

• *Articles* •

“The Superman in a Turban”: Political Jokes in the Iranian Social Media

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Abstract: *In this article, I examine political jokes that flooded social media after Hassan Rouhani won the 2013 Iranian presidential election. I argue that political jokes in non-democratic countries like Iran are not unified expressions of resisting, succumbing to, or making fun of a shared oppressor. They can rather be interpreted and used in very different ways, even by those who are normally placed under the overarching category of “the politically oppressed.” I examine the polysemic nature of the “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes and trace the ways in which they have been interpreted and utilized to represent contradicting political opinions of different groups of people. I also compare the “Thanks, Rouhani” joke cycle to its American counterpart, “Thanks, Obama.” This juxtaposition, while revealing interesting parallels between the two cycles in terms of their form and content, also highlights a similar level of complexity in the meaning and usage of political humor regardless of the state of politics in the two countries.*

Both sides of my pillow are cool! Thanks, Rouhani!!!

—Facebook Commenter

On the evening of June 14, 2013, Hassan Rouhani won the Iranian presidential election with more than fifty percent of the popular vote. Soon after the results were in, the “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes started to pop up on social media networks. The jokes looked very simple and straightforward. They thanked the new president and gave him credit for either real or imaginary positive occurrences in people’s daily lives or the ease of their trivial inconveniences, like hitting all the green lights on the way to work. The jokes portrayed Rouhani as having the power to solve any and all kinds of problems, from social or political issues to those completely unrelated to

the government, such as interpersonal relationships, family issues, or trivial personal problems.

But what do these online one-line jokes that thank the president of a semi-authoritarian state tell us about the joke-tellers relationship to their government and the way in which humor works for different individuals or groups in the society? Scholars within and beyond the field of folklore have formerly studied face-to-face communication of political humor in countries under authoritarian states, such as Romania (Dundes 1971, Cochran 1989), fascist Spain (Brandes 1977, Pi-Sunyer 1977), Nazi Germany (Merziger 2007), post-socialist Belarus (Astapova 2015), and some Arab countries (Shehata 1992, Kishtainy 1985, Badarneh 2011). Several studies have addressed the nature of such political jokes and how they work for people living under totalitarian states. Different theories have referred to political jokes as a means for speaking the unspeakable (Dundes 1971, Banc and Dundes 1986, Schutz 1995, Freud 1905), as "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), as means of non-violent resistance (Larsen 1980, Pi-Sunyar 1977), as admission of defeat in the face of an undefeatable oppressor (Kishtainy 1985, Speier 1998), and as tools for soothing and alleviating anxieties (Dundes 1971, Brandes 1977, Pi-Sunyar 1977, Schutz 1995).

While offering important insights into the nature and function of such humor, I find two limitations with the above theories.¹ First, many approaches to political humor in authoritarian states tend to simplify the complexities in the societies under study, create a binary of powerful and powerless, and theorize about the overall function of humor for the politically disenfranchised. This is while the "powerless" themselves do not belong to a single group in terms of their political perspectives, and it is not possible to theorize about the meaning or function of political joke-telling for people as a collective population. Even though individuals might be living under the same oppressive ruling system, they can still tell and receive political jokes in very different ways. In other words, the polysemic nature

of jokes cannot be ignored in favor of portraying an overall function even when looking at a non-democratic context.

Second, these theories are mostly based on the premise that political joke telling under oppressive situations is a potentially risky conduct that needs to remain underground or be whispered if individuals wish to escape its ramifications. The use of digital media, however, can significantly complicate such theories, as it helps reduce the potential risk involved in face-to-face communication of politically charged humor, and provides a unique venue for folk humor of the politically disenfranchised to be publicly accessible. It allows people to share potentially sensitive content not just with a small group of trusted individuals, but also with a large audience without fear of repercussion.

Digital media also provides folklorists with a new opportunity to study political humor in non-democratic countries, especially at a time when the definition of folklore has moved away from emphasis on “face-to-face” interactions among “small groups” (Ben Amos 1971). In addition, “the validity of folkloric study and the internet as a compatible duo” has been long established (Blank 2009, 17). It is now commonly understood that digital media is not simply a conduit for *transmitting* the vernacular culture and facilitating folk processes, as it was initially suggested in the early 1990s (Dorst 1990, 181). It is rather “fully capable of generating, transmitting, performing, and archiving folklore and other symbolic communicative expressions” (Blank 2012, 12). In this sense, the virtual world has provided an ideal space for the *emergence* of new folkloric forms and content that may not otherwise exist in face-to-face communication. This generating capability has been already shown in the case of “photoshops” (Frank 2011), emailed humor or list jokes (Frank 2009, Oring 2012), and community discussion threads or chat room communications (Dobler 2009, Howard 1997, 2006, Miller 2007), to only name a few. The one-line jokes like “Thanks, Rouhani” are examples of such folk expressions that are both generated and more easily transmitted on the internet. In this case, it is not only the digital medium that facilitates the safe and widespread transmission of the political

content, but also the form of the jokes (one-line statements or images) that is dependent on digital media for effective communication.

The study of political humor on the internet has attracted some folklore inquiry in the recent years. Margaret Duffy, Janis Teruggi Page, and Rachel Young have traced the right-wing anti-Obama forwarded emails for their visual rhetoric and their role in “constructing participants’ individual and group identities” (Duffy et al. 2012, 177). Astapova (2013) has studied online jokes about the 2010 dismissal of Yury Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow, and the way in which they correlate with other expressions of political opinions on the internet about the same subject. Shifman (2014), has looked at internet memes as political participation in democratic societies and as democratic subversion in non-democratic states. Other studies have looked at folk humor on the internet that emerges in response to disasters—a type of humor that cannot find an outlet in mainstream media as it is not considered politically correct, like post 9/11 humor or celebrity death jokes (Blank 2013, Ellis 2002, Frank 2011). However, scholarship is still limited when it comes to internet-based folk humor in response to politics or current events in less democratic countries. What remains underexplored is the possibility that the internet and digital media provide for the creation and dissemination of political humor in repressive contexts, and how digital media can give us a window to understanding the now publicly accessible humor of the politically marginalized in a more nuanced way.

By examining the “Thanks, Rouhani” joke cycle in the Iranian social media networks, I intend to contribute to this understudied aspect of political humor and also offer an alternative, more nuanced way of looking at political joke telling in non-democratic countries. Building upon several examples of the verbal and visual “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes shared on Facebook and describing the controversial political situation in Iran, I demonstrate the polysemic nature of these jokes and the ways in which they have been appropriated by different anti-state groups to suit their political viewpoints.

I also draw a comparison between the “Thanks, Rouhani” cycle and its American counterpart, “Thanks, Obama.” It is worthy of attention that these two cycles, which apparently had no influence on each other, resembled one another so closely in terms of overall form, content, and usage in two very different political contexts. The juxtaposition of the two cycles serves to demonstrate a similar level of complexity in the meaning and interpretation of the political jokes in different societies regardless of their respective political systems. It is meant to show that people living under an authoritarian state have as much diversity of political attitude and relationship to their ruler as those living in a more democratic society that cannot suppress their voices.

Research for this article started in spring 2013 almost three months before the presidential election, and continued until June 2014. To gather my data, I spent several months observing jokes and user comments, primarily on three Facebook humor pages:

"مملکتہ داریم؟" ("What kind of a country is this?!")

"پہ نہ پ" (roughly translated as "What else then")

"²روحانی مچکریم" ("Thanks, Rouhani!")

I also tracked down the more sporadic usage of the phrase on Facebook until April 2016. My focus was not merely on jokes posted on each page by the admins, but a large part of my analysis relies on individual expressions in comment threads where people interacted with each other humorously or seriously and shared their own contributions to the joke cycle. User comments have been italicized throughout the article to distinguish them from the main posts that appeared on each page. In order to protect people's anonymity and right to privacy, I have removed all identifiers and blacked out full names where they appear in the screenshots. All jokes and comments have also been translated from Persian to English, which makes it

impossible to find the source of the quotes either through search engines or by personal recognition of familiar posts.

Since the peak of popularity of "Thanks, Obama" jokes was before I began researching for this article, it was not possible to engage with the cycle in every phase of its development. For the purpose of my brief comparison to the "Thanks, Rouhani" cycle, I relied on the examples of the jokes and opinions around them that were already archived on different websites (like Reddit or *Know Your Meme*) or jokes I could find through a Google search. I understand that some nuances may have missed as a result. Here, I have presented only a limited number of "Thanks, Obama" jokes and mainly as a point of comparison. Getting the full scope of the jokes and their complexities would require a closer analysis of a bigger sample of material, which has been beyond the scope of the present article.

The Iranian Political Context in 2013: The Opposition Camp

The Iranian 2013 presidential election was the scene of major controversies. The previous presidential election in 2009 was believed by many to have been rigged in favor of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and had resulted in a series of demonstrations, followed by arrests, tortures, and killings of the protestors by the state. The two reformist candidates of the 2009 election, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, as well as their wives³ had been confined to home imprisonment, and the Islamic Republic had done everything in its power to bring an end to what was called "the 88 sedition."⁴ By 2013, the already fragile trust between the opposition group and the Islamic Republic had been shattered. Not only did many people see themselves as unrepresented in the election, they also felt they could not trust the Islamic Republic to hold a fair election.⁵ The excitement about the possibility of political change that had flourished in 2009 had almost completely given way to indifference and hostility towards voting among many people.

The drastic economic situation of Iran at the time had added to people's dissent. In the final month of 2012, the currency value was experiencing a record low, inflation was soaring, and Iran was under the economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries, mostly as a result of the policies of right-wing conservatives who had been in power for the past eight years.⁶ Amidst all these hardships, the state continued to spread the election propaganda: the Supreme Leader repeatedly appeared on news broadcasts asking for people's "epic presence"⁷ in the election to show their support of the Islamic Republic. Many people, however, were not on board with the Supreme Leader. The common perception among those in opposition to the state was that after the turmoil caused by the controversial 2009 election, the Islamic Republic would not allow any non-conservative candidates to run for president. The election could be simply an act of choosing between bad and worse with no positive outcome for the opposition group. The more common understanding was that, like the previous election, the name to come out of the ballot boxes was already decided and the rest was only a show to represent the so-called democracy of the Islamic Republic to the world; therefore, taking part in it could only help perpetuate the state's propaganda.⁸

However, a divide appeared among those against voting after a reformist and a moderate candidate—Mohammad Reza Aref and Hassan Rouhani, respectively—were approved by the Guardian Council⁹ to run in the election. Following the lead of a number of reformist parties and figures who endorsed the two candidates,¹⁰ some people started to change their minds about boycotting the election, arguing that the nomination of moderates and reformists was the last opportunity to be seized to save the country from the fundamentalists.¹¹ Others, however, remained opposed to voting. They believed the Islamic Republic would not allow a moderate president to take office. In addition, the supposedly non-conservative candidates were basically "one of them,"¹² only playing a different role to persuade people to vote and give legitimacy to the regime's claims of democracy. Those who had turned in favor of voting accused the pessimists of believing in conspiracy theories and exacerbating

the situation by boycotting the election and paving the way for a fundamentalist to easily come to power. Those against voting, on the other hand, accused potential voters of being gullible fools who could not see they were being exploited and played with by a regime that had shown its real face in the previous election.

At the center of all these discussions was the moderate candidate, Hassan Rouhani.¹³ As a cleric with the platform of political moderation and economic development, Rouhani prompted both positive and negative reactions among the non-conservative and more secular minded Iranian population. His inclination toward change, especially with regard to foreign and cultural policy, separated him from the pool of conservatives running for president. But his status as an Islamic cleric and his previous positions within the Islamic Republic also made him the target of suspicion and mistrust in some people's minds: how could an Islamic Republic insider go against the system and change anything for the better?

In short, the bone of contention seemed to be whether he was "one of us or one of them." But this idea also broke down into a rather wide spectrum. In my observation and documentation of election-related discussions on Facebook both before and after the election, I developed a category of ideas about Rouhani among the non-conservatives that might help sum up the rather complicated situation:

- He's definitely one of them, trying to trick us into believing he's one of us—voting is stupid—the election is just a set up.
- He's basically one of them, but may have a few characteristics that are kind of close to us—Voting is still not an option since there won't be any changes.
- He's closer to us than, say, fundamentalists, but he still has to comply with what the regime demands, and thus may not be able to bring

about any significant changes—ambivalence toward voting: what if we elect him and he doesn't keep his promises?

-He's our only option under the circumstances, and while having to comply with the larger system, he might be able to bring about some positive changes—let's vote and hope for a change/at least keep fundamentalists from gaining more power.

This spectrum is important when it comes to understanding the "Thanks, Rouhani!" joke cycle that widely circulated in and beyond social media after the election. As I demonstrate, verbal and visual jokes in this cycle can be read from almost any of these perspectives, and can be taken as a commentary about the opinion of any of the other groups. This diversity of ideas has made the jokes available for cross-viewing and/or appropriation by several groups of people.

The "Thanks, Rouhani" Joke Cycle, or What's in a Thanks?

Before examining possible meanings and interpretations of the jokes, let us look at a few more examples of the jokes that were shared on several humor pages on Facebook immediately after Rouhani's election, and re-shared and contributed to by the audience. Some of the jokes touched upon subjects that were not politically sensitive, while others took a stab at the state's non-democratic rule and its control over people's lives. The following Facebook post is one of the first widely disseminated "Thanks, Rouhani" jokes:

Our air conditioner has stopped making noise since Rouhani's been president. Thanks, Rouhani :))



Figure 1. One of the first “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes. Screenshot from the Facebook page “What else then?” June 15, 2013.

The comments under this post covered a wide range of topics: someone had received fewer mosquito bites while sleeping, a headache had been stopped, and someone’s mom’s cooking had been more delicious, all because of Rouhani’s presidency. Some other examples also referred to trivial personal problems and inconveniences having been resolved:

Since Rouhani’s been president, my headphones don’t get tangled anymore! Thanks, Rouhani!!!

I don’t get red eye in photos anymore! Thanks, Rouhani!

Both sides of my pillow are cool! Thanks, Rouhani!!!

In Rouhani’s term, if you doze off in class the teacher puts a blanket on you (instead of kicking you out.) Thanks, Rouhani!!

Some jokes commented on issues related to the state’s control of citizen’s daily lives, especially that of the youth whose basic freedoms were being restricted under the Islamic Republic. Jokes of this kind mostly referred to imaginary incidents that *could*

happen under president Rouhani. In Figure 2, for example, a beach guard insists that a woman go and put on her bikini and take off her hijab before getting into the water. In reality, women can be banned from swimming in the sea even with their hijab, let alone in a bikini—as the guard is probably reminding the girl in the original photo (Figure 3). The situation in the joke has been reversed, however, since Rouhani is now president.



Figure 2. The beach guard asks a woman why she's not wearing her bikini. Screenshot from the Facebook page "Thanks, Rouhani!" June 26, 2013.



Figure 3. Image from Deutsche Welle website, captioned “Authorities have tried to separate the sexes on Iran’s beaches.” May 27, 2013.

Another joke makes the case that under Rouhani, being caught by the morality police would not be a terrible experience:

I was kissing my girlfriend in the park when this scary guard appeared out of nowhere, gave me a key and said “take it my son, go here and have some fun.” Thanks, Rouhani!!!!

This is of course just another imaginary incident; kissing one’s partner in public can end up being very unpleasant for those who are unlucky enough to get caught in the act by the morality police. A similar experience is getting pulled over by the police with one’s partner in the car, which would usually yield similar consequences. In the following joke, however, the scenario is very different from the way such encounters normally go down, again because Rouhani is now the president:

Police stopped my girlfriend and I while driving today.
- “Is she your sister?”

- "No sir."
- "Is she your wife?"
- "No sir."
- "Are you related in any way?"
- "No sir."
- "But you look great together; get married, you'll make a pretty baby!"

Thanks, Rouhani!!!!

The election of Rouhani *was* in fact the harbinger of some good news, as it coincided with several incidents that gave the public a sense of exuberance and contentment. As the election results were announced on June 14, 2013, thousands of people poured into the streets, screamed, danced and celebrated this victory. These celebrations lasted several nights. In some cities, the police that are often ready to suppress any kind of gathering were rather cooperative with people. They let men and women dance together and sometimes even joined people in their celebration. Rouhani's election also coincided with small economic changes: The day after the election the value of the plunging Iranian currency increased slightly against the dollar (by about 6%)¹⁴ and there were small reductions in the prices of goods. All these were little things to thank the new president for, and the "Thanks, Rouhani" chant, which is quite rhythmic in Farsi,¹⁵ could be heard during many street celebrations.

These were followed by several other uplifting events in the first two weeks after the election. For example, Iran's national soccer team defeated South Korea on June 18 and entered the World Cup after eight years of absence, which was a big deal due to the popularity of soccer in Iran and a legitimate excuse to continue street celebrations. A few days later, between June 23 and June 28, the Iranian men's national volleyball team started to perform exceptionally well after a couple of defeats in its first appearance in FIVB World Volleyball League, and won against two

of its strongest opponents, Serbia and Italy.¹⁶ There was nobody to thank for the turn of events but Rouhani.

Other unprecedented incidents happened during these two weeks that generated a lot of “Thanks, Rouhani” responses. On a number of occasions, there were “unIslamic gaffes” during the live broadcast of the soccer and volleyball games, as the state-run TV accidentally showed images of women without “appropriate clothing” that were always cut from the original broadcasted images.¹⁷ In one of the games, Colombian pop star Shakira was shown among the spectators in Brazil while cheering on her soccer player partner, Gerard Pique. On several other occasions, Iranian girls appeared on the television screen in tops and miniskirts as they were cheering Iran’s volleyball team against Italy in Sardinia on June 28. Both incidents stirred up huge controversy among conservatives and great surprise among Iranian sport lovers who often had to put up with strict censorship of live games on national television.¹⁸ The following pictures are screen-shots from the games that were broadcast live from the state-run channel 3 and immediately started to circulate on social media with the caption “Thanks, Rouhani,” followed by comments like this:

The next step, god willing, is Shakira’s concert in Milad Tower [in Tehran]. Really, thanks Rouhani :))



Figure 4. Shakira appeared for a few seconds on Channel 3 during the live broadcasting of the Spain-Italy soccer match in Brazil, June 27, 2013.



Figure 5. Iranian spectators of the Iran-Italy volleyball match in Sardinia were shown several times without hijab on Channel 3 during the live broadcast of the game on Jun 28, 2013.

All these incidents within two weeks of Rouhani's election created an opportunity for people to celebrate and enjoy themselves in a way that had not been possible for years. In fact, it was a brief departure from the everyday realities many people were struggling with in their everyday lives. Figure 6 shows a post on the Facebook humor page "What else then?" that describes the situation very well:

This week has to be called the "Week of National Orgasm"... =))))))

Some of the comments under the post read:

Hope we're having a delayed one!

God is making up for the past eight years in a week! :D



Figure 6. The week of national orgasm. Screenshot from the Facebook page "What else then?" June 28, 2013.

But the jokes were not simply expressions of gratitude of those who believed Rouhani had already rolled up his sleeves and was turning things around. Even Rouhani's supporters did not believe that he *actually* had something to do with the uncensored television broadcasts, let alone with the victories of the volleyball team, or people's pillows being cool. If the "thanks" was meant literally, there would have been nothing humorous about these statements as they would be simply reflecting the reality. In order for laughter to arise, based on Beattie's incongruity theory, we need "two or more inconsistent...or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage" (Beattie in Oring 1987, 277). As Elliott Oring explains, it is this "appropriate incongruity" in a statement, usually manifested in the punchline, that makes the text (or a juxtaposition of text and image) funny and turns it into a joke (Oring 2004). The "Thanks, Rouhani" jokes also incorporate this sense of appropriate incongruity, but the way in which it is interpreted can be different depending on who is reading the jokes or passing them along. The opposite ways of perceiving this appropriate incongruity has made the jokes funny to people with very different views about Rouhani.

For the supporters of Rouhani, portraying him as the force behind all the good things happening to people humorously captured a sense of relief and hope—even if imaginary, exaggerated, or tongue-in-cheek—that resulted from having elected a moderate president to replace the right-wing conservatives. Rouhani may not have been seen as a savior who had the power to change things the moment he took office. His election was rather a symbol of the overall hope in a slightly brighter future that was hoped to be achieved under moderation rather than fundamentalism—a progress that could even seep into the most trivial aspects of people's daily lives. This sense of cautious hope can be seen in the following post, written by the admin of the "Thanks, Rouhani" page on July 10, 2013:

It's not like something has really changed in a week. It's more like hope has suddenly made us see the full half of the glass whose empty half we always used to see.

For those who supported Rouhani, the jokes could be a form of what Oring calls "momentary revisions of reality," by creating a temporary space where the usual forces of the state could not penetrate (Oring 2004, 227)—an imagined society under Rouhani in which economic hardships were on the decline, people's lives were getting easier and more enjoyable, and the state's control on citizens' lives was no longer something to worry about.

But we cannot stop here. We must also consider what the jokes meant to Iranians fed up with the status quo. Not all those celebrating in the streets, chanting "Thanks, Rouhani" and passing along the jokes were his supporters. In fact, many were among those who had refused to vote, and for whom the only benefit of Rouhani's presidency was perhaps a limited opportunity for partying. One commenter wrote for example:

Many people on the streets tonight were those who had simply missed laughing and having a little fun. Otherwise, everyone knows that the donkey is the same, it's only wearing a colorful saddle!

Drawing upon a common saying,¹⁹ this comment demonstrates the perception of many boycotters about Rouhani and his capabilities or intentions. Rouhani was no different from the rest despite his more moderate discourse and policy positions. From this viewpoint, the appropriate incongruity in the "Thanks, Rouhani" statements was perceived in a different way. The coming together of apparently impossible matters as a result of Rouhani's presidency confirmed the pessimists' ideas that some people were so credulous as to consider him their savior. In other words, what resolved the incongruity of the joke was the supposed gullibility of their

fellow citizens, and the joke was on those who believed Rouhani was capable of standing against the overarching ruling system.²⁰ The jokes also presented the feeling of cynicism and suspicion toward Rouhani's ability to change anything of real value. His biggest accomplishments could be to give you tangle-free headphones or cool your pillow, but he could not free the political prisoners, cancel the law of mandatory hijab, or improve the catastrophic economy. Read from the perspective of Rouhani's critics, the same "Thanks, Rouhani" jokes hinted at his inability to make life easier for people, while also critiquing those who were (supposedly) attributing random incidents to Rouhani's presidency:

Everything's been in perfect order since Rouhani's been elected. For example, the last day of last week was also the last day of the month and the last day of spring. Again, the first day of this week is also the first day of the month and the first day of summer! Thanks, Rouhani!!!

Since Rouhani's been president, we didn't have a backyard but now we suddenly have one! And a grape tree grew in our yard that gives coconuts. And when you open the coconuts, there are green plums inside. Thanks, Rouhani!

Not happy about being considered naïve and delusional, Rouhani's supporters in turn added their own jokes to the cycle that poked fun at the critics for their unrealistic expectations. These jokes also targeted those who had voted for Rouhani but soon felt betrayed by not seeing any immediate results. This group started placing Rouhani in the category of "them"—the bad guys—again. This immediate sense of hopelessness among some voters can be seen in a user comment from September 5, 2013:

I was such a fool to vote for him... Nothing has changed yet.... The police are still arresting people for their appearance... Political prisoners are still in jail...prices are still high. I'm regretting every single moment that I voted.

This comment was written only a month after Rouhani's inauguration, but some people were apparently expecting the new president to step up and fix things in a matter of days. Some of the later jokes seem to be commenting on such high expectations:

If Rouhani won't open a local branch of Las Vegas in Tehran by next week, some people would say "didn't I tell you he was one of them?!"

☹

I'm hungry, there's nothing in the fridge. What the hell Rouhani?! Is this how you return our trust?!

Some are arguing that Rouhani doesn't turn off the light for us when we wanna sleep. Be a little content folks! It's the end of the semester, Rouhani is busy studying and passing classes for us! Thanks, Rouhani!!

We demand Rouhani to make people understand ASAP that he's the president, not Harry Potter.



Figure 7. "What people expect of Rouhani." Screenshot from the Facebook page "What else then?" July 13, 2013.



Figure 8. Image captioned "WTF Rouhani??" Image from the Facebook page "What else then?"

The Appropriation Phase

A few months after June 2013 when the election fever dwindled, "Thanks, Rouhani" went mainly in two directions and got appropriated in ways that made it less open to multiple readings and interpretations. By the end of year, one major way of using the phrase was juxtaposing it with important rather than trivial positive changes, in a way that challenged the idea that Rouhani was only able to exert influence on the most trivial matters. The phrase was used in relation to events such as some political prisoners being released, or Rouhani's phone call with Barack Obama on September 2013²¹ that was taken as a sign of his real intent to solve the tensions with the West. It was also used with reference to his speech about people's right to have access to the banned social media, emphasizing that "the current world is no longer the place for one-sided media or one-sided pulpits."²² Such uses of the

phrase were not meant to create jokes, but were attempts to appropriate the familiar message that was previously open to interpretation, and make statements that had only one meaning: Rouhani is not one of them.

The other way to appropriate “Thanks, Rouhani” was juxtaposing it with negative incidents or problems that had exacerbated after Rouhani’s presidency. These jokes more directly represented people’s hostility toward Rouhani and anger about his apparently unfulfilled promises and could not be read from any alternative standpoint. Some of these jokes, for example, held Rouhani accountable for the continued state-imposed restrictions on the Internet that were supposed to be lifted, or at least eased, during his presidency. In the following visual jokes, the colorful picture that is featured several times is a screenshot of the page that comes up when people try to access restricted content online—commonly said to be “filtered” by the state. The colorful page includes several categories of officially approved websites with “safe” content that the users are suggested to choose from. Figure 9, captioned “Thanks, Rouhani...” shows this filtering page having appeared everywhere, keeping people from watching television, looking out of the window, having contact with the outside through the intercom, or even enjoying the most basic pleasures in life like sitting on an armchair—all thanks to Rouhani and his failed policies. Figure 10 points at a similar issue with a caption that says: “last night I was peeping at the girl next door. Today I woke up to a filtered window!”



Figure 9. A visual joke showing how everything is filtered, holding Rouhani responsibility by sarcastically saying "Thanks, Rouhani."



Figure 10. Even windows are apparently filtered under Rouhani. Screenshot from the Facebook page "What else then?"

Such examples were no longer open to interpretation and were meant to be sarcastic. They mostly represent the opinions of the critics of Rouhani, but they can also be a form of self-directed criticism of those who supported and believed in the new president. Such jokes could serve as either a reminder to lower their expectations and open their eyes to realities or simply as expressions of the disappointment in the cause they believed in and fought for. Three years after the election of Rouhani, this is now the predominant way in which the “Thanks, Rouhani” phrase is used—with bitterness and sarcasm. Although sanctions are partly lifted and the relationship with the world has ameliorated as a result of Rouhani’s foreign policy, the domestic situation has not improved as far as it concerns the state of economy or personal and political freedoms. As of this writing, the most recent use of “Thanks, Rouhani” has been in reference to the state’s deployment of 7,000 undercover morality guards to report “indecent behavior” in public. Rouhani, unable to stand against the system and bring about noticeable changes, is now the failed Superman who can only be thanked sarcastically.

As I showed above, several variations of “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes were shared by people with different opinions about the election and Rouhani himself. It is not clear who first started the jokes, from which political perspective, and for what purpose. But no matter which group originated the jokes, what is important is that people who are normally grouped under the overarching category of “politically oppressed” or “the opposition” have managed to assign very different meanings to the same jokes about the president of their non-democratic country. As I demonstrated, this took place primarily in two ways: by interpreting the same jokes in a way that would fit the individual’s political viewpoints and by appropriating the phrase “Thanks, Rouhani” to generate forms of creative expression that would resist multiple readings and interpretations.

The “Thanks, Obama” Cycle

It was almost by accident that I came to learn about the “Thanks, Obama” jokes and memes that had been in circulation as early as 2009. In “Thanks, Obama” jokes, we often see the phrase juxtaposed with a picture, animated GIF, or verbal description of a situation in which someone is struggling with a rather simple task and fails. Thus, if we were to replace Rouhani with Obama in some of the jokes above, we would have statements like: “My A/C has *started* making noise. Thanks, Obama!” or “Neither sides of my pillow are cool. Thanks, Obama!” Despite the relative resemblance of the two cycles, one blaming and the other praising the president for some trivial incidents in people’s daily lives, I could not find any trace of the “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes to have been inspired by the American joke cycle that preceded them. The two cycles, nevertheless, share a similar ambiguity of meaning and potential for cross-viewing as well as overall form and content, while differing in terms of medium of representation and pattern of development.

One difference between the two cycles is that “Thanks, Obama” jokes have been mostly created in the form of visual memes that build upon a similar category of images, while the “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes have remained more word-oriented.²³ Even though there are many visual “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes that reference the same content, they do not share or build upon a similar *form*, which is a required element for them to be characterized as memes (Shifman 2014, 41). This is not a big difference, however, as both joke cycles would lend themselves to more than one medium: Most “Thanks, Obama” jokes can be expressed without the use of images (albeit less effectively at times), and many “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes can be turned into visual memes to convey the same message.

The second point of difference between the two cycles is the pattern with which their different usages and interpretations have developed. Unlike the “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes which cannot be traced back to a person/group with a specific political viewpoint, the first usage of “Thanks, Obama” has been documented to go back to a 2009 tweet by a Republican (Schwarz 2015). In this

tweet, the phrase is used in a hashtag together with #tcot, a hashtag that stands for Top Conservatives on Twitter.



Figure 11. The first documented usage of the “Thanks Obama” hashtag.

This first usage was obviously against Obama, and the message of the tweet was not open to interpretation, as Obama was thanked rather literally for his anticipated failure and handing over the power to Republicans as a result. The statement itself was not exactly a “joke,” but rather an attempt to mock the new Democratic president without invoking a more indirect sense of irony or incongruity.

The expression of negative sentiments about Obama on the internet was of course not unprecedented. Margaret Duffy, Janis Teruggi Page, and Rachel Young show that since January 2009, anti-Obama forwarded emails were illustrating a picture of him as an “un-American, un-Christian, power-obsessed, weak, or Nazi-like” figure, who was at the same time “diabolical” and “incompetent” (Duffy, Page & Young 2012, 178). The earlier uses of “Thanks, Obama” represented this viewpoint, though they seem to have put more emphasis on Obama’s incompetence over his supposedly evil character.

The second usage of the phrase documented by Schwarz seems to have followed the same pattern, albeit with a somewhat different spin. The following picture (Figure 12) was published on December 2009 on a conservative political blog, and was another direct attack on Obama. Here, “Thanks, Obama” was juxtaposed with the image of an angry little girl giving the middle finger to the president, sarcastically thanking him for bringing about some kind of economic catastrophe in his first year of being in office, and as a result ruining her present and future life prospects. For a while, “Thanks, Obama” was used in an obviously sarcastic fashion that could not be read otherwise. Obama was blamed in relation to what conservatives considered major social, political, and economic problems that could be expected under his administration.



Figure 12. An early predecessor of “Thanks, Obama” memes. Image from the website knowyourmemes.com.

In 2011, the phrase took on yet another life, and began to be used with reference to trivial personal inconveniences that had nothing to do with the administration, like burning your toast, spilling your coffee on your term paper, or generally failing to carry out a very simple task or facing an unforeseen complication. These new “Thanks, Obama” memes, animated GIFs, and verbal jokes quickly started to circulate all across the web. “Thanks, Obama” pages were created on Quickmeme, Tumblr, Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, and other websites. The Quickmeme page, for example, featured the photo of a sullen-looking President Obama with caption listing petty grievances that were followed by the phrase “Thanks, Obama.”



Figure 13. Some memes in which Obama is blamed for personal or public inconveniences. Image from the website quickmeme.com.

At the time, the “Thanks, Obama” page on *Know Your Meme* described the jokes as “a sarcastic expression used by critics of President Obama to blame personal troubles and inconveniences on public policies supported or enacted by the administration.” But the memes did not obviously remain in the hands of the conservatives who had initiated the sarcastic use of the phrase, as Obama’s supporters read into them a very different meaning. They saw the jokes rather as a way to make fun of those who believed every social ill or trivial problem was a direct

result of Obama's presidential policies. One of the comments under the "Thanks Obama" page on *Know Your Meme* reads:

I think people are missing the point here, this is actually about making fun of people who blame everything on Obama rather than conservatives being sarcastic.

And another person puts it this way:

...It may have started out being done by people that dislike Obama, but it is pretty clear now that it has changed into something that makes fun of Obama critics. In other words it was started by people that blame Obama for all of societies[sic] ills, then the rest of society took it to an absurd degree which intentionally or not makes real Obama critics (at least the far right ones) look stupid.

Taken from this perspective, "Thanks, Obama" jokes closely resemble certain variants in the "Thanks, Rouhani" cycle. They are quite similar to the jokes that made fun of Rouhani's critics for expecting him to prove his good intentions by immediately fixing everything. We can even find similar content being used in both cases, showing that the two cycles have almost come together at some point:



Figure 14. Obama held responsible for a can of food that cannot be opened.

Similar to the case of “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes, these differences of opinions and interpretation of the jokes created the need for the rival groups to appropriate the phrase and bend it to their own political views. Figure 15, for example, is the screenshot of a Facebook page that was created by those against Obama. It clearly states that the memes are loved by “patriots and haters of Obama,” and therefore are not to

be understood and interpreted in any other way, at least as long as they are featured on this page.



Figure 15. Screenshot of a “Thanks Obama” page created for “haters of Obama.”

On the other hand, some Obama’s supporters employed the phrase in the literal sense, juxtaposing “Thanks Obama” with positive changes Obama has managed to accomplish. This usage of the phrase, therefore, countered the sarcastic interpretation of the memes. Figure 16 is an example of such appropriated use of the phrase.

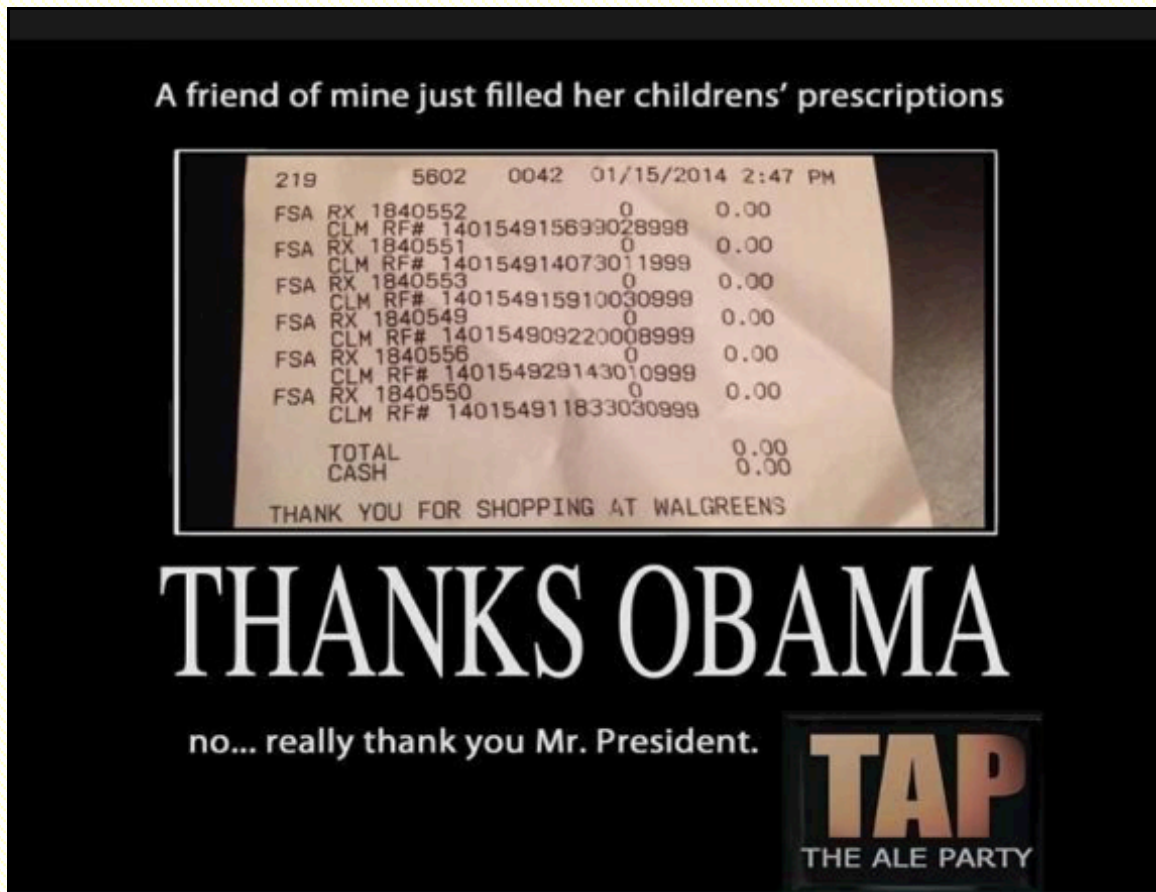


Figure 16. Thanks Obama used to refer to positive changes Obama has accomplished during his presidency.

Although this image may no longer be a joke, it does reference the jokes by critiquing the critics of Obama who used the phrase for making sarcastic remarks about him. By saying: “no...really, thank you Mr. President,” it is made clear that despite what the viewer might expect at first glance, the juxtaposition of the image and the phrase is not meant to be perceived as a joke. It is not to be appropriated by Obama’s critics and read with different intentions. The equivalent in the “Thanks, Rouhani” cycle would be thanking Rouhani for something significant that he had actually accomplished during his presidency or a promise he had fulfilled—a statement without sarcasm that cannot be considered a joke but affirms the presidents’ capabilities.

President Obama himself has used the phrase on several occasions in ways that hint at its different meanings. In a 2015 BuzzFeed video, “Things Everyone Does but Doesn’t Talk About,” Obama thanks himself as he realizes his cookie is too large to dunk in his milk, hinting at his critics’ obsession with blaming him for every little problem in their lives.



Figure 17. Realizing his milk glass is too narrow to dip his cookie, President Obama says “Thanks, Obama.” To view click the image above or follow the link to <http://y2u.be/uhY9Zxv1-oo>.

The “Thanks Obama” subreddit²⁴ that was one of the biggest online archives of the jokes officially closed after this video on February 13, 2015, with a message that said:

THE MAN HIMSELF USED THE DAMN JOKE.
CANT TOP THIS. WE'RE DONE.

This, of course, did not bring an end to the emergence of new “Thanks, Obama” jokes and visual memes or the continued circulation of the older ones. Not surprisingly, Obama himself has kept using the phrase in other situations. During his keynote conversation at SXSW on March 2016, he used the phrase in reference to his successful prevention of another Great Depression and bringing unemployment down to below 5%, while still being criticized by his Republican opponents.



Figure 18. President Obama uses “Thanks, Obama” once again, this time with reference to his own accomplishments. To view click the image above or follow the link to <http://y2u.be/PvKXAj49ZDc>.

Although the jokes are no longer in their peak of popularity, "Thanks, Obama" is still used from time to time by both pro- and anti-Obama groups to make fun of one another and prove a negative or positive point about the president. Of course, the jokes can be open to interpretation from other viewpoints as well, as people cannot be categorized into a clear dichotomy in terms of their opinion about President Obama and his policies. The meaning of the jokes can change every time a person clicks the "like" or "share" button, even if no alteration is made and no overt political commentary is added.²⁵ As I also showed in the "Thanks, Rouhani" case, it is not possible to find out the intention of every individual who shares the jokes, the perception of every individual audience member, and the meanings that are being communicated in the process. These identical texts have the capacity to fit into themselves various expressions and interpretations of people who may not have much, if anything, in common.

Conclusion

"Thanks, Rouhani!" jokes were short and simple, but the complex political context in which they were placed, the contradictory opinions of voters and non-voters, and the blurry boundaries of the groups with which people identified created fluid, slippery, and overlapping meanings and usages of the jokes. Some may have taken the jokes in the literal sense as the expression of gratitude and happiness toward the new president. For others the jokes embodied a sense of hope and created a temporary alternate reality. Some read the jokes with a sarcastic tone, and perceived or re-told them as a critique of those who believed Rouhani would have the power to change things. Others approached them with a sense of disappointment in the president who they hoped would bring about major changes. And yet others, who believed in more gradual reform, told the jokes to tease people who believed if Rouhani did not perfect everything, than he was simply "one of them." The jokes, therefore, have been far from a unified expression of praising,

resisting, or critiquing the ruling system and/or its president. They rather illustrate the struggle among people who hold different political opinions and approach their government from contrasting perspectives. The “Thanks, Rouhani” jokes demonstrate that living under a more authoritarian state and opposing the ruling system does not turn individuals into a collective whole and their folklorist expressions into a unified message against a shared oppressor.

To the outside observer, the clash of ideas between the anti-and pro-Obama groups in the United States might seem to be deeper and more nuanced than the differences of political opinions among all of the Iranians who share a feeling of antipathy toward their non-democratic government. I demonstrated, however, that a more-or-less similar kind of humor can exist in two very different political contexts, can be situated in equally diverse political discourses by different people, and can be open to multiple interpretation based on who reads and shares them.

In nondemocratic societies in which access to face-to-face political humor might be limited both to the people and the researchers, digital media can serve as a tool to mirror the lack of homogeneity that exists among people despite their shared creative expressions. It provides an opportunity for people to voice their diversity of opinions more openly and without fear of repercussion, and allows the researchers to get a glimpse of the complexities and nuances of political humor in politically repressive societies.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elliott Oring, Dorothy Noyes, and Harvey Graff, as well as my M.A thesis committee (Ann Ferrell, Tim Evans, and Rob Howard), who read drafts of this article in different stages of progress since Spring 2014 and offered their valuable suggestions. Any remaining errors are my own.

Notes

¹ For a detailed discussion on other limitations of some of these theories, see Oring

² The “Thanks, Rouhani” Facebook page was created on June 15, 2013, one day after the election of Hassan Rouhani as president.

³ Mousavi’s wife, Zahra Rahnavard remains under house arrest, but Fatemeh Karroubi was released after a few months.

⁴ The number refers to the year 1388 of the Persian calendar (2009) when the majority of the demonstrations took place.

⁵ For more on 2009 election and its influence on 2013 election, see the *Guardian* article “Iranian elections: ‘Opposition? There is no such word here’”
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/20/iranian-elections-opposition-president-hosseini-mousavi>

⁶ For more on Iran’s sanctions and fall of the rial’s value, see Plaut’s article on Gatestone Institute: <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3597/iran-rial-collapse>

⁷ حضور حماسی—A term that is often used in the state-run media to refer to high voter turnout.

⁸ For an overview of 2013 Iranian Presidential election, see CNN article by Smith-Spark: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/12/world/meast/iran-election-explainer/>

⁹ All candidates for the presidential and parliamentary elections need to be deemed qualified by the Guardian Council before being eligible to run in the election.

¹⁰ For more on the endorsements and their significance, see Rezaian’s article on the *Washington Post*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/irans-former-vice-president-mohammad-reza-aref-drops-out-of-presidential-race/2013/06/11/4572b18e-d283-11e2-b3a2-3bf5eb37b9d0_story.html

¹¹ I was personally part of this the pro-voting group.

¹² از خودشون/one of them. In popular discourse, the phrase refers to whoever is somehow associated with the Islamic Republic.

¹³ The debate about whether or not to vote heated up especially after the reformist candidate, Mohammad Reza Aref, withdrew from the election, making Rouhani the only non-conservative candidate.

¹⁴ The currency value increase is stated in the *Guardian* article on Rouhani's election <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/15/iran-presidential-election-hassan-rouhani-wins>

¹⁵ The "Thanks ___" formula is commonly used in the context of sport events in Iran when people celebrate the national teams' victories and want to express their gratitude to the players. The rhythmic chant "ba-che-ha, mo-cha-ke-rim" بچه‌ها مچکریم which roughly means "thanks guys" is usually heard during street celebrations when Iranian teams win an important game. This might have been a reason the phrase "Thanks, Rouhani" or "Rou-ha-ni, mo-cha-ke-rim" روحانی مچکریم became so quickly popular—not just because of the familiarity of the "Thanks___" phrase, but also because the rhythm and number of syllabi in the two phrases matched perfectly in Persian.

¹⁶ The string of volleyball team victories continued with wins against Cuba and Germany between July 5 and 12, 2013.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_FIVB_Volleyball_World_League

¹⁷ For a full report on these "unIslamic gaffes" see Kamali's article in the *Guardian*:
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/03/iran-hardliners-shakira-confederations-cup>

¹⁸ For an overview of the controversy, see
<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/07/04/world/social-issues-world/iran-volleyball-streak-flusters-censors/#.Vx0aLTArLGg>

¹⁹ خر همون خره فقط بالونش عوض شده. A variant of the phrase was also used as a chant during the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran: "We say we don't want the Shah, they change the prime minister/ we say we don't want the donkey, they change its saddle."

²⁰ In some jokes, the appropriate incongruity can also be seen in a different way by those on the side of the ruling system. For religious conservatives who think a reformist president might undermine the real Islamic values, what makes the

incongruity in the jokes appropriate is the idea that Rouhani is in fact a traitor who will uproot Islamic principles. It would be no surprise if things like making out in the street could really happen under his presidency. I have not elaborated on this usage as it does not fall under the category of anti-state political humor.

²¹ For more on the Rouhani-Obama historic phone conversation, see Mason and Charbonneau's article in *Reuters*: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-iran-idUSBRE98Q16S20130928>

²² Full text of Rouhani's speech in Farsi is available on Fararou website: <http://fararu.com/fa/print/190485>

²³ Generally speaking, visual memes that would borrow images from the Iranian context have not been very popular so far. However, more globally famous memes are sometimes adopted in reference to native content. For example, "The Rock Driving" meme thread was adopted several times during the election year to make jokes about different candidates. For more information on the meme thread itself, see <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-rock-driving>

²⁴ Thanks Obama page on Reddit: <https://www.reddit.com/r/ThanksObama/>

²⁵ Russell Frank (2009) has discussed this idea in relation to forwarded emails.

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