, is how various visual techniques, pop culture references, and joking conventions are marshalled by Egyptian memes in order to communicate sustained, humorous criticism of state-led power cuts. In this context, internet memes follow a tradition begun by caricatures and comic strips in the Arab Middle East (Douglas & Malti-Douglas 1994), though one may argue that the intertextual resources marshalled online seem more eclectic and less restrained in their direct use of commercial movie material. I also hope to have reconfirmed Larkin's insight (2008) that infrastructure is a prime subject matter in everyday discussions of state governance in post-colonial settings, whether in Nigeria or in Egypt.

Now, whether these online memes are articulated with wider movements of resistance against the Egyptian state, whether (and to what extent) they are influential in offline conversations, or whether their specific circumstances of production impact their creation and consumption in a politically charged way, are all questions which would need additional research, but I hope that this article will set internet memes on the agenda of digital anthropologists. In so doing, I do not wish to merely exhort the inclusion of more Middle Eastern contexts in this emerging field (though this would be a welcomed outcome), but also point to a neglected source of data in the work of social anthropologists interested in exploring everyday engagements with the state, especially in a Middle Eastern context. Reconstructing the crisp humour of internet memes is not only entertaining, then, but also an effective way to grasp everyday representations of state action. In contemporary Egypt, the state's management of the electricity infrastructure becomes impersonated by a gallery of pop culture characters who, for the time being, are condemned to living in darkness.

## Captions

Fig. 1 (comic by Doctor Error)

No caption needed.

Fig. 2

Ahmad Ezz: *'How many hours do you get electricity, Moataz?'.*

Fig. 3

Caption: *'While your computer is downloading and you're afraid of a power cut'.*

Fig. 4

Caption: Egyptian daily *El-Masri el-Youm*: '*Prime Minister Mahlab: "The administration of electricity is among the most efficient in the world".*

Fouad el-Mohandes: *'On my own hands!'.*

Fig. 5 (from right to left)

Mohammed Saad (in white): *'Do you see how beautiful he is?'.*

Ahmad Helmy (in yellow): *'Yeah, I see...'.*

Ahmad Helmy: *'Do you see the light in his eyes?'.*

Mohammed Saad: *'How can I not? They're lighting the whole world'*.

Fig. 6 (from right to left)

Sisi (in yellow): *'Stop! Get out what you have for the sake of Egypt'.*

Bald man (in white): *'Sorry, I've bought a kilo of meat; I'll go put it in the fridge before it rots'.*

Sisi: *'It'll rot anyway*'; Bald man: *'Why?'.*

Sisi: *'Because I'll cut the power in the whole neighborhood'.*

Fig. 7

(in black) *'They asked the minister of electricity what are the reasons for the continuing power cuts*?'.

(in red) *'He told them Egypt is lit by its people, so we thought we'd save a little money*'.

Fig. 8 (from right to left)

Derp: *'I have an idea'.*

Fig. 9 (comic by Tiva)

El-Qarmouti (in yellow): *'Could you please find a job for my son in America? Even if he just seats people in the cinema'*;

*'My son, Wahid, if only you could see him holding a flashlight during a power cut'*;

*'He holds the flashlight like a pro!'.*

Fig. 10 (comic by Mahmoud Halim)

Caption: Egyptian daily *El-Masri el-Youm*: *'Libya asks for Egypt's help after a power cut in Eastern Libya'.*

Samir Ghanem (to the left): *'You want help for the electricity shortage?'* Georges Sidhom (to the right): *'Yeah...'.*

Samir Ghanem: *'What's the problem? I want help too'.*

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