

# MAD MAD

Underground com

By Jonath

On a humid Cairo evening, in fall 2014, a hundred comics lovers wearing sneakers and graphic T-shirts smoked cigarettes outside Factory Space, a popular venue operated by one of the city's few contemporary art galleries. When a blue hatchback pulled up at the entrance, they instantly recognized one of the passengers: Mohamed Andeel, a twenty-nine-year-old cartoonist and satirist whose status updates on Facebook reach 60,000 mostly left-leaning Egyptian millennials. The crowd was there to celebrate the release of the twelfth issue of *Tok Tok*, a zine that Andeel founded with four other graphic artists. The zine's first issue appeared in 2011, two weeks before the popular uprising against President Hosni Mubarak began, and launched a politicized comix movement in Egypt, much as *Mad* and *Zap* did in the United States a half-century ago. After joking with the crowd, Andeel mounted the stage and began clicking through a slideshow of his greatest hits. One depicts Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's president, at his desk, blithely contemplating his country's position in the world. An assistant appears: "Sir! Sir! What are we going to do with the trash, the traffic, electricity, hospitals, security, wages, judiciary, and the future? What will we do with all the ignorance?!" The president replies, "Increase ignorance." For the new cover of *Tok Tok*, Andeel had drawn a millennial and a traditionally dressed older man in conversation, seemingly bridging an ideological gap—rare in Egypt these days, where thousands have been imprisoned for alleged affiliations with the banned Muslim Brotherhood or with secular opposition movements.

Egyptian political cartoons date back to the 1880s, and Arabic-language versions of *Mickey* and *Superman* have been popular since the mid-twentieth century. The first Egyptian graphic novel for adults, however, was published only in the past decade. The authorities, upset by the book's nudity, obscenity, and anti-regime attitude, raided the publisher. The incident galvanized a generation of young artists, many of whom are now creating subversive comics that stand in contrast to the sloppy and tired work of state-aligned cartoonists at the national newspapers. Andeel lampoons the government incessantly, though he is proudest of gags that address social issues such as homophobia or the disenfranchisement of the poor. "I don't want my work to be only interesting because of dictatorship, because this is again giving dictatorship so much size and importance," he told me. He brushed off the risks of insulting the president, which is prohibited by the country's penal code, and said he preferred to draw attention to his artistic style—simple outlines filled in with the appealing color palette of Matt Groening and offset by vulgar slang. "My work looks nice and cute," he said, "but talks about things that are dark and terrible."

Andeel published his first cartoons in high school, then worked for an opposition weekly that printed some of the earliest biting caricatures of Mubarak. During 2010, he drew daily cartoons for *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, a popular independent paper, in which he lambasted the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the interim government that ruled Egypt after the 2011 revolution. When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, with the 2012 election of Mohamed Morsi, Andeel didn't break stride. In his cartoons, President Morsi contemplates a city in flames ("I feel that there is something wrong"), accosts a citizen ("Love me already!"), and reaches his arms out to seize a miniature Cairo skyline ("It's all mine"). After Morsi was overthrown by the Egyptian military, a year later, Andeel turned his pen on the generals. Amid a violent clampdown on dissent, he continued to crack jokes about the authorities' impunity. Two days after Morsi's ouster, Andeel published on Facebook a cartoon in which a military officer points his gun at a bearded man wielding a stick. "I am killing him because he is a terrorist," says the officer. The bearded man replies, "I am a terrorist because he is killing me." By early 2014, Andeel had left *Al-Masry Al-Youm* to join the writing team of *The Program*, a faux-news comedy show hosted by Bassem Youssef, who is often called "Egypt's Jon Stewart." But the television network pressured Youssef to tone down his jokes, and he eventually canceled the show in June 2014, shortly after the presidential election.



# GAZINES

ics come to Egypt  
an Guyer



On Cairo newsstands, cartoons that mock Sisi remain scarce. Andeel now regularly contributes to the Web news outlet *Mada Masr*, the only local platform that is willing to print his most polemical work. In November, it published a cartoon he drew of a giant Sisi standing on the back of a minuscule everyman; the big-eyed president proclaims, “Endure for Egypt.” After Andeel took his antimilitary barbs online, his audience grew rapidly. (*Mada Masr*’s website uses captions to translate the comics into English so that the works can reach a global readership.) But his surge in popularity was quickly followed by intimidating messages from Islamists and, not surprisingly, supporters of the regime. Vitriol on Andeel’s Facebook wall suggests that trolls are combing through his old posts and uncovering personal information. The Egyptian Interior Ministry has started to monitor online conversations; in November, military intelligence detained his colleague Hossam Bahgat, an investigative reporter at *Mada Masr*. Why hadn’t state security knocked on Andeel’s door? “They are too lazy, and it’s too hot,” he said with a laugh. In truth, Andeel may be lucky that the authorities put more effort into curbing broadcast media that reaches millions than online news that reaches thousands. “There are things you can say on the Internet that you can’t say on a TV show,” Andeel said. He likened satire in Egypt to a chess game. “You’re attacking here. You’re defending here. You’re moving up.”

The biggest challenge facing young comic artists in Egypt right now is not suppression or intimidation but economic stability. To make a living, Andeel writes television and movie scripts—he’s currently working on a zombie-comedy flick. *Tok Tok*, which is at work on its fourteenth issue, also faces an uncertain future—its funding, which was provided by the European Union, ran out at the end of 2015. The cartoonists have been drafting business plans, an endeavor that doesn’t attract the same international media attention as their art. “We all have lives and wish our lives wouldn’t be threatened by poverty or the possibility of failure,” Andeel said. “I hate when people see cartoonists as exotic—the expression of freedom fighters in the Middle East.” Yet freedoms continue to contract, and in December state authorities shuttered the Factory Space and its adjoining gallery. At the Factory Space in 2014, I sat in the front row beside Andeel’s mother as he projected one of his works for *Al-Masry Al-Youm* onto the wall. The cartoon was from September 2013, the height of Egypt’s pro-military furor. Egypt is often depicted as a dignified Cleopatra, but Andeel had drawn a giant woman wearing a long black galabia who was reclining on the Cairo skyline. A man gazing up at her says, “O Egypt, arise and prepare yourself,” a nationalist slogan taken from a popular song. Mother Egypt replies, “Enough, asshole.” *Al-Masry Al-Youm* printed Mother Egypt’s retort as “Shut up already.” *Mada Masr*, which put the cartoon on T-shirts, was less strict: it only blurred the word “asshole.” ■

Jonathan Guyer is a fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs and a contributing editor of *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*.