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Article abstract

This paper is an ethnographic study of digital culture and Iranian online political humor: a hybridized genre of folklore which converges in both online and oral spheres where it is created and shared. It specifically explores the emergence and growth of politicized humorous cellphonelore, which I term “electionlore”, during and after the 2016 February elections in Iran. Analysing different joke sub-cycles in this electionlore, I argue that they serve as a powerful tool for my informants to construct their own “newslore” (Frank 2011) and make manifest what I define as “vernacular politics” through which they become mobilized and unified in their political activism. I diverge from the theory of “resistance jokes” (Powell and Paton 1988; Bryant 2006; Davies 2011) and propose a new framework for studying political jokes in countries suspended between democracy and dictatorship, demonstrating how jokes serve as an effective and strategic form of reform and unquiet protest.

POLITICAL MOVEMENT AND ELECTIONLORE

An Exploration of Iranian Politics Through Digital Folklore

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Digital folklore studies have opened up new possibilities for exploring the far-reaching and effective roles of folklore in various new aspects of individuals' lives in societies. In this digital age, folklore is no longer just the study of "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben Amos 1971). With the advent of new media technologies and the growing popularity of digital communications, folklorists have long unbound folklore studies from their limitation to face-to-face interactions by seeking and exploring various folkloric expressive forms which are created and transmitted outside of the oral realm, in the digital sphere.

From the early scholarship on "office copier folklore" (Dundes and Pagter 1975, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2000) and "photo-copier folklore" (Dundes and Pagter 1996) to contemporary studies of the Internet and folklore (e.g. Blank 2009, 2012), they have demonstrated that new technologies not only short-cut the transmission of oral folklore, but also provide a unique platform for flourishing new generations of vernacular expression, such as online humour (Astapova 2017; Laineste and Kalmare 2017; Rezaei 2016; Blank 2013; Bronner 2012; Oring 2003 and 2016: 126-146; Frank 2004, 2009, and 2011; Laineste 2003), digital vernacular religion (Howard 2009 and 2011), Internet and urban legends (Fernback 2003; Blank 2007; Peck 2015) and cyber folk art (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, Foote 2007), whose existence and growth may not be feasible in the off-line world.

Folklorist Robert Howard points out that nowadays, since the Internet is mundane and digital communications are an inseparable part of everyday life, the question of whether there is folklore online or if vernacular network communications contain folklore are out-dated (2015: 248). Indeed, after publications of anthologies *Folk Culture in the Digital Age* (Blank 2012) and *Tradition in Twenty-First Century* (Blank and Howard 2013) and special

issues in the *Journal of American Folklore* on “Digital Network Hybridity” (Howard 2015) and on “Computational Folkloristics” (Tangherlini 2016), scholarship in digital folklore has passed infancy, and the old inquiry of to what extent digital vernacular expressions converge or diverge from their oral counterparts has shifted to what are the advantages and confinements of digital culture for online folklore.

Answering this question, a number of folklorists focused their exploration on identifying the empowering and limiting roles of new technologies in vernacular responses to social and political phenomena in society. For instance, Frank introduces and defines the term “newslore” (2004 and 2011) as that which individuals creatively generate and share online to express their political comments or criticize news media. Likewise, Cocq explores the empowering role of twitter hangtags in creating folksonomies which led to the mobilization of Sami indigenous groups online (2015). Through numerous examples, she shows how this linguistically and politically marginalized group benefited from twitter in their identity performance and linguistic revitalization movement (2015).

Online humour is a genre of digital folklore which empowers individuals and in some cases surpasses the limitations of its oral counterpart. Some folklorists have identified its unique effects and roles in different political contexts: Forming group identity and reinforcing political polarization and hostility through anti-Obama forwarded emails (Duffy, Page, and Young 2012), subverting political hegemonic discourses through Internet memes (Shifman 2014), criticizing news through digitally altered photos and newslore (Frank 2004 and 2011), constructing a global response to disaster through folk humour in 9/11 jokes (Ellis 2003), expressing untellables through celebrity death jokes (Blank 2013), and making polysomic political statements through visual and verbal election jokes (Rezaei 2016) are some of the achievements of various forms of digital humour for individual users who create and share them on the Internet.

My paper contributes to this long list by exploring the particular case of Iranian political online humour which appeared around the two elections of 2016, the parliamentary and “Assembly of Experts” elections. In this research, I combine virtual ethnography with fieldwork materials and draw on some of my 31 interviews, which I conducted in different cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Bandar-gaz during 2015 and 2016. My informants whose ideas and thoughts are cited in this paper were all born in the 1360s on the Persian calendar (the 1980s on the Georgian Calendar) and constitute the

first generation born after the 1979 Revolution.¹ They are all university educated and are politically and socially aware. Born in the digital age without the need to adapt to technological changes of their time, they are “digital natives” (Prensky 2001, 1) who benefit from emergent technology to undertake their political activities. To protect their identities, upon their request, I use pseudonyms for all my informants throughout this paper.

In this research, I study my informants’ virtual interactions to examine the role of digital culture in creation and transmission of what I call “election-themed cellphonelore” or “cellphone-mediated electionlore.” I argue that this form of digital folklore not only contributes to but also *creates* a political movement. Therefore, I conclude that e-lore is capable of making political changes which seem unattainable within the limitations of the oral sphere.

Bringing forward, once again, the open-ended question in humour studies of whether humour is capable of “real” political change in a society, in this paper, I re-examine this general inquiry from a different standpoint. Instead of asking whether humour is only, using Davies’s metaphor, a “thermometer” (Davies 1990), merely reflecting the political climate, or a “thermostat,” having effective long-term consequences, I shift the focus of this debate to the context where humour is shaped, fostered, and received. The digital arena, which makes the existence of this genre of folklore possible in Iran, not only makes humour free from its oral bands but also empowers it in such a manner that, along with other forms of online vernacular expressions, it plays a crucial role in political activism for this group of young Iranians.

A large group of humour scholars who argue that political humour has only micro-level effects, such as achieving moral victories (see Kishtainy 1985; Benton 1988; Cochran 1989; Davies 2001, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2011; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Laineste 2013), regard political jokes as just “indications of the truth” (Davies 2010) and “not a form of active

1. This generation of Iranians is known as “the ’80s kids” (“Dahe Shasti ha” in Farsi). Opening their eyes in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war, they were called “the buds of the Revolution” (“Ghonche haye Enghelab” in Farsi) by the state. They are the children of parents whose generation overthrew the last monarchy in Iran and carried out a revolution. They are also the younger siblings of “Dahe Panjahi ha” (“the ’70s kids” in English) who witnessed this revolution as young children. For an ethnographic account of the contemporary social and political lives of these groups of Iranians, see Khosravi (2008).

resistance” (Benton 1988: 54), and their “critique [is] in many cases harmless and playful” (Shifman, Coleman, and Ward 2007: 466). Viewed through this lens, they conclude that political humour is “not a sword, but it is an attractive decoration on the scabbard” (Davies 2007: 302) because it “does not make political resistance more effective, but it does make the message more attractive” (Laineste 2013: 489). This view also reinforces the existing dichotomy between joke-telling in democratic countries versus dictatorial, so-called “repressive” regimes. Humour in repressive regimes is predominately studied in different parts of the Soviet Union (Adams 2005; Davies 2007; Krikmann 2009; Laineste 2009); the dictatorial state of Franco in Spain (Brandes 1977; Pi-Sunyer 1977); the Egyptian military regime of Abdel Nasser (Shehata 1992); Nazi Germany (Speier 1998; Herzog 2011); and Czechoslovakia (Bryant 2006) and Norway (Stokker 1997) during Nazi occupations. In this body of literature, joke-telling is often analyzed as a “risky business” (Oring 2004) and frequently labelled as “dangerous” and “whispered” (Beckmann 1969; Dundes 1971; Draitser 1979; Lipman 1991: 18). On the other hand, humour in democratic “Western” countries is regarded as the secondary entertaining tool to ridicule politics and politicians with decorative and ineffectual consequences (Shifman, Coleman, and Ward 2007).

My study of Iranian political humour stands in opposition to this view by introducing a new political context which does not fall under either side of the aforementioned binary division. In suspense between democracy and totalitarianism, post-Revolutionary Iran exists in a gray area where limited political, social, and civic freedom is available to its citizens. Nevertheless, the awakening uprising in 2009, known as the Green Movement,² once again shows that Iranians grasp and take full advantage of any opportunities

2. In June 2009, when the government declared Ahmadinejad as the winner of the tenth presidential elections, hundreds of thousands of Iranians spontaneously poured into the streets, first in Tehran and later across the country, and accused the state of election fraud. Chanting “Where Is My Vote?” and “Give Back My Vote!,” they demanded their uncounted votes and requested the removal of Ahmadinejad from office. Shortly thereafter, this outburst turned into a national movement whose supporters not only expressed their dissatisfaction with the regime in street protests, but also sought fundamental social changes in different aspects of the society. Despite the subsequent brutal crackdown by the government, including the massive imprisonment of protesters, journalists, and political/social activists and the house arrest of the movement’s initial leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnava, and Mehdi Karubi, according to political scientists, the Green Movement has brought about long-term consequences in Iranian society (see Nabavi 2012 for a collection of essays on religious, political, cultural changes after the Green Movement).

to fight for and advance their ideals of democracy and reform. Along with other pro-Green Movement voters, my reformist informants' engagement in the 2016 elections is another example of practising democracy in turbulent times in Iran's political history.

In line with recent studies of political humour in Serbia (Sørensen 2008), Norway and Sweden (Sørensen 2016), Azerbaijan (Pearce and Hajizada 2014), Zimbabwe (Musangi 2012), Egypt (Helmy and Frerichs 2013), and Mexico (Schmidt 2014), my study not only broadens the scope of American- and Soviet-Union-centered scholarship in humour studies, but also provides a contemporary contextualized case study in which jokes appear not merely as decoration; rather they play effective and active roles in bringing political changes such as mobilization and dissent.

Digital Electionlore in the “Telegraphic Elections”: The Intersection of Politics and Cellphonelore

Dear people of Iran, the country needs your vote. Let's decide on a hopeful future for Iran on Friday.

Hassan Rouhani [Iran's president]

That was a text message my 27-year-old reformist³ informant, Maral, read to me from her cellphone. She told me that on Wednesday, February 24th, two days before the elections and the last day of campaigning, she received this text from President Rouhani. She said: “I was checking Telegram [a messaging application] when I got this [message] as a regular text. It is not surprising of Rouhani; once in a while, on different occasions like Women's day or Nowruz [Iranian New Year], he sends text messages to random numbers. I guess he realized where he can find us! In our cellphones!”

The elections in which the president reminded Iranians to participate were held on Friday, February 26th, 2016. Many people, 62% of all eligible electors (Iran's Ministry of Interior Affairs 2016), showed up at the polling stations and cast their votes for two elections: with brown ballots, they selected the 88 members of the “Assembly of Experts of the Leadership”

3. To describe my informants' political affiliations, I use the terms with which they self-identified. However, as they told me by using the word “reformism,” they basically mean a progressive path moving toward democracy and reform. Likewise, by self-identifying as “reformist,” “left-wing,” “liberal,” and “moderate” they do not only express their commitment to the political ideology of a faction, but also their support of the larger discourse of rights and freedom in Iran.

for an eight-year term; with blue ballots, they elected their representatives in the Iranian parliament, the “Islamic Consultative Assembly,” known as “Khane-ye-Melat” [literally meaning “the Nation’s House”]. Given the then political climate, my reformist informants believed these elections were two of the most crucial ones, in their terms “landmark,” within the thirty-seven-year history of the Revolution and identified the following reasons.

Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran’s political system has been founded on a complex hybridization of democracy and theocracy. To put it simply, all Iranian citizens eighteen years and older have the right to vote every four years to elect directly Iran’s president as the head of the Executive Branch of the government, as well as their representatives in the parliament as members of the Legislative Branch. However, Iranians do not have any direct power in electing the Supreme Leader, who is the highest ranking political and religious authority with absolute and unquestionable control over almost all political entities in Iran. Based on the 1979 Constitution, the Leadership title is reserved only for a male Shia cleric who becomes entitled to “Absolute Guardianship and Leadership of the Ummah” [*velayat motalaghey amr va emamat omat* in Farsi] (see Abrahamian 2008: 146-47 and 163-64 for more information on this concept).

In the 2013 presidential elections, Hassan Rouhani who is moderate and leans toward reformists was elected as the sixth president of Iran and took the office after the ultraconservative and populist government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. On May 19, 2017, Rouhani was re-elected as the seventh and Iran’s current president for a second term. At the time of the 2016 elections, while a moderate was the president, the parliament was dominated by conservatives who were against BARJAM.

BARJAM⁴ is a historical agreement with world powers regarding Iran’s nuclear program, which limited its nuclear ability in return for lifting international oil and financial sanctions (see Joyner 2016 for more information on BARJAM and Iran’s nuclear program). In 2015, the night the deal was signed, thousands of Iranians, including my reformist informants, celebrated this victory by pouring into the streets in major cities across Iran, screaming and dancing. Despite this national celebration, the then parliament denounced the deal and began to apply pressure on Rouhani and his cabinet in different ways. Therefore, the 2016 elections provided pro-president voters with a chance to reclaim the parliament from

4. BARJAM is the abbreviation of Farsi phrase *Barnameye Jame Eghdam Moshtarak*. The English name of this agreement is JCPOA (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action).

hardliners. As Fifi, my thirty-year-old female liberal informant describes, their participation in the first election since the agreement meant “the announcement of [their] alliance with Rouhani and Zarif [Iran’s minister of Foreign Affairs] who achieved this great deal.” Likewise, Hadis, my thirty-year-old female reformist informant believed the more reformist representatives they voted for, the more politically uniform parliament they would get. This would ultimately lead to a more harmonious state whose executive and legislative branches would be in accord.

In addition to the parliamentary election, the February vote was also the election of the body of the Assembly of Experts of the Leadership. This Assembly is the only political entity which has complete authority in electing, supervising, questioning, and even dismissing the Leader. As my informants put it, the February election was basically the selection of Iran’s next Leader. According to some evidences, many of them predicted that the Assembly they chose in these elections would be the one to find the current Leader Khamenei’s successor as he is in his late seventies and suffers from ill health.

Furthermore, given that Khamenei is more right-wing leaning, the outcome of these elections had the capacity to integrally change Iranian systems of power. The president, the head of the executive body, is a reformist; therefore, reformist voters were left to wonder: what if two other bodies of power, the legislative branch and the Assembly of Experts, which is the entity selecting and supervising the Supreme Leader, become reformist too? If all bodies of power become reformist, the chance that the next Leader is chosen from reformists will increase. These were some of my informants’ motivations for participating in these elections.

Despite their determination, the Guardian Council, the political entity in charge of approving election nominees’ candidacy, disqualified thousands of reformist and moderate candidates who registered to run in the race. In response to these mass disqualifications, all those remaining reformist and moderate candidates came together and formed a historic coalition in order to prevent conservatives from winning the seats. They announced the names of their candidates in two unified lists, known as the “Lists of Hope,” for both elections, the parliament and the Assembly, for each city in Iran. To conservatives’ shock, reformists won the elections with a landslide victory. In Tehran, the entire List of Hope won all thirty seats, and with one exception, they took fifteen of the sixteen total seats in the Assembly of Experts.

Many of my reformist informants agreed that they owe this victory to social media and mobile applications, namely Telegram. Since the public spaces in Iran are frequently monitored and regulated by the government, Nikuo, my 27-year-old female liberal informant, called the digital space “one of the least fearful” places where she and her like-minded friends discussed their political ideas more openly during the elections. Most of these political network communications happened through cellphones.

Over the past few years, cellphones have been the primary communicative device in Iran where a large number of Iranians’ interactions, professional and informal, take place. With the arrival of affordable phone operators like Irancell in 2005, many Iranians from various socio-economic backgrounds could own a cellphone and in recent years, with the growing popularity of low-priced Chinese mobile devices such as Huawei, more of them were able to upgrade to smartphones. When I was conducting this research in 2016, all my 25 informants had smartphones.

Therefore, it is not surprising that during the February elections, smartphones served as the main digital campaigning tool in this political battlefield. As Rouhani’s text at the beginning of this section shows, politicians along with ordinary voters, especially reformists, used text messages to invite people to participate and vote for their candidates. Along with texts, mobile app Telegram played a key role in this political battlefield to the extent that these elections were also known as the “Telegramic elections” in Iran.

Telegram is *the* most popular social network in Iran. Based on the very recent census figures released by the National Center for Cyberspace in September 2017, with forty million users (more than half of Iran’s population), Telegram takes up more than 60% of the Internet bandwidth in Iran (ISNA 2017). Currently, there are 580,000 Iranian Telegram public channels, and 16 of them have more than one million members (Ibid). Additionally, according to the web analytics service Alexa, as of September 2017, Iran stands at the top of the international list of Telegram users worldwide (Alexa 2017). Given this enormous popularity among a wide range of Iranians, during these elections, this messaging app dominated other social networks and through its public and private channels, provided the space for like-minded voters to gather virtually and establish digital headquarters.

Since Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are blocked by the Iranian authorities, this app and Instagram are the only two social media whose

access, unlike filtered apps, is granted in Iran without the struggle with anti-filter apps, proxy servers, and VPN (virtual private networks). While Instagram is rarely used for political purposes, Telegram is the main arena of political debates among individuals and even politicians. Many Iranian authorities such as the president, the Leader, and parliament representatives have public channels where they announce their political statements. During the February elections, not only reformists but also conservatives benefited from this app to push their points of view and advocate for their candidates. Narges, my thirty-year-old female conservative informant told me that she and her like-minded friends created private groups in which they discussed the elections and debated about which candidates they should vote for. Also, by merely following candidates' public channels, she explained, they got to know them better and by forwarding their messages in other groups, they echoed the conservatives voice in the digital world, especially in the Telegram space.

This online political battlefield, happened primarily on cellphones, paved the way for the emergence and growth of a great body of politicized folklore, which I call "cellphone-mediated electionlore." This digital electionlore is election-themed cellphonelore –folklore which is adapted for, created on, and disseminated through cellphone devices. In other words, they encompass any expressive forms of folklore concerning the February elections which were primarily generated and circulated on the online venues of mobile apps, notably Telegram. This kind of e-lore, like other digital genres of folklore, takes various forms such as jokes, text-based pictures, urban legends, digitally altered-photographic jokes, animated pictures, and videos which both inhabit and are shaped by the digital culture.

It is worth mentioning that since 2005, Iranian digital culture has mostly flourished on mobile devices rather than any other digital tools like laptops or tablets. Indeed, with the arrival of affordable tele-communication service providers, namely Irancell, cellphones have not only become the most popular communicative tools in Iran, but also serve as the main means for transmitting traditional folklore and generating e-lore. Easily portable and fitting conveniently in pockets, they mobilize and digitize joke-telling oral tradition in Iran. With 3G/4G capabilities, they provide the necessary tools to speed up the joke cycles' growth and circulation. Arman, my 31-year-old male informant, calls cellphones the "birthplace of [online] political jokes" in Iran. He believes that, since mobile phones are more accessible to a wider range of Iranians than laptops, they play a

more significant role in the creation and distribution of humour in the digital sphere.

Fifi sent me the following screenshots of her family group's activities in Telegram during the last two weeks of the elections. At that time, her family group had more than one hundred male and female members within the wide age range of seven to seventy-four years, most of whom were reformist and, in Fifi's words, "highly politicized and politically aware." As this selection of pictures show, the electionlore created and passed in this group was mostly in humorous forms including verbal jokes (Figure 1), visual jokes (Figure 2), stickers (Figure 3), and digitally altered photos (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 1. Verbal Jokes-Electionlore.



Figure 2. Visual Jokes-Electionlore. The index finger in the picture says: All year round, they use us for picking their noses, but now we are destiny makers! (referring to ink-stained fingers as the symbol of participation in elections.)



Figure 3. Stickers-Electionlore. Khatami asking voters not to ditch him and vote for both reformist lists.



Figure 4. Digitally altered photo1-Electionlore. Comparing the reformist Khatami to the conservative Khatami.



Figure 5. Digitally altered photo2-Electionlore. The Guardian Council-disqualified candidate, Hassan Khomeini, on the right offering a place to the Council's chairman, Jannati, on the left.

Using a thematic analysis, I have created three sub-cycle categories into which all these election-themed cellphonelore items, whether video, picture, or verbal, fit. Firstly, there is “pre-election disqualification electionlore” which originally appeared as a response to the mass disqualifications of reformists and moderate candidates by the Guardian Council. The majority of the jokes in this sub-cycle criticized the unfairness of the elections by blaming the Council and its Leader-appointed chairman, Ahmad Jannati.

Secondly, “Khatamilore” got widely spread on Telegram and served as one of the key campaigning tools when former President Khatami released a political speech on social media in which he urged reformist voters to participate in both parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections and vote for the List of Hope. Known as the face and pioneer of the reform movement, Mohammad Khatami has been under media ban since 2015. Publishing his images and words and even mentioning his name are prohibited acts on any national media in Iran. In response to this ban, millions of reformist Iranians formed a digital campaign and launched the hashtag “we will be Khatami’s media” (in Farsi *#میشویم-خاتمی-رسانه*) to spread his words, videos, and pictures in the alternative space of social media. During these elections too, they called on each other to become Khatami’s voice. By using the Dubsmash video application, they made thousands of their selfie-videos while lip-syncing over Khatami’s closing sentences: “I repeat, vote for all the individuals in both the lists.”

And, thirdly, there are “post-election jokes” which went viral when the majority of votes were counted, and the List of Hope’s victory became certain. The last constitutes the largest sub-cycle within the February electionlore. In the following section, I further explore the last sub-cycle as an example of digital folklore which, along with other February electionlore, unified reformist users and moved forward their digital campaign. The post-election jokes can be representative of the other two joke sub-cycles because they not only conclude the story of the elections, but also encapsulate it. In the examples below, I show that some of the jokes in this sub-cycle borrow themes from and refer to joke heroes/targets of pre-election disqualification electionlore and Khatamilore.

“The Conservatives Left the Group!”

Once the election results were officially announced, on February 28, 2016, on his official Twitter account,⁵ the prominent conservative and

5. Ironically, even though Twitter is blocked in Iran, many politicians and state

the former speaker of the parliament, Haddad-Adel, who lost to the List of Hope by placing the 31st, tweeted:

During the past few days, in cyberspace, I have read many interesting and remarkable jokes about myself. I am happy for the excitement and happiness of my fellow Tehranians who support the opposing group.

And in the comment section, he continues:

I am thankful because the most significant portions of your jokes do not target my personality and my family!

In the last days of the elections, there were numerous jokes targeting him as being only one place behind to win a seat in the Tehran parliament. I personally received many digitally altered photographic jokes and Internet memes and even before knowing the official news, I became aware of his defeat through the following meme which a friend of mine shared in our Telegram group.

The largest and, as Fifi calls it, “the most passionate [*Por Shour* in Farsi]” group of jokes during the February elections consisted of the post-election jokes which were all over Telegram, reporting the election outcome second by second when votes of each voting district were counted and officially announced by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. According to my reformist informants, it is not an overstatement to say that not a single newsworthy story during that time remained without comment or “unjoked,” especially because Tehrani reformists achieved a decisive victory in the parliament and, with one exception, won all the seats in the Assembly of Experts.

Many of my reformist informants, including Hadis, named these jokes as their favorite ones during the elections. Hadis explains:

I got floods of jokes during the vote-counting period. I really enjoyed reading and sharing these jokes. It gave me a deep sense of confidence that it was I who voted and won! Joke after joke I read, I witnessed the opposing group who always underestimates us falling down step by step until all of them got kicked out! [...] These jokes about the conservatives’ downfall really and deeply cheered my heart! And I heard many, many jokes of this sort, jokes about the conservatives’ *heavy humiliating* defeat! [emphasis in her tone]

Likewise, Maral states:

authorities including the Leader and the president have official, active accounts in English and Farsi.

Joke One/ collected on March 2016:

Peter from the movie Finding Neverland: What were the results of the parliamentary election?



Haddad-Adel: We lost just with a slight difference...



Haddad-Adel: Don't worry! Soon, I will divulge documents which prove the state cheated in the elections.



Figure 6. Joke One. It alludes to the 2009 presidential election in which many reformists and the Green Movement protestors believe the then state cheated.

I really enjoyed reading these jokes [jokes during the vote-counting time]! Especially the ones with pictures [jokes appeared as funny captions for photos], they were very interesting! Hilarious! You know I really wondered at some point where they found these pictures as if they had saved all them for these special moments. I had not seen many of them before. [...] sometimes, I got a joke first and then the [corresponding] news. Off the top of my head are Hashemzaee's jokes [Hashemzaee was a conservative candidate for Tehran's parliament]. I remember when they were counting votes, and he was still among winners but the last one, I got a joke saying: 'Poor Hashemzaee, he has been always at the end of the list since school times [In Iranian schools, students' names are usually listed alphabetically, and "H" is the second last letter in the Farsi alphabet]. Look, he is still the last one in the parliament list.' Then, when they finished counting votes, I got another one to the effect that 'Poor Hamshezmaee, his family name always steals away his luck! It seems that no space is left in the parliament list for the H letter!' So then, I realized he didn't make it!

As Maral and Hadis pointed out, one could follow the outcomes of the elections just by reading the live-streamed jokes in Telegram. They

only needed to search for the hashtag “counting” (#شمارش in Farsi) in any social media to make these jokes appear. The following jokes are sorted chronologically, in the order I received on my Telegram groups at different stages of the vote counting:

Stage One: At the beginning of counting, Haddad-Adel was the only conservative candidate who made it into the final list of parliament representatives while all the remaining were the List of Hope’s candidates. His place was seventh to that point. The joke I received at this stage is as follows:

Joke Two/ collected on February 2016:

Now, Haddad has come to Agha [Sir in English, vernacularly and humorously used to refer to the Leader], put his head on his lap, crying and saying: ‘I do not want to go to the parliament alone! No way!’ Agha is kindly patting him on his head and saying: ‘Do not worry sweetie! You will find new friends!’

Stage Two: A few hours later, Haddad’s place was dropped down to 22nd out of thirty.

Joke Three/collected on February 2016:

Haddad at Khatami’s feet [In Farsi, ‘to be at someone’s feet’ means ‘to beg them for help with abasement’]: Sayed, I beg you to help me! Please come and ‘repeat the vote for me!’ I am losing my reputation!



Figure 7. Joke Three: Post-electionlore. It refers to Khatami’s famous phrase “I repeat” in the video through which he calls on voters to come and support the reformist movement and emphasizes the importance of two elections by saying “I repeat, vote for all the individuals in both the lists.”

Joke Four/ collected on February 2016:

On the left, Aref, the leading candidate in the Tehran parliament election from the List of Hope, is talking to Haddad: Look! You are getting removed!

Haddad: For God's Sake, do not refresh the damn page anymore!



Figure 8. Joke Four: Post-electionlore.

On the other end, on the Assembly of Experts final list, only two of the Leader's confidants and well-known ultraconservatives, Jannati and Mesbah-Yazdi, had, to that point, made it to the winners' list in the last two places.

Joke Five/ collected on February 2016:

The longest jump in the history of the Olympics is co-awarded to Haddad and Jannati whose names just appeared in the middle of reformists!

Along with people from within the country, Iranians in the diaspora also passionately followed the election news and contributed to the creation and distributions of these vote-counting jokes. On his Facebook page, a friend of mine posted a video of a concert in Montreal, Canada, in which the celebrated Iranian singer Ebi was singing a famous verse from his works, "without opening the gift" [*Hedyaro baz nakarde*], and waited for the answer from the audience. Instead of saying "she/he sent it back" [*pas ferestad*], they played with the rhyme and chanted all together "the elimination of Mesbah" [*Hazfe Mesbah*] (see Ebi 2016).

Since the 1990s, when Ebi performed this song for the first time, this particular verse has appeared many times in Iranian jokes as the second part sounds mysterious and unclear enough to be the target of playful mishearing and creative interpretations. Playing with language, these derivative jokes are like riddles whose answers and subsequently appropriate incongruities are embedded linguistically in the rhythmic, but not necessarily meaningful, words of the second verse.⁶ As a result, when Ebi sang this verse in Montreal

6. This joke is parallel with the modern folkloric genre, *mondegreen*. *Mondegreen*

protesters' claims regarding vote-rigging, joke tellers compared the vote-counting periods of the 2009 and 2016 elections and criticized the 2009 state, Ahmadinejad's, whose Minister of Interior Affairs announced the official election outcomes in less than a day (see Jokes Nine and Ten). Additionally, they indirectly questioned the regime's unjust punishment of the Green Movement's Leaders, who were labelled as "leaders of sedition" and were sentenced to strict house arrest since 2009 without having an official trial (see Joke Eleven).

Joke Nine/ collected on March 2016:

It is funny they cannot count five million votes for Tehran's Assembly in three days; how come they counted thirty million votes of the whole country in just five hours in 2009?

Joke Ten/ collected on March 2016:

These elections [2016] are among those exceptions in which a night's sleep does not surprisingly change their outcome!

*** In 2009, to voters' extreme shock, early in the morning after election day, Ahmadinejad was officially announced as the next president of Iran.

Joke Eleven/ collected on March 2016:

I was thinking if Jannati did not acquire enough votes to remain in the Assembly, we should pour into the streets and protest like 2009. We would pretend that we are his supporters, so they will put him under house arrest!

Final Stage: The final outcomes of both elections were officially announced by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Haddad-Adel lost to the List of Hope by placing 31st. On the other end, despite having the Leader's support, Mesbah-Yazdi, along with other prominent ultraconservatives, namely Mohammad Yazdi who was then chairman of the Assembly of Experts, did not make it to the next Assembly. Jannati was the only conservative who slid onto the winners' list as the last elected candidate.

Joke Twelve/ collected on March 2016:

Noah, the great prophet with superhuman power, could not kick Jannati out of his Ark. Now, did you really think you could get rid of him in the Assembly of Experts? Such a naïve thought!⁷

7. This joke refers to a larger joke cycle in which Jannati is the main target for his age. As he is in his nineties and has a bony face and a frail figure, these jokes

Joke Thirteen/ collected on March 2016:

I was passing by Baharestan Square [where Iran's parliament is located] when I saw the banner which says: 'under new management!'

Joke Fourteen/ collected on March 2016:

Now, the Guardian Council has been driven crazy and just announced: 'From next election on, first you, the nation, vote, and then we disqualify!'

With the elimination of Mohammad Yazdi, the reformist candidate, Hashemi Rafsanjani, placed at the top of the elected candidates, would probably become the next chairman of the Assembly of Experts. In the final scene of these jokes, reformist candidates, either those who won a seat or those who were disqualified by the Guardian Council from running, faced conservatives and ridiculed them for their downfall in these elections (see Jokes 15 and 16).

Joke Fifteen/ collected on March 2016:

Hashemi Rafsanjani on the left talking to Mohammad Yazdi on the right: "Say Ya Ali and stand up!"



Figure 9. Joke 15: Post-electionlore. Ya Ali is the expression which Shia Muslims say when they want to stand up or commence doing something in order to get aid from their first Imam. It is also sarcastically used to request an unwanted guest to leave.

portray him as an "immortal radical politician" who, since "the dinosaur age," has been "reformists' sworn enemy" (words in quotations were chosen from jokes).

Joke Sixteen/ collected on March 2016:

Hassan Khomeini [a reformist candidate who was disqualified by the Guardian Council from running in the race] on the right offering a place to Jannati on the left:

“Please sit at the end of the line!”



Figure 10. Joke 16: Post-electionlore.

Joke Seventeen/ collected on March 2016:

The Nation Removed Haddad-Adal.

The Nation Removed Koochakzadeh.

The Nation Removed Mesbah-Yazdi.

The Nation Removed Mohammad Yazdi.

The Nation Removed Rajab Rahmani,

The Nation Removed Ahmad Jannati.

Ahamad Jannti joined the group via invite link.



Figure 11: Joke 17: Post-electionlore.

Influenced by the online venue of their growth, many of these digital post-election jokes benefited from technological terminologies and special features in the Telegram platform in forming what Oring calls “appropriate incongruities”⁸ (Oring 2003).

8. Oring argues that “humour depends upon the perception of an appropriate incongruity; that is, the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous” (2003: 1). In his

Joke Eighteen/ collected on March 2016:

Haddad-Adel left the group.

Joke Nineteen/ collected on March 2016:

I am so happy to see, even if Fars News [State-run news agency⁹] does everything with the Tehran's parliamentary winners' list, sort them by size, age, alphabetical order, weight, height, any kind of order, there is no way Haddad can get it!

Not simply covering the election news, vote-counting jokes also acted as a commentary which analyzed, corrected, and criticized the news of the state-owned and backed mainstream media (Joke 19). Additionally, they reminded their listeners of the violations of freedom of speech and the press, and political freedom in Iran (Jokes 20 and 21).

Joke Twenty/ collected on February 2016:

Did you realize that, oddly enough, after the election day and even the next morning after the announcement of the outcomes, journalists and social media people [ashabe resane in Farsi] woke up in their beds, not in the Evin prison¹⁰!?!?

Joke 21/ collected on March 2016:

Now, it is the time [for the government] to send parasite noises to its own News Network [Shabakeye khabar in Farsi].

The News Network is one of Iran's national TV's news agencies in Farsi. Since 2009, during politically sensitive periods such as elections, access to independent broadcasters, primarily headquartered outside of Iran, is usually poor and disturbed by the government's parasite noise from within the country. This joke shows how the announcement of reformists' victory sounds like bitter news to the national TV indirectly governed and directly supervised by the Leader.

book, he identifies those mechanisms which these incongruities “appropriate” in the frame of a joke (2003: 13-26).

9. Although this news agency officially describes itself as “independent,” my reformist informants and many other reformist Iranians feel it echoes the government's voice.
10. A prison located in northern Tehran and known for housing political prisoners since before the Revolution. From Ahmadinejad's presidency onwards, it has been sarcastically called “Evin University” due to the high numbers of intellectuals imprisoned there.

Hana, my 33-year-old female reformist informant, describes the critiques embedded in these jokes as “people’s honest and unstifled idea of politics” and says: “There is no open space for political discourse in Iran. All we have is *biased*, and *state-controlled* and *directed* political discussions. All of us are aware that these political jokes are the *safest* and the *easiest* way of communicating our political thoughts in Iran without ending up in Evin [emphases in her tone].”

Like other sub-cycles of the February electionlore, the vote-counting jokes provided voters with a relatively safe language and secure tool to make manifest vernacular politics and express their criticism of the Guardian Council (Jokes 14 and 15), the previous election (Jokes 9-11), and government-dependent news agencies (Jokes 19-21). They also enabled them to construct “newslore,” which constitutes a large component of their vernacular politics. Defined by Frank, “newslore” is “folklore that comments on, and is therefore indecipherable without knowledge of current events” (2011: 7). He argues that newslore is “expressive,” “cathartic,” and “subversive” because “it violates the rules of deference and discretion when it comes to authority figures, bodily functions, and social conflict” (2011: 11).

According to this definition, all the February electionlore studied here is voters’ newslore which subverted the hegemony of the elections’ power dynamics in favor of reformists. In this way, they mobilized my informants and the pro-reformists’ supporters by evoking their sense of solidarity and empowered them by engendering a feeling of superiority. Golnar, my 26-year-old reformist informant, explains these feelings as follows:

I think the election jokes with this variety, made and spread by reformists mostly in Tehran’s society, elicited a sense of *hamdeli* [‘compassionate’ is the closest translation. The word-by-word translation is ‘united in hearts’] among people. When people received these jokes online, they would say: ‘yes, it is my idea too! I agree!’, and because they were all like-minded [*hamfekr* in Farsi], they shared the jokes and spread [their] political messages. Therefore, I can say according to the huge number of pro-reformist jokes which were viral during the elections, many [pro-reformist] people realized they had millions of allies out there who, like them, wanted reformists to win. [...] yes, I think these jokes showed them that they are large in number and can win the elections, so they came out and voted. [...] Even at the polling station where I cast my vote, I witnessed once a person bringing out their cellphone to write the List of Hope from the Telegram; others expressed their familiarity and agreement by approaching them and finding an excuse to have a chat.

The most explicit examples of such subversive empowering discourse in jokes are the ones which listed all prominent defeated conservative candidates and announced their downfall with a single sentence, “Disqualified by people!” This short but powerful punchline not only challenges the game of power by replacing the Guardian Council with voters, it also shows people’s empowerment and how they used their ballots to take revenge for the unfairness of the elections.

Digital Folklore and Political Movements

Digital folklore does not confine but empowers traditional vernacular expression as it provides individuals with tools and freedom which may not be accessible in face-to-face communications. In the 2016 February elections in Iran, election-themed cellphonelore played a pivotal role in creating and advancing a political movement. The digital movement, initiated and led by reformist voters in the February elections, not only was nourished by various vernacular expressive forms but also rose from the vernacular network of political communications in Telegram. Private groups and public channels provided reformists with a venue to find their online allies and establish virtual campaigning headquarters. At different stages of these elections, from the disqualification of their candidates to the celebration of their victory, reformists manifested their political opinions through various forms of digital folklore. While the disqualification and the vote-counting jokes helped them express their criticism, the Dubsmash videos of Khatami’s speech led to the growth of their political movement as they called on each other to come and support the List of Hope. The use of hashtags such as “counting” in the distribution of election jokes created “folksonomies” (Peters 2009; Lin and Chen 2012) and expanded the scope of their political messages because by creating emic categories, it enabled reformists to find their like-minded peers online and forward each other’s jokes and political messages.

Moreover, this strategic use of political folklore in these elections is an example of how digital folklore is capable of making political changes and can have long-term consequences. Beyond what Davies describes as the temporary “aspirin” effect of political jokes (2011: 248), online humour in these elections not only helped its consumers suspend their political pain but also equipped them with a tool through which they could claim and regain their lost rights and freedom. In countries like Iran with very restricted freedom of speech and political freedom, humour provides a protective shield through its “cryptic language” (Schutz 1995) that enables

its creators and distributors to cautiously manifest and articulate their often counterhegemonic political ideas. Neither “whispered” (Beckmann 1969; Dundes 1971b; Draitser 1979; Lipman 1991: 18) nor “risky” (Oring 2004), humour in these elections was used loudly, widely, and strategically for political purposes. Free from the limitations of oral communications, it gained far-reaching and non-decorative effects. Appearing in different forms of stickers, Dubsmash videos, and digitally altered photos, election-themed cellphonelore not only contributed to but also made this reformist political movement happen in the alternative space of the Internet.

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11. Please note that long URLs have been converted to tinyurls for the convenience of the reader.

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