



WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2015



Chinese artist's Ai Weiwei work 'He Xie' is pictured during a press preview at the Royal Academy in London yesterday, ahead of the opening of a major exhibition of his work. The exhibition runs from September 19 to December 13, 2015. — AFP

A street car named satire: 'Kabul Taxi' lampoons Afghanistan



An Afghan man browses the Taxi website at an internet cafe in Kabul. — AFP



Afghan woman satire Masouda Khazan Tokhi 39, displays cartoon papers inside of her home in Kabul.



Afghan woman satire Masouda Khazan Tokhi 39, types satirical pieces on a computer at inside of her home in Kabul.

From ridiculing warlords to poking fun at the political elite, a crop of covertly run Afghan satirical outlets are resonating widely with disenfranchised citizens and provoking the ire of officials. Afghanistan's spy agency last month rounded up journalists suspected of running "Kabul Taxi", accusing the satirical Facebook page of imperiling national security. The crackdown, which catapulted the little-known page to fame, triggered outrage and defiant Internet memes such as "I am Kabul Taxi!" spotlighting a new generation of clandestine political satirists.

A blend of humor and scathing wit, the page launched by an unknown Afghan in April depicted a yellow Toyota taxi with its motto scrawled on its rear windscreen: "Life is bitter and the future uncertain". It tapped into widespread angst over corruption and political dysfunction. Posts depicted high-profile politicians and bureaucrats squeezing into the back seat and descending into petty bickering and mocking conversations.

Passengers have included President Ashraf Ghani and his ally in the national unity government, Abdullah Abdullah. But the Facebook page invited trouble when it targeted Hanif Atmar, the powerful national security adviser. A Kabul Taxi post describes picking up Atmar and his 27 children, who are introduced as part of an oversized entourage of advisers hired on hefty salaries.

The post mocks a recruitment process seen by Afghans as nepotistic and prone to favoritism. Atmar was not amused, ordering the grilling of journalists rumored to be behind Kabul Taxi on suspicion of exposing state secrets by naming his advisers. Defenders in the Afghan media pointed out the names of Atmar's staff were already posted on a government Facebook page along with their photos. "The government considers satire as terrorism," Kabul Taxi wrote in the aftermath of the controversy, which sent its fan base soaring with the number of "likes" nearly doubling to 60,000 and provoking an outpouring of public support before it was suddenly taken down.

"The Afghan National Security Council (NSC) should be chasing suicide bombers, not the driver of a taxi," wrote one Facebook user. Efforts to apprehend the page administrator incited an outpouring of ridicule for Atmar. One animated video on Facebook shows him chasing a taxi, which mischievously lurches forward every time he tries to get in.

'Eagle eye'

The booming genre of political satire has a special place in Afghanistan, where all major problems plaguing the country—militancy, warlordism and corruption—seem linked to what many describe as the venality of politics. Politicians are widely berated as insincere, power hungry and concerned only about the welfare of their own ethnic groups. "The role of satire in Afghanistan is to keep influential people, especially politicians, on their toes," said a co-founder of Afghan Onion, a new English-language satirical website that pays tribute to the US website of the same name.

"It is to make them aware that they are being watched with an eagle eye—not by corrupt authorities then by the public who can expose them," the anonymous co-founder told AFP.

But the crackdown on Kabul Taxi has raised concerns over free speech in Afghanistan, which ranks 122nd out of 180 countries in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. Human Rights Watch has documented increasing intimidation and violence against the Afghan media over the past two years as international support wanes amid a drawdown of foreign troops.

But political satire will thrive despite the risks, said Jalal Noorani, author of a forthcoming book "Art of Satire". "Satire has survived the rigours of time. It survived the Taliban, the mujahideen, the civil war," Noorani, 66, told AFP. "You can try to restrict satirists, even imprison them, but you cannot stop the flow of satire," he said. "The post-Taliban era is... a golden age of bold, fearless satire." But Masouda Khazan Tokhi, the editor of a satirical monthly called Achar Kharboza (Melon Pickle), says she has fielded threatening calls even for benign posts mocking the sartorial choices of some politicians.

The co-founder of Afghan Onion said running a satirical site is a "calculated risk", but no one is off-limits to mockery and ridicule. After insurgents brazenly stormed a prison this week, freeing dozens of Taliban inmates, the site posted: "(Atmar's) NSC claims they are chasing the Taliban escapees in Kabul Taxi." — AFP

Fans flock to honour queen of crime fiction Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie fans have descended on her hometown of Torquay on the English Riviera for the 125th anniversary of the murder master's birth yesterday as the crime novel enjoys a global revival. Simplicity is the key to her enduring popularity, said Christie's only grandson Mathew Prichard, who has been the chief custodian of her work since the queen of crime fiction died in 1976. "My grandmother wrote books to entertain people," he said. "She liked the thought of them enjoying them if maybe they're in hospital or on a long train journey. I think this was the beginning of it all." A century on the novels continue to sell by the millions and Torquay, a genteel Devon seaside resort, is hoping to harness their universal popularity even though the novels have little in common with today's thrillers.

Christie's works hark back to a bygone era in the first half of the 20th century when murder most foul was often committed with old-fashioned poisons. John Curran, an expert on the novels and author of "Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks", said the books can be devoured by children and academics with the same pleasure. A learned mix of amateurs and specialists attended a series of lectures and conferences in Torquay aiming at dissecting the novelist's work and life. Delegates engrossed themselves in Christie's intimate world, exchanging views over tea, dinners with white tablecloths and butlers, or in flower gardens that could have come straight from her stories. All that was missing was the customary corpse.

Picture-postcard nostalgia

Around 100 events have been organized and thousands of people from the world over are attending, said Pam Beppard, head of communications for the festival. At one event, expert Kathryn Harkup will describe the poisons used by Christie, and why it was the author's favorite method of killing off her characters. "Because of her background as trainee at a dispensary she knew a lot about lots and lots of different poisons," said Harkup, a chemist and author of "A is for Arsenic", a study of Christie's poisons. French writer and editor Anne Martinetti will look at the recipes and dishes that appear in the novels, which often feature marmalade, scones and pies.

Curran will explain how home-schooled Christie's storytelling evolved over the course of five decades. "This woman who never went to school is the biggest selling and most translated writer of all time," said Curran. Christie wrote no fewer than 80 books, which are continually adapted for the cinema and television. "In the UK, every night there is an Agatha Christie somewhere on some channel. That of course is a factor in her continuing popularity," he added.

TV dramas featuring the moustachioed Belgian detective Hercule Poirot or the wise spinster Miss Marple have brought Christie to a new generation. With their dinner parties, operas, and trips on the Orient Express, the adaptations offer a glimpse of a picture-postcard world of English high society, a world that continues to delight Christie fans worldwide. — AFP



This picture taken in March 1946 shows British author Agatha Christie, in her home, Greenway House, in Devonshire. — AFP