

**SHARPENING THE SWORD AND ROUNDING THE SHIELD: ONLINE JOKES
AND THE VERNACULAR RESPONSE TO POLITICAL REFORM IN IRAN**

by
Saeedeh Niktab Etaati

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Department of Folklore
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of Iranian political jokes: a hybridized genre of folklore which intersects 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 these jokes serve as a powerful tool for my informants to construct their own “newslore” (Frank 2011) and make manifest what I term and define “vernacular politics” through which they were 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 in suspense between democracy and dictatorship: jokes as an effective and strategic form of reform and unquiet protest.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Jokes in the Margins

In 2015, when it came to the time that I had to choose a topic for my master's thesis, the first thing I consulted with was my journal. For the year since my husband, Hadi, and I moved to Canada, I had recorded almost all of my daily experiences of living in this new country in my diary. Throughout sixty pages, I had written several sad and happy stories about my challenges with the new culture, language, weather, and people. Reviewing all those memories after a year, I concluded that if I wanted to write my thesis on a subject which is the least emotionally charged and the most compelling, it would be jokes. In between the lines and in the margins of my journals, there were multiple jokes which I had written, usually in different colors to separate them from main stories. They were either told to me by my Iranian friends in our daily conversations or were the ones I remembered as I wrote about my experiences. Perhaps I was writing them in the margins, not in the body, because I thought they were secondary and distracting. However, after a year, I found them more explanatory than the stories themselves! Indeed, I was mostly intrigued by this revelation of how often my friends and I used humor in our daily speech without being totally self-aware of our humorous language or of the number of times we told jokes to convey our meanings in a single conversation. The more pages I reviewed, the more inspired I was to study jokes as my master's thesis.

One of my favorite pages in my journal is about an incident that happened in June 2014 when Hadi and I were in a car with two of our Iranian friends, also graduate students in our university, heading to the countryside for picnic. In the body of the journal, I had written in blue:

Not surprising, today, all way to the Middle Cove Beach, we were just talking about the school and our experiences in the first semester of our graduate studies at MUN. [Then, I retold the story of our friend and their issues with their supervisor.]

In the margin in pink ink, I wrote the joke which our friend used when they were explaining their problems:¹

Joke One/collected on June 2014: Writing a Thesis on Elephants

In a university, there were three international students, one German [gender is not specified], one British [gender is not specified], and one American man. All three were working on elephants as their PhD theses at the same time. After three years, the American guy came back with his dissertation, around 250 pages, called ‘Everything you need to know about elephants all around the world.’ The next student who submitted their thesis was the British one who came back after seven years. Their thesis was an 800-page book called *Trying to know elephants better*. And, finally, the German student came back after 15 years with a book as thick as 2000 pages which was called *An introduction to getting to know elephants, volume one!*

Then, the story continues in the body:

On the way back home, we talked about our experiences of living in Canada. It strikes me that even though all of us are living *here and now*, all our memories tie us back to *there and then* as if we do not belong to either. Comparing Iran and Canada, Hadi said: ‘Our story in Canada is like the story of the guy in a joke with two seats on a bus.’

Again, in the margin in pink ink, I had written the joke he told:

Joke Two/collected on June 2014:

On a bus heading to Tehran from Shiraz, there was a weirdo guy [ethnicity is not mentioned] who every couple of minutes showed up from the back, sat in an empty seat in the front, rested for couple of minutes, and then returned to the back. He kept changing his seats for many times until the driver got angry and called him out: ‘Hey you, what is wrong with you? Just go and put your ass down on your seat for God’s sake! You are driving me nuts!’

Calmly with confidence, the guy answered: ‘Sorry but I’ve booked two seats to be more comfortable all the way long!’

Back in the body, I had written:

Hadi explains that our lives in Canada are like having two seats, one in the back and the other in the front as we are in suspension between two worlds. He said: ‘Neither can we totally abandon what we have left in the front in Iran and stay in our seat in Canada nor

¹ To protect my friend’s identity, I cannot provide more details on their story and the context in which the joke was told.

do we want to return to our first place and stay calm there. We are always physically or mentally commuting between these two seats without finding comfort in either place.’

These two jokes are among many in the margins and in between the lines of my journal which helped my Iranian friends and me to exemplify, metaphorize, and simplify complicated and sometimes untellable concepts in an accessible, humorous language. As a folklorist, curious about the ordinary moments of life, I find them not only fascinating but also revealing about many aspects of Iranian culture.

In addition to my journal, my cellphone also played a decisive role in convincing me to choose jokes as the subject of my master’s thesis. It also helped me realize what kinds of jokes interest me the most, and where the best place is to find them. In late December 2013, before I moved to Canada, I installed the messaging application Viber to use its free phone call service to keep in touch with my families and friends in Iran. However, after a year, many of my Iranian friends and families had transferred a large number of their daily online activities on social networks to Viber because, unlike Facebook and Twitter, it had not been blocked or filtered by the government.

Exchanging political jokes was one of the most recurrent activities in Iranian Viber groups. First, it was just a hobby for me; first thing in the morning I checked my Viber groups to read jokes and have a good laugh. These jokes also updated me with the day’s hot news in Iran. Because of the seven-hour time difference between Tehran and St. John’s, I was sure that if something newsworthy happened in Iran, jokes about it would be all over my Viber by the time I woke up in Canada. Sometimes, I even got the jokes before I learnt about the actual news. Later, as I became a more passionate student of folklore, this ritual of checking Viber turned into my morning homework; I began to collect jokes and have written them down, each with a small note

as a reminder of their contexts for my future reference. In 2015, when I was preparing the first draft of my proposal, I already had ten Excel spreadsheets of jokes!

In 2015, as I reviewed these pages for my preliminary proposal, it became clear to me that political jokes not only constituted the majority of my materials but also excited me the most. I found politics embedded in Iranian jokes enigmatic, creative, multilayered, and worthy of multi-volume theses. By this time, I became determined to narrow my thesis focus on political jokes and study their roles in and impact on Iranian society, both virtual and real.

It did not, therefore, take me long to realize where I should embark on my research even from oceans away from Iran. Social media, particularly Viber and, later, Telegram, enabled me to bypass the physical distance. They not only kept me updated with the latest political jokes and consequently news in Iran, but also made me more aware of the existence and popularity of alternative spaces in which Iranians manifest and circulate their often counterhegemonic political ideas in various forms, including humor. As I expanded my research, I realized this online humor, along with other forms of online media, plays an effective role in shaping and changing my informants' political ideologies and helps them in their political activism. To study these alternative spaces and social orders, as a part of my morning ritual of updating my joke archive, I began to document my friends', families', and later my informants' online interactions in Viber and Telegram groups. Since then, I have collected not only online political humor, but also the conversations and the reactions they engendered in online communications.

Moreover, I was not only interested in the digital performance of political jokes in Iranian virtual communities, I also wanted to complement my virtual ethnography with actual fieldwork in order to explore political jokes' significance and functions in off-line Iranian society and see how they commute between the digital and oral realms. To this purpose, after submitting my

preliminary thesis statement and ethics application were approved, I prepared myself to go to Iran and start my ethnographic research.

As I prepared to leave St. John's for Tehran, whenever I spoke to Canadian friends about my plan to work on Iranian political jokes, and especially to conduct fieldwork in Iran, one of the first comments I received was: "Be careful! Iran? Politics? Prison?" Most of their reactions were not surprising to me as I was aware that in Western academia, working on a sensitive subject like politics, even political jokes, in a Middle Eastern country like Iran raises a red flag. From our university travel policy (Memorial University 2010) to even some of my close non-Iranian friends, it was thought not safe to conduct fieldwork in Iran, which is somehow related to Iran's regime. However, despite these discouragements and warnings, my 26 years living in Iran assured me that nothing could threaten my informants' and my safety as we have all learnt in our lifetimes in Iran how to play around the fire without getting burnt! My supervisor's constant support reinforced my confidence as he reminded me that I, better than anybody else, know how to protect myself and my informants. I therefore ended up in Tehran twice, once in 2015 to conduct the first round of my ethnography and then later in 2016 to finish up my research.

My Methodology and Positionality

In April 2015, I traveled to Iran and started a preliminary ethnographic study including conducting informal interviews and archival research primarily in Tehran. After receiving ethics approval in June 2015 (ICEHR 20160071-AR), I completed the first round of my fieldwork research and conducted 20 recorded interviews in three cities (Tehran, Bandar Gaz, and Kerman). In late February and March 2016, during the parliamentary and the "Assembly of

Experts” elections, I did four Skyped interviews, and finally, in August 2016, I traveled one more time to Iran and finished my fieldwork study in Tehran.

In total, I have 25 participants, six of whom I interviewed more than once. All my informants are Iranians and Farsi speakers as their first or second language; therefore, I conducted all the interviews in Farsi and did not require assistance from an interpreter or a translator during or after these interviews. Throughout this thesis, all English translations, including interviews and other Farsi materials, are mine. To remain faithful to my informants’ word choices, I provide readers with word-by-word translations of their Farsi expressions, metaphors, and slang, as well as giving some brief context to those readers who may not be familiar with the Farsi language. Additionally, in my transliteration of Farsi words and Arabic loanwords, I rely on either my informant’s pronunciations in the interviews or on the most commonly used form in Iran.

It should be noted that my informants used the word “jokes” in a broad sense, as the substitute for the word “humor” [*Tanz* in Farsi] when they discuss different forms of humor such as Dubsplash videos and Internet memes. In other words, for them “jokes” mean both humor and a particular kind which Elliott Oring defines as “brief communications whose humor is abruptly apprehended only at their conclusion” (1992, 81-93). I, too, refer to them as “jokes” in my English translations of their words. Additionally, in the title of my thesis and also other parts of this research, like my informants, I use “jokes” in a broader sense under which various forms of humor fall. While I am aware that words like jokes, memes, and Dubsplash videos are used in fairly variable ways, my intention of calling them all “jokes” is to underline their vernacular creative nature with dual humorous and serious intent, parallel to traditional jokes.

In June 2015, when I conducted the first round of interviews, four informants of mine lived in Bandar Gaz, five in Kerman, and eleven in Tehran. All four of my Skype interviewees lived in Tehran in late February and March 2016, and, likewise, my interlocutors in my second trip to Iran in August 2016 were all residents of Tehran. Tehran is the capital, the largest, and the most populous city of Iran (Tehran Municipality 2006). It is located in central Iran and is contained, to the north, by the Alborz mountains (see Appendix A-Maps: Map One). According to the census issued in 2011, slightly over twelve million people live in Tehran Metropolis, known as Greater Tehran (Statistical Center of Iran 2011a). Kerman is a city in south-eastern Iran, bordered by Lut Desert (see Appendix A-Maps: Map One). Around 800 thousand people live in Kerman (Statistical Center of Iran 2011b), the majority of whom are Persians and speak Farsi with the Kermani accent. Bandar Gaz is a city by the coast of the Caspian Sea in the northern Golestan province (see Appendix A-Maps: Map One). Even though Golestan is predominately settled by Persian Iranians, Bandar Gazis people belong to a minority group who self-identify as Mazani or Mazandarani and speak the Mazani dialect as their first language (see Appendix A-Maps: Map Two).

Even though my informants were then settled in Tehran, Kerman, and Bandar Gaz, they come from more diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds including Mazani, Azari, Ghazvini, Shirazi, and Lur (see Appendix A-Maps: Map Two: Ethnoreligious Distribution Map of Iran). Since the focus of my research is political jokes rather than ethnic and local humor, my interviewees' ethnic background and their city of residence are of the secondary importance. Additionally, all my informants are mobile Iranians for most of whom the notion of home as a physical place to live is constantly changing. For example, while in 2015, I had ten informants in Tehran; on my next visit in 2016, four of them had migrated to other countries. Likewise, two

out of my five Kermani informants had moved to Tehran by early 2016. Therefore, throughout this thesis, I intentionally avoid giving unnecessary information about my informants' ethnicity and location and introduce them primarily with their age, gender, and political affiliations. However, when it is occasionally required, for example in Chapter Three in my discussion of local humor and intergenerational identity construction, I draw on their ethnicity and family background.

In this research, my main goal is to reflect the views of a particular age-group of Iranians regardless of their ethnicity and location. With five exceptions, all my informants are from the "1360 Generation" in Iran. Known as "Dahe Shasti ha" ("the '80s kids" in English), they were all born in the 1360s in the Persian calendar (the 1980s in the Georgian Calendar) and constitute the first generation born after the 1979 Revolution. Opening their eyes in the Islamic Republic of Iran at the midst of Iran-Iraq war, they were called "the buds of the Revolution" ("Ghonche haye Enghelab" in Farsi) by the state. They are the children of those 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.

The children of the 1970s and 1980s are often known in Iran as "the Burned Generation" ("Nasl soukhteh" in Farsi) and "a generation with little to lose" (Khosravi 2008, 139). The '80s children are also called "the Third Generation" (Nasl sevomiha in Farsi) who, as a result of the baby boom during the 1980s war with Iraq, "make up more than half of the present population of Iran" (Ibid., 5). Unlike their parents, "the First Generation" of the Revolution, and their siblings, "the Second Generation", they have no memories of this political, religious, cultural, and social uprising as "they are the product of the Islamic Republic" (Ibid., 5).

Despite their lack of participation in the 1979 Revolution, “the ’70s and ’80s kids” were the protagonists of what many political scientists and historians call the most important and the largest uprising in the history of post-revolutionary Iran (Farhi 2012, 4; Adelhah 2012, 17; Nabavi 2012, xi): “the Green Movement”. In June 2009, when the government announced 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 the office.

Shortly thereafter, this outburst turned into a national movement whose supporters not only expressed their dissatisfactions 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 imprisonments of protesters, journalists, and political/social activists and the house arrests 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). As such, many of my informants believe that it at least generated a social, cultural, and political awareness which is still awake among their generation.

Except for two who did not deliberately clarify their political affiliations, all my other nineteen informants who are “the ’80s kids” (aged between 28 to 37) are pro-Green Movement. They either participated in street protests or contributed to this movement with their strong and active presence in social media in 2009. Two of them were slightly injured by the state authorities during street protests, and one of them was briefly imprisoned. To protect their

identities, upon their requests, I use pseudonyms for almost all my informants throughout this thesis.

My pro-Green Movement informants self-identity as “reformist” and support the “reformist movement.” Iran’s “reformist discourse” was initially theorized by revolutionary elites and religious intellectuals in the early 1990s, ten years after the Revolution. On May 23, 1997, when Mohammad Khatami, as the pioneer of this discourse, won the presidential elections, it officially injected into and gradually restructured the political system. Khatami’s victory day, the second of the Khordad month in the Persian calendar (May 23), is annually celebrated by reformists and their supporters because it marks the birthday of “reformism,” “liberalism,” and “democracy” in Iran’s post-revolutionary politics (see Nabavi 2012, 41-46 for a brief history of this movement).

Even though Iranian reformist politicians never gained enough power to achieve their political aims, their discourse of reform paved the way for the emergence and growth of the Green Movement in 2009. As my informants explained to me, by using the word “reformism,” they basically mean a progressive path moving toward democracy and reform. Likewise, by self-identifying as “reformist,” 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.

All of my nineteen reformist informants are university graduates: one with doctorate, sixteen with master’s, and two with bachelor degrees in either humanities or engineering disciplines. My two informants who did not specify their political affiliations also have university degrees; one has a master’s and is currently a PhD student, and the other has a bachelor’s. Two of my four remaining informants who do not belong to the ’80s age-group have high school diplomas, and the other two are now university students. As a result, it is right to

conclude that my research findings have drawn mostly from the views of a particular group of young Iranians who are all well-educated and come from middle and upper-middle socio-economic class.

My position in this group was very clear: on one hand, I was an ethnographer, and on the other hand, I was an insider. Like most of my informants, I am a child of the '80s with similar lived experiences and challenges during my childhood, adolescent, and youth. As a supporter and a participant of the Green Movement, I not only share common political interests with my reformist informants but, also like many of them, I was affiliated with student political associations while attending university in Iran. These common political activities helped me build trust among my informants to the extent that they fearlessly and confidently spoke to me about politics and their political involvements without self-censoring.

Additionally, my educational background in both humanities and engineering positioned me not only as a curious insider, but also as a researcher familiar with both the daily and academic languages of her informants. My engineer participants frequently used esoteric terms when they discussed technical matters related to their activities online with the confidence that I shared their knowledge. Likewise, my interviewees from humanities disciplines quoted well-known theorists in their fields as they assumed I might have heard of them or at least be interested to learn about them.

Finally, almost all my informants (except one who is in her seventies) and I are “digital native[s]” (Prensky 2001, 1) as we were all born in the digital age and do not need to adapt to the technological changes of our time. Like other children of “techno-culture” (Penley and Ross 1991), my informants not only spend several hours a day with their laptops and smartphones surfing social networks, but they have also, as mentioned earlier, benefited from this space to

undertake their political activism, especially since the Green Movement. Telegram and Viber are the most popular online venues for exchanging news, political debates, jokes, videos, music, and different forms of expressive culture among Iranians, from politicians to ordinary people. In 2015, 22 of 25 of my informants were Viber users, and in 2016, this number changed to 24 Telegram users. In my last visit to Tehran in 2016, I realized almost all my informants' online activities were centered in Telegram. In less than a year, this application not only replaced Viber but also became, by far, the most popular online space which, unlike other social networks and messaging apps, is still accessible without VPN and anti-filter software.

As a digital native and also an active user of Viber and Telegram, it was easy for me to observe and sometimes participate in my informants' online communications in these venues. Since 2015, through virtual ethnographic methods (see Hine 2000; Boellstroff 2012), I have documented their digital interactions and online conversations which involve any form of humor. I was either invited to and joined their groups and channels or, if it was a private group where I was not allowed to join, I asked my informants to send me screenshots or sheet-logs of their humor-related activities after getting permission from the other members in their groups. Later in our interviews, my informants contextualized this material for me. Therefore, my methodology in conducting this research was a combination of virtual ethnography and fieldwork research.

Research Objectives and Overview of Chapters

This research is an ethnographic study of a “hybridized” genre of folklore (Blank 2013a, 20), Iranian political humor, which is created, shared, and converged in both online and oral spheres. The Messaging applications Viber and Telegram, as well as semi-public places like taxis are the main fields of the emergence, growth, and exchange of political humor in Iran. In

this study, I explore how my informants use these spaces to express their political ideas in the language of humor, and how this political humor serves them in achieving their political ends.

To this purpose, I follow four objectives which correspond with four chapters of my thesis:

The first objective of my research, outlined in Chapter Two, is to study the evolution of joke-telling culture in Iran's recent years. I start my exploration with Irancell, a telecommunication company which led to facilitation, mobilization, and digitization of joke-telling communications. I argue that with its arrival, cellphones became the main medium of creation and dissemination of jokes in Iran. I further explore how these pocket-sized joke-telling devices prepared the ground for the formation, expansion, and distribution of what I term cellphonelore: folklore that is adapted for, created on, and disseminated through cellphone devices. I end my discussion with a brief overview of how smartphones and messaging apps such as Telegram and Viber influence cellphonelore and consequently affect joke-telling tradition.

In Chapter Three, I follow two objectives: first, I explore my informant's online joke-telling culture by studying its identifying features and its functions in their online groups. Second, I offer a theoretical discussion of the concept of digital joke-telling performance by providing a holistic analysis of online humor in the Telegram space. In my exploration of digital joke-telling culture, I open my discussion by introducing Viber and Telegram's platforms and their features while naming the factors which led to my informants' mass migration to Telegram. Then I focus on their humorous communications to argue how these interactions make a culture which is embedded, interactive, and referential. I finish this discussion by identifying moral and social protocols such as *Adab va Ehteram be Bozorgan* (in English, respect and graciousness for elders), an adherence to which makes my informants' joke-telling culture intergenerational.

In my study of digital joke-telling performance in Chapter Three, I first situate my research in the body of the folkloristic scholarship on both online and oral humor. Then I identify three characteristic features which make Telegram joke-telling performances distinct from oral humorous communications: joke forwarding/sharing, digital laughter and unlaughter, and reordering public and private spaces. I end this chapter with the argument that Telegram and Viber provide my informants with alternative spaces for the manifestation and circulation of their counterhegemonic political ideas, those that cannot flourish in the public sphere because of the control and fear of the state.

This conclusion brings us to the fourth and last objective of my thesis outlined in Chapter Four and Five, which is an exploration of political humor serving political activism in Iranian society. To this aim, I specifically study Iranian election-themed cellphonelore, which I call electionlore, in order to show that, contrary to the general assumptions among a large number of humor scholars, political humor can be effective, strategic, and an active and unquiet form of protest. In Chapter Four, I start my discussion by giving political, historical, and social contexts of political jokes that emerged in both virtual and oral Iranian society during and after the parliamentary and the Assembly of Experts elections in February 2016. According to my informants' statements, I re-narrate the story of these elections from the perspective of joke tellers and distributors and ask and answer when, how, where, and why these jokes were told, what consequences they brought, and what goals they achieved.

In Chapter Five, I analyze three joke sub-cycles of the February electionlore: the pre-election disqualification jokes, Khatamilore, and post-election vote-counting jokes. In this study I diverge from the theory of "resistance jokes" (Powell and Paton 1988, Bryant 2006) and argue that, unlike Christie Davies's argument, political jokes in Iran do not act like an "aspirin" which

people take to “suspend their political pain” (2011, 248) without getting long-term real effects. Instead, in post-revolutionary and post-Green-Movement Iran, they are an active form of reform and effective expressions of support and unification toward a more democratic Iran.

In this chapter, I introduce the term vernacular politics: the ways in which individuals live out politics on a daily basis while interpreting complicated political events that directly or indirectly affect their everyday lives. In each joke sub-cycle, I demonstrate that the vernacular politics embedded in and articulated through these jokes are not just a simplified vernacularized version of so-called official politics but rather are painstakingly selected, carefully modified, and intentionally subverted versions of politics whose multiple layers reveal different unspoken details about politics in Iran. I finish this chapter with a discussion on how these jokes enabled my reformist informants to construct their “newslore” (Frank 2011) through which they subverted the hegemony of the elections’ power dynamics in their favor. In this way, these jokes mobilized them by evoking their sense of solidarity and empowered them by engendering a feeling of superiority. I explain these effects by drawing on three meta-theories about laughter, “superiority” (Hobbes 1962; Berlyne 1968; Morreall 1987), “relief” (Freud 1960; Meyer 2000), and “incongruity” (Beattie 1776; Oring 2003). I conclude that these jokes served as an aggressive weapon as well as a safety-valve, and the laughter they aroused was an explicit message of superiority from my reformist informants to the defeated conservatives as the victims and targets of these jokes.

Chapter 2: Joke-telling Tradition from Taxi to Smartphone: Cellphonelore and Transmission of Hybridized Folklore in Iran

“Do you remember the time when there was no joke in Iran?” asked my 31-old male informant, Arman. He continued:

I do! I recall when I was a child till perhaps I turned 12 or 15 years old, there were abundance of jokes; Once a Turk guy, once a Lur guy, ... There were plenty of jokes of this sort, ethnic jokes, and we always laughed at them. I also remember the time when I felt there is no joke anymore; all jokes are old. I was 17 or 18 years old [at that time] which is 2004 and around 2005 [1382 and 1383 in the Persian calendar]. There were no new jokes, or at least, I as a teen, got just repeated jokes. When I got together with my friends and family members, as soon as one of us started to tell a joke, after the very first word, we all together stopped them, saying: “don’t tell it, we have already heard it!” That is the time the Madhouse joke appeared! Iran was really like that madhouse. Have you heard the joke?

“No,” I answered with a recorder in my hand. We were drinking tea and talking about my research in his apartment in Tehran. He continued:

Joke Three/collected on June 2015

Once, in a city, there was a madhouse with plenty of crazy people! Really *Majoon* [the Arabic and Persian word for crazy which is vernacularly used at times when everything goes insane without legitimate reasons]! One day, an inspector went there for a visit. He found a line of mad people who were laughing out loud and were rolling on the ground out of joy for couple of minutes nonstop after one of them shouted out only a number. It repeated for several times; each time, one said a number, and all died laughing. He asked the head of the madhouse: ‘why was that funny? The interval between their long laughter and the time when one of them says a number is very short! Nothing could have been said or have happened in between!’

The head answered: ‘All these people have been here for a long while. They numbered all the jokes they knew. Now, it is enough one of them only says a joke number to make all laugh. Why do you not try it once? Just pick a number and see what will happen. Remember there are only 52 jokes told here, not more.’

Then the inspector said 22, and all burst out laughing for couple of minutes. Amused by this game, he thought it is a good time to test how mad they are. Therefore, he picked a number out of the joke range and said 67. To his surprise, this time, the mads laughed even harder and longer! When they stopped laughing, the inspector asked one of them:

‘Excuse me, can you tell me what you laughed at?’ The mad answered: ‘Not exactly but it was a new joke! Haven’t heard it before!’²

We both laughed and then Arman commented: “it was a widespread joke at that time³, and Iran was pretty much like that before then. Perhaps, it was not as ridiculous and exaggerated as the joke says but symbolically as joke-less and insane as the madhouse was.” I asked: “But this joke famine did not last long, right? When did it end? Do you remember?” “Of course, it ended,” Arman answered. “Do you know when I got the 67th joke? If I remember right, it was in 2004, 2005 when *Irancell* came to Iran.”

Irancell Saves the Madhouse from the Joke Famine

Irancell is one of the biggest mobile phone operators in Iran which provides its customers with a number of telecommunicating services such as international calls, SMS, MMS, 3G/4G mobile data, and WiMAX⁴ with an inexpensive price compared to its opponents. What it is most popular for, or at least among my informants’ generation who constitutes one of its largest market targets, are its pre-paid tariff plans offered for a range of fees. For example, one can go to an Irancell official representative store across the country and buy and register a pre-paid SIM card by showing their national identity card, *Kart Meli* (Irancell 2017).

² To translate this joke from Farsi to English, I tried to remain faithful to Arman’s word choice. For example, he used the word *divaneh-khaneh* in Farsi whose English word-by-word translation is mad(divaneh)-house(khaneh). Also, the word “mad” in English is the closest translation to the Farsi word *divaneh*. *Divaneh* refers to insane people who do crazy acts and harm others either intentionally or unconsciously and is different from the word *bimare ravani*, which is primarily used for patients who suffer from mental illnesses.

³ Multiple variations of Joke Three may be universally known and told all around the world.

⁴ WiMAX is an abbreviation for “Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access” which is a digital system for wireless communications based on specific standards.

Up to the point when I first left Iran, at the time I conducted my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016, none of the four major mobile phone operators in Iran have provided plans with cellphones. A subscriber gets only a SIM card from an operator and separately buys a cellphone from electronic shops. Also, to register a SIM card in one's name, they must have their national identity card with them at the time of buying it. Every permanent resident above 15 years old in Iran, whether citizen or not, is eligible to get a national identity card. This card has its holder's national identity number, some basic biographical information, and their photo on one side and their home postal code on the other side⁵.

To use a registered Irancell SIM card, the person increases its credits by dialing a charge code. Charge codes are provided through pre-paid charge cards which are available in almost every store in Iran, from grocery stores to newspaper street booths. They are also purchasable online, and even orderable directly from the operator by dialing a code. Irancell charge cards range from 10,000 Iranian Rials (about 0.50 Canadian dollar) to 200,000 Rials (8.43 CAD) and provide services accordingly. As it is said on the Irancell website, there is no expiry period for these pre-paid credits, and there is no monthly fee to keep the line active (Irancell 2016).

According to my informants who still use Irancell, the main advantages of Irancell over its biggest opponent, *Hamrah Aval*⁶ are its affordability and anonymity. While Irancell numbers do not include area codes, every number assigned to Hamrah Aval's postpaid SIM cards has one appearing in the first four digits, indicating in which region of Iran the SIM card is registered. For example, if a number starts with 0913, people assume the number and consequently its

⁵ It is compulsory to have Kart Meli to do many things in Iran such as to get a passport, a driver license, and to do bank procedures.

⁶ Hamrah Aval is one of oldest and largest mobile operators in Iran which is primarily known for its postpaid SIM cards.

owner might be from a city in either Yazd, or Kerman, or Isfahan provinces whose Hamrah Aval area codes are 913. For this reason, my 32-year-old female informant, Rezvan, discarded her Hamrah Aval number and bought an Irancell SIM card when she moved to Tehran for work in 2010, where, in her words, “nosy townie Tehranis look down on *shahrestanis*,” people from a city other than Tehran. With similar motives, Mandana, my 31-year-old female informant, bought her first Irancell SIM card in 2009 when she moved to Tehran for study. She told me that since she moved to Tehran, whenever she gave her Hamrah Aval number to people at University or other institutions, a flood of stereotypical questions and jokes about her ethnic background chased her. She says in our interview: “I got sick of these questions and the *shahrestani* label. It didn’t take me long to realize that the easiest solution was to get an Irancell line which does not reveal my ethnic background to everyone in first place!”

Besides its anonymity, Behzad, my thirty-year-old male informant, believes that Irancell with its highly affordable and widely available SIM cards enables all Iranians to have, use and keep a cellphone line while they are not trapped by monthly bills and subscription fees⁷.

Comparing Irancell and Hamrah Aval, one friend of mine once sarcastically made this analogy: “rather than giving you a heart attack and killing you at once by a monthly bill as Hamrah Aval does, Irancell *Sar-e-to ba panbe mibore* [literally meaning ‘cuts your head with cotton,’ metaphorically used to convey ‘killing someone painlessly and silently without making the victim realize their death’] by its pre-paid charge cards.”

In addition to its reasonable costs, it was its irresistible promotions which drew many people to buy an Irancell SIM card during its first years in Iran. Like Arman, I, too, got my first

⁷ Besides Irancell, there are other phone operators such as Taliya and even Hamrah Aval which also provide pre-paid cellphone lines without charging subscription fees. However, according to one of my interlocutors, Irancell is the most famous, the most accessible, and the most reliable.

Irancell SIM card in 2005 when I was in the second year of my undergraduate studies. Using its Red promotional plan for just 30,000 Rials (slightly more than one Canadian dollar) per month, I could send unlimited texts to other Irancell users without consuming my credit balance, and even more importantly I could make Irancell-family-wide phone and conference calls for free in the evenings. To give readers a better sense of Irancell prices, I should note that on average, the total amount of Irancell charge cards I used in a month was up to 150,000 Rials (roughly six CAD), whereas the bills I received for my Harmah Aval line was roughly 400,000 Rials (approximately seventeen CAD) per month, almost three times more. To become a member of this inexpensive network, many people who I knew bought an Irancell SIM card and used it alongside their primary lines. My then roommate had four Irancell SIM cards plus one Hamrah Aval, each of which she used for contacting different people: her Irancell ones respectively for family and close friends, university friends, her two partners, and her Hamrah Aval was her official contact number which she gave to our residence manager and university staff. While chatting and texting with her friends and families regularly, she also used her Irancell for exchanging jokes, funny/informative notes, poems, and even stories. One exam night, she sent a whole chapter of a book as multiple pages of texts to her classmates, all for free without spending any Rials from her credit balance!

To compete with Hamrah Aval and to widen its network, Irancell, for a long time, used to have a special offer: “buy one SIM card and get one free as a gift!”⁸ My first Irancell SIM card was my sister’s gift SIM card, and my mother’s was my father’s gift one. Similar to my family, many other Iranian families became Irancell members and fans and started to use their Harmah

⁸ The second SIM card was known as *SIMcart hadye*, “the gift SIM card” in Iran. Since no other operators had given this offer at that time, whenever one said “the gift SIM card”, it was assumed they referred to their Irancell line.

Aval lines less frequently. Behzad, for instance, told me he used to have an Irancell line, and soon his mother and his brother joined this mobile network through the buy-one-get-one-as-a-gift offer. Four years later, in 2009, when I bought my second Irancell line, I only paid 50,000 Rials (2.11 CAD) and again got two SIM cards, one as a gift. As a result of this affordability and popularity, many Iranians without a cellphone line became able to own one. In 2014 when I left Iran to come to Canada, almost all of my friends had an Irancell line. In 2015 and 2016 when I conducted this research, almost all of my 25 informants had or used to have at least one Irancell line at one time.

Returning to the madhouse joke and Arman's claim, how did Irancell end Iran's joke famine? Arman explained:

[When Irancell came to Iran and brought its unlimited free texting services], people started sending infinite texts to each other. Anything funny they read on websites was turned into a text-message joke and was carried over into this text messaging network [Irancell]. Therefore, Irancell and these text jokes grew up bigger and even faster. It was then when I got more than thirty or forty new jokes a day! All via SMS! [...] Perhaps, it was Irancell from which I heard [got] my first political joke [...] I remember we [my friends and I] made jokes of whatever, literally whatever, we thought it might make us and others laugh and texted it to all people in our phone book [contact list]. It didn't matter how many people they were or how many texts we had to send because they were all free. And I guess at this point people started to become more hilarious and funny. The people whom I thought were getting frowning and serious, now were turning funny and humorous again. Therefore, jokes started to get produced more and more.

Arman's account refreshed my memory. I recall when I was in the third year of my undergraduate studies in computer engineering in 2006, a year after I got my first Irancell SIM card, every Wednesday after our last class of the week, two students of my cohort got together in our undergrad room. One of them searched the Internet for jokes while the other one typed them as texts. They sent these texted jokes to all the people in their contact lists, including me, via their Irancell lines. As a result, every Wednesday, I received waves of jokes on various topics, some of which I forwarded to people in my contact lists with Irancell lines.

In its early years in Iran, Irancell enabled many Iranians to have an affordable cellphone line. It provided its customers with inexpensive pre-paid plans and guaranteed their anonymity through its region-code-free numbers. It also expanded its network through some special deals, thereby making families and friends more connected with each other. However, these were only some of the impacts it had on my informants' communications. In fact, Irancell's most significant contribution to their social interactions was the formation and the transmission of a pocket-sized digital joke-telling tradition. In the following section, I argue that Irancell played an essential role in the construction and dissemination of what I term cellphonelore, a form of digital folklore which has mobilized joke telling culture in Iran since then.

Irancell and the Phenomenon of Cellphonelore in Iran

“You should hear my story about Irancell. You would like it. I'm sure it will be some sort of use in your thesis. It is kind of embarrassing, but now after five years, I don't mind telling it. I got publicity at school for this story.” My 31-year-old male informant, Ahmad, chuckled and waited for my confirmation. “I would love to! Please!” I nodded to him impatiently. Then, I quickly opened my notebook. It was not a scheduled interview, and I did not have my recorder with me. In fact, I was not prepared at all and was still feeling dizzy and jet-lagged from my twenty-hour flight to Iran a few days before. That night, I had come to a party in my old friends' house in Tehran where I met Ahmed. When he heard that I came back to Iran to do my thesis research on jokes, he got interested in my topic and had a long chat with me during the party. He was a slow talker, and I was optimistic that I would be able to keep up with his pace and jot down what he was telling me in that loud, crowded party.

Ahmad's Story⁹

Let me start from the very beginning. It goes back to 2007 when for the first time I got a cellphone. [I looked up from my notebook without saying a word, and he rushed for his next sentence as if answering my unasked question] Yes, I did not have any before. I never wanted to have a cellphone line, even when I was living far from my parents. I had my own reasons back then which seem absurd to me now. Anyway, guess what operator I bought? [without waiting for my answer, he continued]. Of course, Irancell. When Irancell came in to Iran, I couldn't resist any more. It was very cheap, and all my friends had one. I remembered ten or more friends of mine made a group and had conference calls at least one day in a week in the evenings. It was all free, and they used their Irancells just for fun. I badly wanted to join them, so first I bought a very old cheap mobile device, Nokia 1100, and then an Irancell SIM card. I got a good plan as well; it was the Red or Golden plan, I cannot remember now, but whatever it was, it enabled me to join my friends' conference calls in low cost.

“What did you talk about on your calls?” I asked. Ahmad answered:

Nothing serious. We were often chatting about ordinary topics, and telling jokes. It was just for fun and laughs. Occasionally, we had male-only group talks in which we chatted about different topics and told different jokes like dirty jokes. In all these conference calls, I was the only one who did not have a Hamrah Aval line.

Even though it all started just for having fun, after a year, I decided to keep my Irancell line and use it as my primary number. In winter 2008, I was co-teaching a course with a female peer of mine. It was a lab course for which the students were sitting behind computers, and we walked around to help them with their projects, live-running on their computers. As the instructors of the course, we were only a year or two ahead of our students; therefore, it was not easy for us to control the class.

My colleague and I realized we should soon have a meeting to discuss our issue. While we were still in class, surrounded by students, she asked for my phone number to arrange a meeting date. I said only the first four digits that she suddenly interrupted me and said in an angry voice: ‘No, please give me your real number! It is a serious matter, and we do not have time for fun!’

Puzzled and a little irritated, I answered: ‘That is my number! My only number! I only have an Irancell line!’ I heard students who were sitting at my back giggling.

After this incident, this news got distributed as a joke all over the department that ‘Ahmad used his Irancell phone for serious stuff!’

⁹ To reconstruct Ahmad's story, I relied on the notes I took at the party. While I attempted to be faithful to his narrative, some changes were necessary in order give the story more flow and coherence. These alterations were made with his permission.

I wish it was the end of my story with Irancell, and I had bought a Hamrah Aval line after what happened in class. But regrettably, I didn't learn my lesson.

A year later, I graduated and was looking for a job. My friend's father who runs a successful firm promised to help me out with my job hunting and making networks. One day, I was at a meeting with him and his friends who were also successful CEOs. The meeting went well, and was hoping one of them would offer me a good position. In the end, I was given a form in which I wrote my Irancell number in the indicated space for a primary contact number. When I handed it back, my friend's father took a quick look at it. With a frowning face, he asked me in a serious voice: 'Please give us your main number!'

As Ahmad's account reveals, Irancell, in its early years, was not considered as a primary number by mostly middle- and upper-class cellphone users. Like Ahmad's friends, students, and colleague, many people associated Irancell numbers primarily with entertainment and leisurely activities. For most of my informants, myself included, it was the informal and secondary cellphone line which was exclusively used for making conference calls with friends and family members and texting jokes, poems, love notes, stories, and occasionally political and social awareness-raising notes. My informants who had multiple cellphone lines treated each of them differently. Like my aforementioned roommate with five mobile lines, they too used Irancells as their *private number*, only for communicating with their intimates, whereas Hamrah Aval was their *formal number*, the one often chosen to fill the blank of a primary number in official forms.

These two different approaches toward Irancell and Hamrah Aval not only underlined a clear distinction between two existing cellphone cultures in Iran but also prepared two separate but parallel grounds for the growth of each; on one hand, there was the official mobile culture mostly associated with Hamrah Aval numbers which required the use of high variety language in formal communications with strangers such as bosses, teachers, and co-workers. On the other hand, there was the informal mobile communications among intimates which flourished by

Irancell's arrival and has evolved along with the technological and tele-communicational changes in Iran. Cellphonelore has emerged out of and thrived on the latter.

What I call cellphonelore is folklore that is adapted for, created on, and disseminated through cellphone devices. Cellphonelore takes various forms such as jokes, text-based pictures, urban legends, and with the advent of new messaging applications such as Telegram and Viber, this list expands to short films, digitally altered-photographic jokes, animated pictures, and, more recently, Dubsmash¹⁰ videos.

Cellphones, like fax machines and computers, not only serve as a medium for the communication of folklore among my informants, but also provide the tools for creation and transmission of cellphonelore, which both inhabit and are shaped by this environment. By the arrival of affordable and accessible operating mobile network of Irancell, millions of text messages, many of which included forms of folkloric expressive culture such as jokes and urban legends, were exchanged by Iranians on a daily basis. However, not all Iranian cellphonelore is textlore; in other words, not all cellphonelore is generated on and transmitted through texts. The prevalence of smartphones with Wi-Fi and 3G/4G data capabilities and the popularity of messaging applications such as Viber and Telegram in the recent years in Iranian society have unbound cellphonelore from its limitation to text messages, thereby enlarging this genre to include other forms such as videos and photos. In the following sections, I draw on my

¹⁰ Dubsmash is a video messaging application through which users lip-sync over an audio clip and make a new one with their own faces. Audio clips can include a section of a song, a movie, or, more notably in Iran, a political speech. A very famous example of this type in Iran is found in the popularity of the numerous Dubsmash videos of the former President Mohammad Khatami's speech, which went viral during the Parliament and Assembly of Experts elections in February 2016. In his speech, Khatami, who is currently subject to media ban, called on people to vote to the "List of Hope" which included all remaining reformist candidates in the election campaign. I further discuss this election-themed cellphonelore in Chapters Four and Five.

ethnographic observations and my informants' narratives of these cultural and technological changes in Iran in order to reveal how they have affected the joke-telling culture.

From Taxi to Telegram: Changes of Joke-telling Tradition

In this section, I draw on my observations documented in my field notebooks to demonstrate how the joke telling tradition has changed in Iran since 2013. The following entries selected from my fieldnotes are provided in chronological order and are marked by the place and time of their occurrence. These fieldnotes provide different joke-telling instances that happened in taxis or public places like the metro. They show that technological changes such as the arrival of messaging apps like Viber and Telegram affected and mediated this oral phenomenon in Iran. In the following section, I further discuss these changes.

June 2013, Tehran, in a yellow Taxi

In one of my notebooks, I have kept a joke I heard from a taxi driver in Tehran around the 2013 presidential election:

Joke Four/collected on June 2013:

One day Ahmadinejad [Iranian former president] found lice crawling on his head. He took a comb and made a neat middle parting in his hair. Someone asked him why he did so. He replied: 'One side is for male lice and the other for females.'

I remember it was around the presidential elections in Tehran in 2013, and I was on my way to a party when the taxi driver told me this joke. I wrote it down to retell it to my friends in the party.

January 2014, Tehran

In 2014, the messaging application of Viber was new in Iran. Before I left Iran to come to Canada, I installed Viber on my mother's smartphone, so we could have free voice calls with each other when we are apart.

April 2015, Tehran, Sadeghiyeh Metro Station

It was a Spring day in 2015, and I was back in Iran to undertake the first round of my fieldwork. Coming back home from an interview with one of my informants, Hana, I was on the metro. Next to my bench, there were two girls, in their twenties I suppose, sitting on the ground and reading jokes from their cellphones to each other.

While giggling and whispering, one of them asked the other one to forward her the joke. From my angle of view, one could easily see the screens of their cellphones. Curious, I took a look and recognized the purple background of Viber on their cellphones via which they were exchanging jokes.

June 2015, Taleghan

It was the last week of my fieldwork in Iran in June 2015. I was invited to go to a one-day trip to the countryside around Tehran, Taleghan, by a big group of my friends. To organize their plans, manage the budget and share photos, they created a group on WhatsApp and requested all the fellow-travelers to join it. For four months after our trip, the WhatsApp group was still alive with a change in its name and a twist in its function; it became a venue for my friends to exchange jokes and share news.

August 2016, Tehran, Sadeghiyeh Metro Station

Today was a hot day of summer. I was on my way to visit a friend on the metro. Looking around, it seemed to me nothing has changed since last year: In the women-only section of metro where I saw the two girls last year, what was smoothly going on was very similar to my last year's observations there: people's heads were down on their cellphones, texting, laughing and talking to people in their next. A woman in her late thirties or early forties next to me had a fancy iPhone with a big screen. A light-blue page of Telegram was open on her phone. Reading something on it, she was occasionally smiling and typing something back. Next couple of days, whenever I used metro, I sat in different sections. One day, a young man at my height with earphones was standing next to me and was saying something to his phone's speaker once in a while. Holding his cellphone in his hands, the sequential breaks on each station pushed his body forward and consequently made his cellphone screen visible to me. From Telegram's logos and the wavy shapes of its voice messages, I realized he was exchanging voice messages on Telegram.

Pocket-sized Joke-telling Devices: Mobile phones Have Mobilized Joke-telling Tradition in Iran

After asking about my informants' biographical information, my interviews usually started with this question: "How do you typically get a joke?" Before conducting my interviews, when I was thinking of my potential questions, I put this in the ice-breaking category with the expectation that my participants would answer it with one or two short sentences, something like "I get usually jokes from my friends" or "I hear jokes from my funny aunt." However, as my research moved forward, to my surprise, the answers to this seemingly simple and single-layered question ended up constituting this chapter of my thesis. This question directed me to see and

interrogate the aspects of my research which had become invisible to me because of my familiarity with the field as an insider.

Although it was not my initial intention, through this question I was able to trace back joke-telling culture in Iran from the time of Irancell to Telegram, and to study its evolutionary patterns. It also changed my approach toward taking fieldnotes. In one of my first interviews in Tehran in 2015, I asked the same question of my 33-year-old female informant, Hana. She answered:

I mostly get jokes on cyberspaces. Before I gained access to Viber and Telegram on my cellphone, I got jokes via text messages. I used to read jokes on Facebook or emails but not any more. Right now, I use only my cellphone. I got numerous jokes from my Viber groups [She then named all the groups in which she was a member and explained what kinds of jokes are exchanged in them]. As you can see we are more active on our cellphones now. Just look around in this coffee shop. How many people do you see who are busy with their smartphones?

After this interview, I became more attentive to changes around me. Wherever I went during the three months of my fieldwork trip, I took a closer look to see how people were spending their time, in public or even in private spaces. As a student living abroad, in Canada, I was attached to my cellphone, regularly checking it from morning to evening (the late-night time in Tehran) because it was my only way of making connection with my families and friends back in Iran. However, it did not occur to me before that the same thing was happening in Iranian society; in my visit to Iran in 2015, people there were also becoming more engaged with or, in some cases, addicted to online activities on their cellphones, such as Vibering and playing online video games. At all the parties and gatherings I attended in different cities in Iran, it is not an exaggeration to say that at least one person in each household who had a smartphone via which they have been using Viber and WhatsApp. With only three exceptions, 22 interviewees of mine were a member of at least one Viber group. When I asked them to tell me political or the latest

jokes they heard, in several cases they brought up their cellphones to search for and read jokes from their multiple messaging groups online.

Furthermore, I realized that being a member of Viber, and later WhatsApp, at that time in Iran was interpreted as an indicator of improvement in people's livelihood and financial condition. In my interview with Sharon, my thirty-year-old female informant, she explained to me that when she or her friends get a notification from WhatsApp saying a friend of theirs from their contact lists has just joined WhatsApp, they automatically assume that their "friend [who is new on WhatsApp] must have changed their old cellphone and afforded to buy a smartphone" because, in her words, "it is impossible to have all these applications with you all the time without owning a smartphone." Comparing her Iranian friends living in Iran with those who live abroad, she believes most Iranians inside Iran "care more to have smartphones because they want to be a part of these social lives happening on cellphones and do not want to *az ghafeleh aghab biyoftand* [literally meaning "falling behind the convoy," metaphorically used to imply "not moving along with changes including technological, political, and social in the society"]."

A year later, in 2016, cellphones were still the primary device for exchanging jokes among my informants. With the arrival of low-priced Chinese mobile devices such as Huawei in Iran, more people from lower middle socio-economic background were able to own a smartphone. Therefore, unlike in 2015, being a Viber or Telegram user in 2016 did not necessarily suggest being young, coming from a higher class, and even significant improvement in one's economic status in Iran. In fact, affordable smartphones draw more economically and generationally diverse groups of Iranians to online mobile activities such as online messaging and gaming.

To respond to these growing interests and increasing demands for cellular activities, the main Iranian mobile phone operators, such as Hamrah Aval and Irancell, competed to offer unbeatable 3G/4G data packages. As a result, cellphone versions of applications such as Viber, WhatsApp, and particularly Telegram gained more popularity and accessibility in Iran, to the extent that they predominately replaced regular text messaging. This change became evident in my own research. Two of my three informants who were not members of any online messaging groups in 2015 were primarily using Telegram for sending texts in 2016.

This phenomenon was not specific to Tehran. In Bandar Gaz, a small city in northern Iran where last year I studied jokes in the Mazandarani dialect, many of my Mazani participants currently use the Telegram app on their smartphones for texting. My 38-year-old male informant, Mahdi, told me that last year he had to use his computer to stay in touch with his friends on Viber while this year, he has bought a Huawei smartphone and began to use the mobile version of Telegram instead of carrying it on Viber. My 29-year-old female interviewee, Forough, who read me Mazani jokes from her Viber groups last year, was now a professional MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) game player. She told me since she always has her cellphone with data with her so that she could dedicate more time to play games and send jokes. Even my seventy-year-old female informant, Khale Moshtari, who still uses a traditional way of writing jokes in her notebook, is a Telegram user now.

Returning to my first question in my interviews, “How do you get jokes?”, I draw on Arman’s answer to summarize the evolutionary pattern of the joke-telling tradition in Iran:

Five or six years ago, [the ways I got jokes] were different. Five years ago, I got all my jokes via SMS [abbreviation for Short Message Service. In the vernacular Farsi language, SMS is commonly used instead of text messages]. It rarely happened that I went to a web site joke or surfed the Internet to read a joke. And even social networks were not like today; there were not enough jokes exchanged on them. But now, it is different. In this recent year [2015], messaging applications got more power, albeit only their *mobile*

versions [emphasis in his tone]. [...] Mobile apps such as Viber, WhatsApp, Line, and Telegram are very powerful now. A strong joke wave appears and flows on them. The wave becomes popular, and people give it latitude [*behesh bal va par midahand* in Farsi, literally meaning “give it feather and wings”]; it soars and soars till people get tired of it. Then, they move on to the next topic. All jokes are coming with these waves. No jokes can be found in SMSs any more. Perhaps four years ago, out of five SMSs, two of them were jokes. But not now. Luckily *if* [emphasis in his tone] you could find one joke [message] in fifty SMSs.

As Arman remarked above, cellphones are popular communicative tools for transferring the joke-telling tradition in Iran. Easily portable and fitting conveniently in pockets, they have mobilized and digitized this oral tradition. With 3G/4G capabilities, they provide necessary tools to speed up the joke cycles’ growth and circulation. Moreover, as discussed earlier, cellphones not only serve as a tool for transmission; they also generate new forms of folklore defined as cellphanelore. From the Irancell’s time to the age of smartphones, this genre of digital folklore has evolved under cultural, economic, technological, and tele-communicational changes in Iran. Humorous expressive forms in cellphanelore are not limited to textlore anymore. Messaging applications such as Telegram and Viber prepared the ground for the development of visual, animated, and digitally altered-photographic jokes. In the following chapter, I examine in detail the role of Viber and Telegram in and their impact on joke-telling tradition in Iran.

Chapter 3: Digital Joke-telling Culture and Performance in Viber and Telegram

Joke Five/collected on February 2015:

Mahmood Ahmadinejad [Iran's former president]: Hey there, how are you doing? Why don't you answer me?! I want to have a word with you.



Hassan Rouhani [Iran's current president]: Look! I am busy! What? Do you want to add me to a group, or you want to tease me again? 😏 I don't have time for that!

M: nuh-uh! To be honest, I want to ask you a favor. I will appreciate it.



Are you in the office right now?

H: Yes, I am in my office. What is wrong??

M: That closet next to the aquarium, there is an Adidas wind jacket in it. It is a souvenir from Chávez family. I brought it from Venezuela, do you see it?

H: Wait a sec... Yes, I see it, there is a leather jacket with it too.

M: OK! let them be there! 😊

H: eh?! [waa in Farsi] 😏 shall I send a delivery man to bring it for you?

M: No, it is not necessary. I will come over soon.

H: You come here? When?

M: Two years later when I become president again! Haha [khh in Farsi]



Figure 1: Joke Five

I received the above joke (Joke Five) from a friend of mine in Viber in February 2015. In its format, it is a digital version of a dialogue joke¹¹ between the former and current Iranian presidents. This joke was among the first visual jokes I got in Viber. The joke teller, who is a famous Iranian humorist, used the Viber platform to make a dialogue between the former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, with his successor, Hassan Rouhani. By using digital features such as emojis and simulating the Viber interface, he creates a familiar joke-telling environment for his audience in Viber. In addition to its form, the political message of this joke adds appeal to his artistic creation.

As one of the most recent controversial and corrupt Iranian politicians, Ahmadinejad has a reputation among reformist Iranians that his appetite for power never gets sated because he never stops his efforts to come back to the political scenes regardless of his failed administration and his cabinets' big financial and moral scandals. This joke clearly shows his greedy hunger. Two years ago, in 2015, when I received this joke, it seemed very funny to me. A year had passed since Rouhani, the reformists' candidate, took the office, and like many Iranians, I felt distanced and safe from Ahmadinejad's stormy and disgraceful presidential era, so I could easily laugh at the joke. As I wrote this sentence in early May 2017, it did not sound like a joke to me anymore. To everybody's extreme shock, Ahmadinejad did register as a candidate in the 2017 presidential election. However, he was disqualified by the Guardian Council, and he did not run in the race on May 19, 2017.

¹¹ In his most recent book, *Joking Aside*, Oring has a thorough discussion on "narrative jokes" where he defines them and makes a distinction between them and dialogue jokes (2016, 147-164). According to his definition, Joke Four is not a narrative joke because it is constructed from conversational exchanges and lacks "a series of consequential actions" as an identifying feature of a narrative joke (ibid., 152).

This chapter offers a general overview of the contemporary Iranian joke-telling culture on smartphones. Starting with the Viber application, I identify different moral and social protocols in the online joke-telling culture of my informants. Then, I explore Telegram's joke-telling culture. I end this chapter with a theoretical discussion of the concept of digital joke-telling performance by providing a holistic analysis of online humor in the Telegram space.

What is Viber?

Viber is an instant messaging application with the cross-platform capability which allows its software to be simultaneously implemented and run on multiple computing platforms such as smartphones and computers with different operating systems including Windows, Mac, and Linux. Viber provides its users with instant private and public messaging, as well as offering them free voice and video calls available over WiFi or 3G/4G data. This application was originally developed and launched in 2010 by the Israeli company, Viber Media, and four years later, in 2014, it was bought by Rakuten, a Japanese electronic commerce and Internet company (Shu 2014).

The most convenient way to install Viber on computers and smartphones is to go to the website, Viber.com, where visitors are directed to links or app marketplaces through which they can download the application suitable for their platforms. To create a Viber account, a user is asked to enter their phone number at the installation time. A code is instantly sent to the given number through which they can complete the sign-up process. If the user uses the same phone number and, consequently, the same account on different platforms of mobile and computers, they are able to sync and transfer their ongoing calls and data between the devices.

Viber's mobile app and its macOS (the operating system exclusively designed for Apple's Macintosh computers) version were not effortlessly and efficiently gained for Android and Mac users inside Iran for many years. Based on US economic sanctions against Iran, access to certain application marketplaces, notably Mac and Samsung app stores, was denied to users within Iran for several years, and many Iranians including myself used intermediating apps such as Bazaar to get smartphone and MacBook versions of Viber until 2015.

In July 2015, when Iran signed the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) agreement, a number of international financial sanctions, such as the export ban, were lifted from Iran (see Joyner 2016 for more information on this agreement and Iran's nuclear program). Accordingly, Apple reassured its Iranian customers that "Apple is no longer banned from selling Macs and iOS devices to customers who plan to bring or send those products to Iran" (Sherr 2013). Since then, the ban on app stores such as Mac and Samsung has been removed, and Iranians may download Viber directly from these online stores without using intermediators.

Viber's Joke-telling Culture: General Overview

A month before starting my fieldwork in Iran, I was still in Canada when I read an article with the compelling title "Jokes, Politics, and Medication Prescription: Iranians' lives in Viber" published on the BBC Persian¹² website on March 9th, 2015. Underscoring the significance and multifunctionality of Viber in Iranian society, the article opens with this sentence: "Mobile messaging apps such as Viber, WhatsApp, Line, and Telegram gained enormous popularity

¹² BBC Persian is BBC's Persian language news channel whose web site, Twitter account, Telegram channel, and TV and Radio channels are among the most popular and followed news resources among Persian speakers, including Iranians inside and outside of the country. To date, the BBC Persian web site and its Twitter account are blocked, perhaps permanently, by the Iranian authorities. However, many of my informants inside Iran bypass this filtering by using anti-filter apps and proxy servers.

among Iranians, but it is the Viber application which has seized Iranians' hearts" (BBC Persian 2015). According to a statement made by then Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the paper reports that in 2015, "almost ten million Iranian – over 12% of Iran's entire population – used Viber." Additionally, based on the web analytics service Alexa, it asserts that in 2015, Iran was placed on the top of the international list of visitors to the website Viber.com, and Iranians constituted 17% of Viber users from all over the world. It is, therefore, especially well used in Iran.

In the next section, the article provides the reader with a thorough documentation of the multiple functions of Viber among Iranian users; it demonstrates how the exchange of photo, video and music clips and instant private and group messaging are, specifically within Iran, used for various reasons including medical purposes, such as providing emergency diagnoses, in addition to joke exchanges. Emphasized in a bold font, the article asserts that "due to the Iranian users' insatiable appetite for humor, the free Viber service has turned into a platform for exchanging the latest jokes in Iran."

Quoting Iran's then Minister of Information and Communication Technology, the article argues that, given Viber's widespread popularity among Iranian youth, Rouhani's current government, has no intentions of blocking Viber or other messaging apps. As expected, this decision was not well received by Iranian hardliners and other political groups opposing Rouhani who held a conspiracy theory that Viber was used by its Israeli initiator to spy on Iranians. The article ends by noting the growing popularity of Viber among Iranian politicians, including a number of ministers in Rouhani's cabinet and several parliament representatives who used Viber for both personal and political purposes.

Two months later in Iran, in April 2015, my observations of Iranians' lives in Viber corresponded with what the BBC article describes. From my family members, friends, and informants to total strangers in taxis and the metro, everyone seemed to be using Viber to get and stay connected with people around them. Viber messaging had almost replaced text messaging, and its free phone-call was frequently used along with Irancell and Hamrah Aval telecommunication services.

In 2014 when I had left Iran, using mobile messaging apps was rather a new phenomenon, and, in my family, it was only my mother who used Viber exclusively for calling me in Canada. Since access to Google Talk and FaceTime was denied from within Iran due to sanctions, Skype was the most popular communicating app for making phone calls, and Gmail's chat program was frequently used for messaging.

My first time back in Iran after being gone for over a year, I noticed two evident changes in Iranians' tele-communications. Firstly, as some sanctions were lifted, Iranians' access to mobile app stores and, consequently, applications were provided, so they did not have to bother with proxy servers and intermediating software. This ease in access and use widened the age range of mobile application users. It was not only young Iranians as "digital natives" (Prensky 2001, 1), who under any circumstances found ways to use emergent technology and who were Viber users, but also older Iranians who were "digital immigrants" (2001, 2) and accepted and adopted digital technology and who became Viber's fans. In my extended family, along with my teenage cousins, my uncles and aunts (who are in their middle sixties) had Viber installed on their smartphones and used it primarily for at least reading if not sending texts, as well as occasionally calling their children living abroad. Many informants of mine had similar experiences with Viber family groups. Sharon, my thirty-year-old female informant, explains:

It is not hard to find at least an active family [Viber] group in any Iranian families these days. In my families, from my 14/15-year-old cousin to my 60-year-old dad and uncles, all have smartphones and use Viber. Whenever I or one of us want to send a general note to them or arrange for a family gathering, we create a group [in Viber] including all my families instead of sending each of them separate texts. [...] Such family groups exist forever in Viber and get revived whenever someone shares something there.

In such family groups, jokes were one of the most exchanged folkloric materials, and humor is one of the most trusted languages for sharing political ideas. Arman, my 31-year-old male informant, explains:

Jokes are easily spread [in Viber]. In the Viber group with all my family members, my forty-year-old cousin sends exclusively jokes and occasionally religious texts. I realized whenever she gets serious political notes on the Internet, she usually ignores them; whereas, if she gets political jokes with the same content as the notes, she forwards them. Likewise, my mom in our group never sends political notes while she frequently sends political jokes.

The second noticeable change was the growing popularity of mobile apps among Iranians from lower-middle socio-economic backgrounds. As discussed in Chapter Two, low-priced Chinese smartphones such as Huawei and affordable mobile operators, namely Hamrah Aval, enabled more people to own smartphones and to stay connected in the digital world along with their fellow Iranians. While in 2014, Viber and other messaging applications were exclusive to the upper middle class, mostly residents of the capital or big cities, in 2015, people in small cities were familiar with mobile messaging apps and gradually joined other Viber users. Along with my Tehrani informants, almost all my informants in Bandar Gaz, a small city in northern Iran, used predominantly Viber for exchanging jokes and text messages by 2015.

My informants' most-used and favorite feature of Viber was its private messaging groups. In private groups all members usually know each other, and only the administrator and the current members of the group can add a new member. In our interviews, my informants listed multiple purposes of and activities with which they were engaged in each of their private virtual

gatherings in Viber. Gathering up family members scattered all around the world; communicating with coworkers and customers; having virtual reunions with old roommates, high school friends, and college cohorts; maintaining relationships with former teachers and bosses; and organizing parties, trips, and events within their communities and families were among the activities they named.

Joke-telling was the most recurrent activity of my informants in their private groups. Viber's platform provided them with a specific medium of voice, picture, text, and video to create and share jokes in their desired format. The kind of jokes, such as political, ethnic, dirty, or other, shared in a group primarily depended on the group's agenda, members' gender and age, and their type of relationships. In my general observation, my informants felt more relaxed in sharing humor of any kind among their peers; whereas, in groups with their family members, they exchanged in Narges's, my thirty-year-old female informant, terms, "more general and riskless jokes which [they] guess most members have the capacity [*zarfiyat* in Farsi] to hear."

Likewise, Mandana, my 31-year-old female informant, explains her comfort in sharing any jokes in a Viber group with her friends around her age:

In the groups I have with my close friends, since there is no moral scale based on which I am judged, I feel more relaxed to share any, any jokes I like. [...] [Also, in one Viber group of hers with her college female friends], we even encourage each other to exchange more dirty jokes.

In April 2015, I asked Sajad, my 29-year-old male informant, to send me some activity logs of his Viber groups. Through the Viber backup option, he generated eight Excel sheets, one for each group of his in Viber. Reviewing some parts of his logs, I made an inventory and

summarized their main activities during a two-month period, March and April 2015, in the table below¹³.

Group Name (Names in Farsi)	Numbers of Members	Gender/Ethnic/Age of Members	The Initial Purpose of Creating the Group	Main Activities Within Two Months
The Cool Kids (Bachehaye bahal)	10	Male only/Multi ethnic/Late twenties and early thirties	Keeping in touch with old and new colleagues at his workplace	Sending funny pictures and jokes (mostly political and dirty)
Work!!! (Kar!!!)	7	Male and Female/ Multiethnic/Two members in their late twenties and the rest in their forties and older	Having a formal relationship with a group of his current and old managers and seniors (As an unspoken rule, no jokes were exchanged in this group)	Arranging meetings and, in one case, using this group as a billboard to announce their new regulation
Number One (Darajeh yek)	12	Female and male/ Multiethnic/Late twenties and early thirties	Keeping in touch with close friends from his cohort at Shiraz University	Sending any kind of jokes except dirty jokes and sharing photos of their old times together

¹³ It was impossible for me to get permissions from all Sajad's groupmates to review and use their chats in my research. Therefore, I contented myself with only selections of their Viber activities which were limited to general and impersonal information such as jokes. These parts were meticulously chosen by Sajad to protect his groupmates' identities and personal information. In our follow-up interview, he revised and completed the aforementioned table.

All My Families (Fak o famile Man)	More than 15	Female and male (his extended families mostly from his mother's side)/Khouzestani (from the south of Iran)/Multiage from 17 years old to late 50s	Planning for a family gathering at first but the members decided to keep the group alive	Sending jokes and occasionally planning parties
Jokeland (Jokestan)	More than 20 (He does not know all the members. It is a group of friends and friends of friends)	Female, male, and unknown/Multiethnic/Unknown	Exclusively for jokes (The only rule in this group is that if someone sends something other than a joke or an ethnic joke they will be instantly removed from the group by the administrator)	Sharing jokes about politics, economics, social topics, (mostly in the format of texts)
Friendly (Doostaneh)	11	Female and Male/ Multiethnic/Late twenties and early thirties	A group of close college friends scattered all around the world	Updating each other with their lives, sharing news, and sending jokes, especially at the time of specific political events
High School Friends (Bachehaye dabirestan)	More than 25	Male only/Multiethnic/Late twenties and early thirties	A group of high school friends	Sending all kinds of jokes (including ethnic and dirty ones)

Pals at the Break at the University [workshop] (Bachehaye Zange Tafrih)	15	Female and Male/ Multiethnic/Multiage (mostly around early thirties)	A group with friends he met in a workshop for which he volunteered as an assistant in 2010	Sending jokes, notably political
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Table 1: Viber Activity Log

As the table shows, Sajad did not share jokes with his superiors and coworkers in group *Work!!!*. The more formal his relationships are, the less jokes are exchanged. Additionally, he followed the same policy as Mandana did for sharing jokes in single-sex and mixed-gender friend groups. Among his male peers in groups *The Cool Kids* and *High School Friends*, he felt more freedom to share any kind of jokes, including dirty ones, while in mixed gender groups such as *Friendly*, he was more conservative about the type and extent of swear words in jokes. Also, like Narges, he forwards “riskless jokes” with no or a few acceptable swear words in his family groups.

In her studies of “foul language” – particularly in Australia, but to some extent through the English-speaking world – linguist Ruth Wajnryb defines “social swearing” as occasions of using foul language in social groups. She indicates that “in relaxed settings where people are comfortable with other in-group members, their language is characterized by a high degree of swearing” (2005, 34) which builds rapport and fosters an atmosphere of acceptance and solidarity in groups (ibid., 197). She identifies gender and class as two social variables which affect the extent of swear words people use in their social groups and says, “there is less swearing in mixed-gender groups than in single-sex groups of either sex” (ibid.). Wajnryb’s statements hold up in this examination of Iranians’ Viber groups.

In addition to gender and class, age is another determining factor of the extent of the use of foul language in my informants' Viber groups. While in groups with their single-sex peers, they extensively shared obscene jokes; however, the existing moral standards in family groups imposed some limitations on their joke-telling. Furthermore, the dominant Iranian culture of treating seniors, known as *Adab va Ehteram be Bozorgan* (or just "Adab" refers to respect and graciousness for elders) is to a certain extent digitally evident in Viber groups.

As a long-lasting component of Iranians' culture in pre-Islamic and Islamic eras, Adab includes certain instructions which leads to "gracious and proper demeanours" (Davaran 2010, 171) toward parents, teachers, seniors, and spiritual and intellectual superiors who are counted as *Bozorgan* or elders. (See Davaran 2010, 170-220 for a historical and literary analysis of Adab in Persian culture.) Entering a place after elders, not lying in their presence, and using the plural forms of verbs when addressing a single individual in a conversation are some common examples of Adab-practice. The digital version of Adab in my informants' Viber family groups involved their thoughtful and conservative word and emoji choices, as well as their avoidance of sharing jokes with even the slightest swear words. In this way, Narges's term, "riskless jokes" includes jokes which do not endanger Adab among different generations of families.

As Sajad's activity log shows, along with foul language, politics as a theme for humor necessitates a specific atmosphere to grow. While sharing political jokes and discussing politics in groups with like-minded members in most cases leads to socialization and group cohesion, the opposite result is expected in groups whose members have less in common in their political affiliations. Sajad explained to me that to minimize confrontations, he did not forward political jokes in some of his Viber groups whose members he did not know and trust well. Likewise, in her family group, Maral, my 27-year-old informant, told me that even though she enjoyed this

close online connection with her family, she avoided sending political jokes because her leftist view point is not in accord with their conservative political ideology, and she did not want to offend them. Therefore, trust and Adab are two factors which influenced my informant's online political joke-telling.

Moreover, joke-telling was not only popular in Sajad's private groups with his family and friends, but also in semi-public ones like *Jokeland*, humor was the only permissible language. As he explained, he joined this group via one of his friends; he did not know many of the members and was not sure whether they used their actual identities or joined the group with their pseudo-username. All information about a group member accessible to him or other members was limited to their names (either real or pseudonym), profile pictures (which could be left blank), and their cellphone numbers. Therefore, such big groups in Viber, with known and anonymous members, were not totally private but rather semi-public, and usually created for a specific purpose such as sharing jokes.

Mahdi, my 38-year-old male informant who lives in Bandar Gaz, was an administrator of one of those semi-public groups in Viber in 2015. His group's name was *Townspeople* and has more than seventy members who were either Bandar Gaz dwellers or those who were originally from this town but currently live somewhere else. As Mahdi describes this group, it is a group which, according to its members, "always smells like home to Bandar Gazi people, no matter in which part of Iran they live now." Explaining the initial purpose and the current agenda of the group, he stated:

This group was established [by me] in order to be a space where we [Bandar Gazis] could exchange our thoughts and ideas on social, cultural, and political matters relating to our town. Then, the city authorities joined the group and said they would like to hear what we are discussing about, and then this group gradually and slowly became larger that as of today [June 12, 2015] it has seventy, eighty members! [...] Townspeople is a group for exchanging ideas on town issues, cultural and social concerns, art-related matters,

tourism, town beautification and so on. When the mayor, the deputy mayor, some members of City Council, along with several well-known Bandar Gazi artists and academics joined the group, it became more serious! Since then, all we talk is about the town and issues related to it and its people.

Then I asked him if he and other members of the group have used jokes to assist them in communicating their critiques. He answered:

Yes, of course like any other political social matters in Iran we make jokes out of them. However, we have a rule in our group. If we are in the middle of a serious discussion, no *parazit* [literally meaning parasitic noise and vernacularly used to convey any annoying uninvited noise] like jokes are allowed.

According to what Mahdi and Sajad state, joke-telling communications in semi-public groups in Viber act like forwarded emailed jokes (Kibby 2005, 775; Frank 2009) or list jokes (Oring 2016, 129-146). In private groups, the online joke-telling settings are more like the oral transmissions of humor. Similar to the traditional definition of folklore, private-group joke-telling is an “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben-Amos 1971, 13) whose audience is limited to known members of families or friend groups. However, posting a joke in semi-public groups like *Jokeland* or *Townspeople* is not like telling a friend a joke in an intimate one-on-one conversation. It is indeed like an emailed joke forwarded to a large contact list, known and unknown, or like a joke posted in special-forums or joke websites where the audience is potentially extended to all net users. In this way, as Oring argues, online jokes “escape the confines of local groups and find their way across social boundaries and persist over stretches of time” (2016, 146). In the following sections, I argue that these semi-public Viber groups and later Telegram channels facilitate my informants’ use of humor in their social and political activism by reordering public and private spaces.

Despite all its advantages, Viber had a short life in Iran, and its initial appeal, which in BBC report’s terms once “seized Iranians’ hearts over other applications,” did not last long. In

July 2015, almost four months after the publication of this report and a month after my fieldwork, in a Skype interview with Sharon, she informed me Viber is no longer in use in Iran. She identified Viber's low speed, the limitations on the size of the exchanged data, and its lack of supporting video files¹⁴ as the main reasons which made people replace this application with its competitors, first WhatsApp and then Telegram.

My 29-year-old female interlocutor, Sara, in our informal chats mentioned that the other biggest problem with Viber was its defective programming. To join a Viber group, a current member of the group is able to add a new member without asking their permission. Although later, it is the new member's decision to either stay or leave the group, their consent is not initially required. As Sara explained, in Viber space, "[one] can be easily thrown into the groups where [they] do not wish to be even for a second." This careless coding made the Viber environment relatively unsafe and unreliable.

The other main reason Iranian users migrated from Viber to other messaging apps was its on-and-off filtering by the government. Social media filtration is not a new story in Iran, and there have been abundant visual and verbal jokes addressing this phenomenon as an inseparable part of Iranians' daily lives:

Joke Six/collected on November 2013:

On the plane, on his way back from Geneva [after Iran's Nuclear Program negotiations], Zarif [Iran's minister of Foreign Affairs] tweeted: "I do not know where I am right now." Someone answered his tweet: "Don't worry Doctor! Just try to open Facebook on your cellphone. If it is filtered, be sure you are back home, sweet home!"

Even though since the 2009 Green Movement, many Iranians have become experts at finding alternative ways to bypass these filtrations, this time, because of Viber's numerous errors, they

¹⁴ However, as of early May 2017, many of these errors and deficiencies have been solved by the Rakuten company.

did not see any benefits in remaining loyal to Viber, so they easily and quickly abandoned their groups and made new ones in Telegram. On July 5, 2015, I report in my fieldnotes that seven of the ten active Viber groups of mine had transferred to Telegram. Two of the remaining groups in Viber were those whose members all live in diaspora and keep their groups up-to-date. In August 2016 when I conducted the second round of my fieldwork, none of my 20 informants who still lived in Iran used or even had Viber on their cellphones. Joke Seven, which I received many times from multiple groups in Telegram around that time, best demonstrates this phenomenon in Iranian cellular communications:

Joke Seven/collected on July 2015:

You can say for sure Aryans'¹⁵ immigration from Viber to Telegram is the largest and the fastest immigration of this nation throughout the whole history of Persia.

What Is Telegram?

Like Viber, Telegram is a cloud-based instant messaging application which enables its users to access their messages with seamless sync on multiple devices at the same time. It was launched in 2013 by Russian brothers, Nikolai and Pavel Durov, but as it is said in their official website, it is “not connected to Russia – legally or physically” and is headquartered in Berlin, Germany (Telegram 2017).

Compared to its two main competitors, Viber and WhatsApp, Telegram’s messenger is programmed more accurately and provides its users with more features while giving them fewer bugs. Unlike Viber, there is no limitation over the type of a message in the Telegram platform, and the size restriction is not comparable with Viber. Telegram users are unlimited in their

¹⁵ Aryan, *Aryaee* in Farsi, is a term frequently used among Iranians when they want to refer to their historical and ancestral background. Historically, Aryan tribes were the first settlers of the land later known as Persia, in the third and second millennium BC (Barker 1871, Introduction; Katouzian 2009, 28).

ability to send any type of message, including audio, video, as well as doc, zip, mp3 files, up to 1.5 GB each time. Moreover, unlike WhatsApp, Telegram's data exchanging does not consume the memory of a device since messages can be stored in the messenger's cloud. With regards to security, Telegram officials claim that this application "is more secure than mass market messengers like WhatsApp and Line" because it is based on a more intelligent protocol (MTProto) which is "compatible with high-speed delivery and reliability on weak connections" (Telegram 2017).

Like Viber, the best way to to install a portable version of Telegram that connects with the user's computing systems is to go to its main website, Telegram.org, where the main server directs users to a link to the appropriate version of the app. Since Telegram has cross-platform capability and uses cloud-based messenger, users get synchronized messages on every device upon which they had installed the app.

Telegram provides its users with different services such as private messaging groups, Supergroups, public channels, and, more recently, free voice calls. Accommodating up to 200 members, a private group functions similarly to a Viber group. It provides families and friends with a space for exchanging cellphonelore. If a group grows to 5000 members, it can be ungraded to a Supergroup. By default, every member of a group or a Supergroup can add a new member, participate in group discussions, and edit the group's name and picture.

A public channel is a specific tool for exchanging public ideas. These channels are exclusive to the Telegram environment. Defined in Telegram's website, they are "a tool for broadcasting public messages to large audiences" as they can have an "unlimited number of members" (Telegram 2017). Unlike Telegram private groups and semi-public groups in Viber, a member of a public channel does not have any access to other members' information except the

creator's, if it is provided and public. More importantly, unlike semi-public Viber groups, a current member cannot add a new member. They can only share the channel's link with their friends, and if anyone wants to join, they have to go to the channel page and press "Join". In a channel, only the creator and the administrator can send or delete a message; there is no option for other members to make comments or take any action except reading and forwarding its messages to other groups. In this way, Telegram channels act like a news agency whose roles are communicating news from the perspectives of their creators. When a message is sent in a channel, it is signed with the channel's name and photo, not its creator's.

Based on the web analytics service Alexa, as of early May 2017, most visitors of the website Telegram.org are Iranians, who constitute 35.8% of the all Telegram users worldwide (Alexa 2017). According to the head of National Center for Cyberspace, Firouzabadi, half of Iran's population (forty million) own smartphones (National Center for Cyberspace 2016), and according to official statistics, as of September 6, 2016, more than 25 million of them are active Telegram users (Fardanews 2016). Firouzabadi also states that there are more than 100,000 Iranian Telegram channels, some of which have more than one million members. Throughout a day, over 1,200,000 items are created and spread in the Telegram space in Iran, and on an average, each item is seen 400,000 to 500,000 times (National Center for Cyberspace 2016).

Not limited to ordinary Iranians alone, Telegram is a popular app among state authorities who frequently use it as a billboard to make public announcements. The Leader, the President, some of the parliament representatives, all have multilingual channels through which they share their thoughts and ideas with people. Ironically, some hardline officials in military and judiciary agencies who call for Telegram's blocking also take advantage of this application to promote their ideology. Even though their attempts to totally block this application have failed so far, they

have succeeded in making this online venue feel less safe for political activists. Occasional arrests of creators and administrators of political channels is one of their strategies in stifling freedom of speech in cyberspace (see Center for Human Rights in Iran 2017 for more detail on their arrests). Despite this constant fear, the platform served as the most influential accompanying tool used primarily by reformists in the February 2016 elections which I discuss in detail in the next two chapters.

As of early May 2017, all Telegram services are available from within Iran except free-voice calls. Even though this service was launched by the Telegram officials in Iran on April 14, 2017, it was quickly blocked by the Attorney-General, which denounced it as “a threat to national security” (quoted in BBC Persian Telegram channel on April 2017).

Telegram’s Joke-Telling Culture: General Overview

As discussed earlier, because of Viber’s on-and-off filtering, restrictions, and errors, Iranians inside Iran moved their family and friend groups to Telegram, so that new-born Telegram groups were identical twins of Viber versions. Therefore, all the dominating joke-telling culture in Viber was also transferred to the new online environment along with this relocation. The moral codes of Adab, the protocols of social swearing, and all other etiquettes explored in the Viber sections are equally applicable to the joke-telling performances in Telegram. All these protocols and behaviors constitute what Gary Alan Fine terms as an “idioculture” or “small group culture” (1979).

Fine defines idioculture as “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behavior, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer that serve as the basis of future interaction” (1987, 125). In their ethnographic studies of joking idiocultures in workplaces, Fine

and Michaela De Soucey identify them as “embedded, interactive, and referential” (2005, 1), which serve as “regulation” of “the smoothing of conversation, [...] separating group from others, and securing the conformity of members” (ibid., 17).

Although their studies explore face-to-face interactions with a focus on practical jokes not joke-telling, their findings are loosely applicable to my informants’ Telegram joke-telling idiocultures. Their online humorous communications are also embedded and interactive as they happen within the context of a group when its members digitally interact with each other. They are also referential because group members use the “cryptic” (Schutz 1995) language of humor to express their beliefs and thoughts while making references to cultural, political, and historical commonalities shared between them.

Additionally, this online idioculture is intergenerational. As mentioned earlier, not only digital natives but also digital immigrants, regardless of their age, are members of these private groups and contribute to their activities such as joke-telling in different ways. The 60-year-old mother of an interlocutor of mine is the creator of several family and friend Telegram groups in all of which, in my interlocutor’s terms, “she has the responsibilities of coordinating groups’ activities, and make sure all members have good time.” Likewise, my 65-year old father is an active member of numerous Telegram groups such as our extended family group in which he shares jokes, political notes, and pictures.

The online humorous interactions among different generations of families not only blur the digital divide but also help families reconstruct and reinforce their group identities as family members. My 33-year-old female informant, Hana, is a resident of Tehran but a member of a large family group, some of whose members live in Malayer, a small city in central Iran. Malayer is Hana’s parents’ hometown; they moved from there to Tehran when she was four

years old. Even though her parents never spoke their local language at home, she became familiar with her paternal culture and language through local jokes which her Malayeri relatives share in their family group in Telegram. She even learnt about “blasons populaires” (Widdowson 1978), which are widespread in that region, because they are embedded in these jokes.

However, not all family groups are like Hana’s, successful in building intergenerational identities and filling gaps through humor. In many of my informants’ family groups, young generations do not participate in political debates and, subsequently, do not share or digitally react to political jokes. Like Maral, many of them prefer to remain silent and hide their disagreements by staying in the group because they believe leaving the group will be interpreted as a violation of Adab to their elders.

Fine and De Soucey’s conclusions regarding the effects of joking culture in their participants’ groups are applicable to my research. My own informants’ online joke-telling functions as “group regulations” in “smoothing interactions [...], sharing a collective identity through cohesion, separating the group from others by drawing boundaries, and securing appropriate action by means of informal social control” (Fine and De Soucey 2005, 8). However, my informants’ online humorous communications not only regulate their relationships but also act like a double-edged sword: it bonds while at the same time it separates group members. For example, in a multi-ethnic group, sharing ethnic jokes reinforces cohesion among non-victim members while it generates “unlaughter” (Billig 2005; M. Smith 2009), which is “the display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for, or demanded” (2005, 192)” (Billig 2005, 192), among targets. In my interview with Eli, my thirty-year-old Azari female informant, she named different instances that had happened in her Telegram group with her close

friends in which she felt “excluded” and “offended” when others shared jokes against/about Azari people.

Likewise, social swearing through dirty jokes is simultaneously intimating and divisive. Hadis, my thirty-year-old female informant, was a member of a Telegram joke group, *Joke Ghashang* [“the Pretty Joke” in English], with her colleagues. She left the group because of what she calls “disgusting dirty jokes which cross the line.” She told me that, in the end, this group did not survive because, like Hadis, many of its initial members left the group. Also, sharing jokes about politically sensitive matters might elicit online fights while making like-minded members form new groups that are in opposition to others. My 32-year-old female informant, Rezvan, left a group during the February 2016 elections because she could not tolerate their jokes that were in conflict with her political affiliation.

Digital Joke-telling Performance in the Telegram Space

In line with the then-paradigm of the field, most early folkloristic studies on humor were text-based (see Ellis 1991, Dundes 1971a and 1987, Smyth 1986, Banc and Dundes 1986, Brunvand 1970). Through a textual analysis of a joke’s “appropriate incongruity” (Oring 2003), these folklorists focused exclusively on the joke’s “base meaning” (Oring 1987, 278) and speculated on the psychological motivations of joke-tellers. As the field’s paradigm shifted from *text* to *context*, humor scholars who were influenced by “performance theory” (Ben-Amos 1971) turned their attention toward jokes’ “performance meanings” (Oring 1987, 278) and explored humor in relation to specific joke-telling settings (see Walle 1976; Thomas 1997; M. Smith 2009; Oring 2010).

With the advent of new technologies and their massive influence over orally transmitted folklore, some folklorists, notably Alan Dundes and Carl Pagter, departed from their peers' preoccupations with face-to-face orally communicated humor. They explored photocopied jokes shared among office workers (1975, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2000) and, accordingly, coined the terms "office copier folklore" (1987) and "photo-copier folklore" (1996). Soon thereafter, folkloric scholarship on digital folklore grew in different fields, namely computerlore (see Roush 1997, Howard 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995 and 1996, Baym 1993, P. Smith 1991, Dorst 1990, Fox 1983, Beatty 1976), mass/popular culture and folklore (Narváez 2003), and more recently Internetlore (see Kibby 2005; Mason 2007; Blank 2009, 2012, and 2013a and b; Frank 2011 and 2015) and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (Staple 2010, Learning 2009). However, with a few exceptions (Rezaei 2016, Blank 2013a, Bronner 2012, Oring 2003 and 2016, Frank 2009, Laineste 2003) online humor remains understudied in this body of literature.

Exploring *digital* performance meanings of humor is not possible in the same way as oral performance meanings because, as Russell Frank argues, the virtual ethnography of online-joke telling lacks "the texture of an account of actors, scene, and setting" (2009, 100). Therefore, I suggest that if we seek for performance meanings of online jokes, we need to read this genre of digital folklore as its own language and not seek to translate into that of oral humor or seek out possible equivalents in traditional folklore. In the following, I identify three characteristic features which make Telegram joke-telling performances distinct from oral humorous communications.

Joke Forwarding/Sharing

In Telegram, there is no joke-telling but rather joke-sharing. Unlike oral performances, joke-sharing does not serve as a means for a joke-teller's self-expression and does not display what James Leary terms their "jocular communicative style" (1984a, 30). While joke-telling performances "are powerful vessels for creating and using symbols of self" (Bronner 1984, 36), joke-sharing in Telegram does not demand the self-involvement of those who share a joke. In this way, a shared joke lacks the "particularity" of an orally communicated joke which "reveals the personalities of individual tellers" (Leary 1984b, 1).

Furthermore, when it comes to joke-forwarding, there is no variation in most cases. In his study of emailed jokes, Frank argues:

Forwarding an emailed-joke does not even entail retyping it: one hits the forward button, and the joke from the incoming e-mail is automatically reproduced in the outgoing e-mail. In other words, variation, long an identifying feature of oral tradition, has become the exception rather than the rule. (2009, 100)

Likewise, my informants in Telegram mostly forward ready-made jokes from other channels and groups without even a slight alteration. However, this uniformity and the resulting invariability do not necessarily devalue digital joke-telling performances and elevate real-time humor but rather necessitate a shift of focus in studying humor online; while performers and their performance are in the center of folklorists' attentions in their studies of oral joke-telling communications, in digital humor, the ways in which people interact and converse through humor are of greater importance. To put it simply, in the Telegram space, groups and the ways they converse through forwarded humor matter more than individuals and their performative styles. These conversations generated by humor are worthy of folkloric research because Frank believes they include people's reactions to the folklore (2009, 100).

Additionally, forwarding is not the mere act of copying and pasting. It entails intentional selecting and shows the sender/forwarder's agency in choosing what parts of a tradition they think deserve to get transmitted and go viral. Therefore, in a Telegram group, forwarded jokes make members' joke repertoires, and studying them reveals the general mood and interest of the group. My informant, Narges, used this strategy when she wanted to join political channels and groups in Telegram during the February 2016 elections in Iran; by quickly scrolling down and skimming their jokes, she got a sense of members' average political orientations and ideological directions.

Forwarding can be also interpreted as a digital response to a joke. When a Telegram user forwards a joke from other online resources, it means they either agree with its message or they want to criticize it with a follow-up conversation. Arman, my 31-old male informant, states: "When I get a political joke, if I agree with its message and content, I will forward it, and vice versa; if I do not agree, obviously, I do not help its circulation." Therefore, forwarding is the digital repetition of a meaningful tradition. Only those jokes that contain politically and individually important messages are forwarded. Consequently, with regards to political jokes, the most forwarded jokes are the ones which best represent one political party and their supporters' ideology. I use this rationale in my analysis of election jokes in Chapter Four and Five.

Even though the lack of self-expression makes forwarded jokes impersonal, it facilitates their circulation and expands their audience. It also helps the mass production of jokes. In fact, an online joke is like a mass-produced cultural product which makes folklore available to a larger number of consumers. These consumers are also producers because, with the ease of forwarding, each joke audience has the potential to become a joke-teller without having any performative and jocular communicative styles. My informant, Araman, calls this phenomenon

“joke waves” (clearly parallel to the folkloristic term “joke cycle”) and believes Iranian political joke waves play influential roles in shaping and changing the political climate of Iranian cyberspaces in general and Telegram in particular. In this way, online joke waves are more effective in social and political activism, at least in Iran, than their oral counterparts because there is no hesitation in circulation, no limitation on audience, and no condition on joke-tellers.

As discussed earlier, even though there is a constant fear among Iranians because of the government’s control of and spying upon cyberspaces, political activists still find Telegram and other online venues safer than public spaces for their political activities, including political humor, which might be interpreted as “a threat to national security” by Iranian officials. The potential anonymity in these spaces works as a shield under which they conceal their real individuality. Therefore, the absence of real self, let alone self-expression, works as an asset rather than a disadvantage in humorous commutations online which serve as means to a political end.

However, not all political humorous activities in Telegram are anonymous, and not all forwarded humor lacks self-expression and variation. In the recent Iranian elections in February 2016, many young reformists made Dubsmash *selfie* videos of former President Khatami’s speech in which they lip-sync over his voice when he called on people to vote for the reformists’ list. These videos are not just humorous creations of hundreds of political activists, but are also political statements against the prohibition issued by the judiciary branch which bans national media from publishing Khatami’s photos and speeches. These achievements seem unattainable within the constraints of the oral world. In the next two chapters, I discuss the February electionlore and the multiple roles it played in Iranian society and politics.

Digital Laughter and Unlaughter

As Moira Smith indicates, “laughter is a normal and desirable reply to a joke performance” with which “the audience signals acceptance of the joker’s invitation to join him or her in the humorous mode of discourse for the time being” (2009, 152). On the other hand, “unlaughter,” defined by Michael Billig as “the display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for, or demanded” (2005, 192) when it happens, is socially powerful and very significant, highlighting supposed differences and heightening exclusionary social boundaries (M. Smith 2009, 150-151).

However, in online venues, laughter and unlaughter are communicated differently. In his studies of Internet joke lists, Oring argues that the emailed joke “does not demand a reaction, and a purveyor of e-mail humor usually cannot be sure that the humor is read, let alone appreciated” (2016, 132). Unlike emailed jokes, humor in Telegram calls for a response and cannot be easily ignored or avoided. While an email can be deleted without being opened, a message in Telegram must be read in order to be deleted. Also, any message seen by members in a Telegram group is marked with double ticks while unseen delivered messages are differentiated by a single tick. Therefore, in the intimate private space of a small family or friend group, ignoring a joke is noticeable by the joke-forwarder and other members of the group.

There are three common ways of digitally reacting to humor in Telegram: stickers, emojis, and emoticons. Unlike emoticons, emojis and stickers contain the actual pictures of what they represent; however, there is not a significant difference, at least in Telegram, in their functions and usages (see Lucas 2016; Danesi 2017 for the genesis, cultural and linguistic significances of emojis, and their differences from emoticon), and all three serve as the most common modes of emotive and expressive communications in Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM)

environments. Since sociolinguistic and semiotic-anthropological literature has largely grown around emoticons, I build my analysis of digital laughter upon scholars' findings on the cultural and linguist significance of emoticons and expand them to include stickers and emojis.

Anthropologist Smiljana Antonijevic defined emoticons as “emotional icons [...], visual representations of facial expressions used in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) to indicate the mood and/or emotion of the user” (2005, 1). Emoticons – a portmanteau word composed of emotion and icons – “serve paralinguistic functions in textual communications” (Oring 2016, 130). In their studies of emoticons in instant messaging discourse, communication scholars Anthony Garrison, Dirk Remley, Patrick Thomas, and Emily Wierszewski point out that this paralinguistic nature “does not imply that emoticons must be *compensatory*. In instances where the emoticon appears *alone*, the nature of the emoticon clearly allows it to function as an utterance on its own” [emphasis in original] (2011, 123). Likewise, in their study of the sarcastic use of emoticons, psycholinguists Dominic Thompson and Ruth Filik argue that “emoticons may actually be more efficient than *standard* language for marking sarcastic intent. That is, the intention can be communicated more quickly via an emoticon than via additional words or phrases, in a way somewhat similar to nonverbal cues in speech” [emphasis in original] (2016, 117).

In the same vein, in humorous communications by my informants in Telegram, different kind of emoticons, along with emojis and stickers, are used in response to jokes. In many cases, my informants express their agreement with jokes' messages only through emoticons. Therefore, emoticons digitally represent the audience's laughter which, as established by the aforementioned scholars, is not compensatory but the efficient, sufficient, and quickest way of

nonverbally responding to a joke. The table below includes some of the most common Telegram emojis and their corresponding emoticons¹⁶ used as digital laughter by my informants.

Description	Emojis	Emoticons
Grinning Face		:)
Grinning Face With Smiling Eyes		No emoticon
Face With Tears of Joy		:\'')
Rolling on the Floor Laughing		No emoticon
Smiling Face With Open Mouth		:-)
Smiling Face With Open Mouth & Smiling Eyes		8D
Smiling Face With Open Mouth & Cold Sweat		,:)
Smiling Face With Open Mouth & Closed Eyes		X-)

Table 2: Unicode Emojis to ASCII-art Emoticons

Unlike emoticons and emojis, stickers are customizable and individually creatable in Telegram. Using the Telegram @sticker bot, a creative user can create their own sticker sets and get permanent links which they can share with their friends (Telegram 2017). This unique feature

¹⁶ There is not a universal mapping table to convert Unicode emojis to ASCII-art emoticons and each emoji might have from zero to more than one emoticon equivalent. The emoticons in my table are based on what my informants commonly use.

not only provides joke tellers with required equipment for making visual jokes, but it also enables the audience to give personalized visual responses.

Customized sticker sets usually emerge as a topical joke cycle goes viral in Telegram. Corresponding with a day's hot political and social events, these sets are used either as visual jokes on their own or a response to another joke. In the fall of 2016, during the elections in Iran, many of my informants created their own or added already-made election-themed sticker sets with which they replied to political jokes spread all over Telegram. In addition to politicized stickers, accented stickers are very popular among my informants with non-Tehrani origins. Customizing nationally viral stickers, they change the Tehrani-accented Farsi lines in the stickers with their mother language, dialect, or accent and make them their own. For example, Forough, my 29-year-old female informant, is the user and creator of stickers in the Mazani dialect, the language of Mazandarani who live in northern Iran (see Appendix B-Stickers: Local Stickers).

While analysing digital laughter is possible through its embodiment in the virtual language of stickers, emojis, and emoticons, exploring digital unlaughter is not an easy endeavor. The aroused silence after sharing a joke does not necessarily mean disagreement, one-sided laughter, or deliberate boundary making through unlaughter. Even in the Telegram space where ignoring a joke is noticeable in a private group, some jokes do not receive reactions, either acceptance or rejection. As mentioned earlier, several of my informants including Rezvan and Eli, have been marginal members and been offended by a joke in their groups; they have reacted in one of two ways: they either hid their feelings by remaining silent or they could not tolerate the group anymore and left it.

My informant, Hana, uses the term “threshold of humor tolerance” when she discusses ethnic jokes in her multi-ethnic Telegram groups. From the perspective of an ethnically or

politically marginalized member, when joke-telling passes this threshold, this targeted or offended member – referred to here as X - leaves the group. Immediately after their exits, the sentence “X left the group” appears in the main page and informs all the remaining members. This act is interpreted by the other members as a sign of X’s intolerance and their protest to the intentional or accidental unlaughter. In this way, the digital unlaughter does its ultimate job which is “heighten[ing] the group boundaries by mocking and ostracizing the outsider” (M. Smith 2009, 166) and shrinking the group’s size by pushing out those who find group norms unbearable.

In Iranian political jokes, “X left the group” is frequently used as the punchline to target the joke-teller’s political opponents and underline their intolerance in staying in and hearing voices of groups who have an opposing perspective. In the vocabulary of Iranian political jokes, this sentence is usually associated with hardline and ultra conservative politicians who are against freedom of speech and political freedom. In Chapter Four, I further discuss these jokes.

Reordering Public and Private Spaces

When it comes to studying online folklore, folklorists such as Trevor Blank, the pioneer of online folklore theorists, usually undertake their investigations under the dominant shadow of oral traditions. In other words, in their exploration of the digital world, they constantly make unnecessary comparisons with the oral realm seeking parallels in this new language (see Frank 2011, 9-15; Blank 2013a, xi-xxvi). In this limiting view, online folklore is frequently seen as the computer-mediated version of vernacular culture that has limited independence from the oral realm (Blank 2012, 5; 2013b, 106) and is primarily admired for its contribution to facilitating disseminations of oral folklore (Blank 2013a, xviii; 2012, 5-12). With this preoccupation,

folklorists generally neglect the specific roles of online venues as if they are merely transitory roads which short-cut folklore's transmission. In this sub-section, I diverge from this view and turn my focus toward Telegram as the space in which online humor is created, lives, and is circulated.

In his well-known theory of "public sphere," Jürgen Habermas defines public space as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" where they openly discuss their political views against public authorities (1989, 27). He states that these public places, such as coffee houses in 1680 and 1730 in Great Britain and salons in the period between the Regency and the Revolution in France, were the centers of criticism, first literary then political, where people regardless of economic class and social status engaged in political debates (ibid., 32-39).

Drawing on and challenging this theory, anthropologists Shahram Khosravi and Mark Graham argue that while in a society, public sites ideally provide places for sociability and political debates, and Iranian cyberspace "has in some respects provided an outlet for the opinions of groups excluded from the public sphere" (2002, 222). They clarify that even though the Internet "does not provide any simple choice between a blueprint for justice or injustice, freedom or thralldom, democracy or dictatorship, order or disorder", it "does offer different ways of *ordering* social life" [emphasis in original] (ibid., 223). They conclude that cyberspace is a "place of alternative orderings" or, in Foucauldian term, a "heterotopia" because it is the "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space" where cultural, social, and political alternatives can exist and flourish (Foucault 1986, 24). In this way, it redraws the boundaries between public and private when private and semi-private opinions become more available for a much larger public (Khosravi and Graham 2002, 243). Similarly, drawing upon the work of the

geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, folklorists have often noted landscapes of “one space, many places” (Hufford, 1986).

In the same vein, the Telegram space is a heterotopian place for alternative orderings that cannot flourish in the public sphere. It offers a relatively safe podium to those speakers whose voices are not heard or allowed in public. Therefore, Telegram, along with other social networks, reorders public and private spaces as it creates alternative sites where censored or fearful voices are magnified for a much larger audience.

As discussed earlier, semi-public Viber groups and Telegram channels are the places where an administrator or a creator can share their ideas with their channel members. Even though no discussions can be formed, and only administrators and creators can post and control materials, some of the Iranian Telegram channels are the most referred to and reliable news and information sources in Iran. In an informal conversation, Reza, my 37-year old male interlocutor, mentioned that if it were not for Telegram channels, “20:30”, the state-run news program broadcast every night at 20:30 from Iranian national TV, could convince people of their lies. He believes that the existence of these channels alone worries the authorities because they know if they do not tell the truth, they will be caught by people in the channels.

Furthermore, as noted above, these news channels are the place for unheard stories. For example, in January 2017, a vendor woman in Fooman, a city in northern Iran, was accused of street blocking and was slapped harshly by a municipal officer. This incident was captured in film and photos by people who were present at the scene and soon went viral all over Iran’s Telegram channels, arousing public outrage. In response to this scandal, Fooman’s mayor officially apologized to the woman and her family and made a public statement in which city

authorities provided more details about the incident and explained how they would compensate the woman and punish the offender. Like the news, this statement went viral as well.

However, channels do not only act like news broadcasters. Indeed, in the intervals between broadcasts, numerous jokes and humor both related and unrelated to the news are distributed. VahidOnline, (وحدید آنلاین in Farsi), is one of the most famous and followed Iranian channels in which not only news but different forms of “newslore” (Frank 2011) are exchanged. With over 150 thousand members, Vahid, the administrator’s probable pseudonym, provides his channel followers with daily news and people’s afternews responses.

I was referred to this channel by my thirty-year-old female informant, Bahar, who describes it as “the reliable news agency” which “covers literally anything, *az shir morgh ta joon adamizad*” [literally meaning from hen’s milk to human’s life. Like the English idiom, “Everything but the kitchen sink,” this Farsi expression is used to emphasize “inclusiveness and heterogeneity”]. For many of my other informants, as well as my father and even many Iranian friends in Iran, VahidOnline is the first and sometimes the only place to go to for uncensored and unfiltered news which otherwise might be inaccessible or unreported, especially from within Iran. On his channel, in a description placed below the channel’s picture, which is a sideview of his face, Vahid explains the purposes of his channels:

Vahid Online: a curious netizen¹⁷;
I attempt to provide a picture of the society;
what is going on and what are people talking about?
I reflect [news] as much as I can.
Time is short, and the contents are too many.
The priority goes to those with less media coverage (his Telegram channel
[@Vahid_Onlin]).

¹⁷ Netizen is a portmanteau word composed of “Internet” and “citizen”. It refers to a person who is a “citizen of the net” and actively involved in virtual communities and online spheres (see Hauben and Hauben 1997 for more information on netizen).

As humor is always intertwined with politics in Iran, all forms of jokes, constitute a large portion of his channel's materials. At the time of important national or international political events, he covers the most famous online jokes distributed through different forms of social media along with actual news. Indeed, channels like VahidOnline update their followers' cellphonelore by providing a large up-to-date archive of news and newslore. In this way, they not only offer a space for under-represented opinions such as censored news, unheard stories, and untellable jokes, but also bypass the boundaries between public and private as the transition of information and folkloric materials happens in two or more ways: first, it is from private (the channel's administrator) to public (its followers); second, this direction is reversed when individual members of the channel forward any material from the channel to their private groups. Therefore, compared to the public sphere, Telegram provides a much larger audience for private, as well as public, opinions.

This unique feature of Telegram makes this environment an ideal place for political activism in Iran. Using public channels and private groups, Iranian political activists get their voices to many ears, especially at the climax of significant political events such as elections. During such periods in Iran, several political channels appear to promote candidates and their political parties. Simultaneously, numerous forms of political humor are exchanged in support of or against candidates and their parties in Telegram channels and groups. Iran's February 2016 elections were known as "Telegermmic elections" among my informants because of these undeniable roles of Telegram.

However, reordering public and private spaces does not only affect the creation and circulation of political jokes. This phenomenon plays an indispensable role in the nationalization of local humor in Iranian cyberspace. For example, a non-Mazani Telegram user can easily get

access to a large number of jokes in the Mazani dialect by merely joining Mazani joke channels. My informant, Forough, introduced me to three channels which only share jokes in different variants of the Mazani dialect. Even though an understanding of these jokes for many outsiders like me is not acquired easily, the existence of such channels has at least two consequences: firstly, it provides linguistically and, in most cases, politically marginalized Iranians with a space to express their culture and identity through humor in their mother language, which is different from the official language of Iran, Farsi. In this way, these channels contest the hegemonic power of dominant social orders as they offer a new ordering which is local humor in the language of subordinates. By doing so, they contribute to the creation of multilingual and multi-vocal spaces in the digital world which used to be univocal, echoing only Persian voices. Secondly, these channels widen the audience for local humor and facilitate its circulation by giving access to all Iranians regardless of their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, online Iranian local humor in Telegram never stays local; rather, it becomes national because there are no spatial boundaries in cyberspace.

Chapter 4: The Iranian February Electionlore: Political Humor in Turbulent Times

“Saeedeh, you know, I boycotted the 2012 [parliamentary] election” said Hadis, my thirty-year-old female informant, “and I have regretted it ever since.” “Me too if it makes you feel better” I replied to her in our Skype interview on March 11th, 2016, almost two weeks after the February elections. She continued:

But you know, I made the same mistake in 2013 [the presidential elections]! After the 2009 elections [the Green Movement], I decided not to participate in any elections in Iran until my death! Why I should have bothered to stand in long lines for hours while I was sure my vote would not get counted?! But you know, now I feel the people who voted [in 2013] are proud of what they did. Now when one like Zarif [Iran’s minister of Foreign Affairs] has accomplished this achievement [Iran’s Nuclear Deal], is improving our relations with the West, is lifting our sanctions, and literally does his best to clean up after [former President] Ahmadinejad’s messes, I feel people who voted for Rouhani [Iran’s current president] can hold their heads up and say: ‘It was me who voted for him, it was me who chose this president who selected Zarif as his minister! It was my vote which resulted in this deal!’ I felt how much I cannot say that! How much I cannot be part of this happiness! I badly wanted to be like them, to feel like them! But I was too embarrassed to feel happy for the thing I did not have a part. I did not vote, and yes, I made a huge mistake!

“But you voted this time. Right?” I asked. “Yes, of course! I voted *for all the individuals in both the lists*¹⁸!” She laughed while alluding to a famous joke.

On February 26, 2016, many Iranians who, like Hadis, were once determined to boycott all elections in Iran broke their promise and went to polling stations to cast their votes for two crucial elections: with blue ballots, they selected their representatives in the Iranian parliament, the “Islamic Consultative Assembly”, known as “Khane-ye-Melat” [literally meaning “the Nation’s House”]; with brown ballots, they elected the body of the “Assembly of Experts of the

¹⁸ She refers to the List of Hope and repeats a line from a video by former President Mohamad Khatami. In the following sections, I discuss the list, and, in the next chapter, I explore the video and the jokes it generated.

Leadership” for an eight-year term. The historical and political significance of these elections drew many people with different political affiliations and multiple, and in some cases contrasting, intentions to ballot boxes. The high turnout, 62% of all eligible electors (Iran’s Ministry of Interior Affairs 2016), surprised those who predicted that like other previous elections, the 2016 elections would be neglected by Iranians who have not forgotten the tragic aftermath of the 2009 presidential election. Even the results astounded political forces, especially conservatives.

Like any other important political event in Iran, these elections fostered the emergence and growth of a great number of political jokes. In this chapter, I re-narrate the story of these elections by placing this political humor in the center in order to shed light on its political and historical significance from the perspective of joke tellers, listeners, and distributors. Analyzing different joke sub-cycles in various forms of video, photo, and text, I ask when, how, where, and why these jokes were told, what consequences they brought, and what goals they achieved.

A Brief Overview of Iran’s Electoral System

The 1979 Revolution opened a new chapter in modern Iran’s political history by overthrowing the ruling monarchy, Mohamad Reza Shah, and establishing an Islamic republic state. Following the Revolution, Iran’s political system was founded on a complex hybridization of democracy and theocracy. To put it simply, all 18-year-old and older Iranian citizens have the right to vote every four years to directly elect Iran’s president as the head of the Executive Power, as well as their representatives in the parliament as the 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. The Assembly of Experts of the Leadership is the only political entity which, based on the 1979 Constitution, has complete authority in electing, supervising, questioning, and even dismissing the Leader. All 88 members in this assembly are elected by direct public votes once in every eight years.

The current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is Iran's second leader since the Revolution and, according to the Constitution, is 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). Since Khamenei is in his late seventies, and there were some speculations about his health, the 2016 Assembly of Experts election was regarded as particularly significant by both sides, conservatives and reformists. Many of my informants who voted in the elections supposed that the incoming members of this assembly will be the ones responsible for finding him a new successor. Fifi, my thirty-year-old female informant, believed that "through [her] vote, [she] would contribute indirectly to the election of the next Supreme Leader who plays dominating and unquestionable roles in shaping the country's future for generations." Khamenei, himself, acknowledged the crucial nature of these elections and urged all Iranian citizens to vote. He said in a speech around the election time:

Everyone should participate in the elections; even those who do not believe in the regime should participate for the sake of country's dignity. There might be some people who do not approve of me, but they should also participate in the elections; the elections do not belong to the Leader, they are for the Islamic Iran, for the Republic Islamic (quoted in Farsi in his Telegram channel [*@Khamenei_Ir*] in February 2016).

As the head of the regime, Khamenei appoints the heads of many influential posts in the military, the civil government, and the judiciary, as well as supervising the parliament and even the president. Additionally, he wields control in any national elections through the Guardian Council of the Constitution. Six religious experts in this council are the Leader's appointees. The other

six members, who are legal experts, are selected by the parliament. One of their main responsibilities is approving the candidacy of election nominees and granting them permission to run for an election campaign. Moreover, the results of any election will not be considered final unless the Guardian Council certifies them.

In the 2016 February elections, the Guardian Council, which was dominated by conservatives, disqualified thousands of reformist and moderate candidates who registered to run in the race. To the surprise of many people and some politicians, they even disqualified Hassan Khomeini, the 43-year-old grandson of revolutionary leader and Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. His disqualification awakened many criticisms from reformists, especially President Rouhani, and some influential politicians like Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was one of the founding fathers of the Revolution, Iran's fourth president, and the former chair of the Assembly of Experts. Despite 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 unified lists, known as the "List of Hope," for each city in Iran. For Tehran, the List of Hope consisted of thirty candidates for the parliament and sixteen for the Assembly of Experts.

In response to this coalition, Khamenei, who swings toward conservatives, criticized the British media broadcast, implicitly BBC Persian, accusing them of interfering in Iran's elections. He asserted in a speech before the elections: "The British radio is giving guidelines to the people saying vote for so-and-so and do not vote for so-and-so! What is this? Are the British missing their interferences in Iran's affairs?" (quoted in Farsi in his Telegram channel in February 2016). A group of his hard-core supporters are called "the Worried Ones" [*Delvapasán* in Farsi] due to

showing extra concern over Iran's nuclear agreement¹⁹ in 2015. Drawing on his quote, *the Worried Ones* labeled the List of Hope as “the Queen's List” and promoted this idea that anyone who votes for this list is doubtlessly a traitor and a “Westoxificated” [*Gharbzade* in Farsi]. Various translations as Westoxification, Westoxication, or occidentosis, *Gharbzadegi* is a term first coined by Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid and widely used by the lay intellectual and writer Jalal Al Ahmad. It means the loss of Iranian identity through the blind adaptation and imitation of Western culture (Keddie and Richard 2006, 189) which Al Ahmad analogizes to “a plague coming from the West” and intoxicating the society (1984, 135-6).

With two exceptions, all my informants who participated in the elections were pro-reformists and voted for the List of Hope. Like Hadis, they did not boycott the elections this time because they saw it as a rare moment to, on one hand, show their support for the reformist president and his cabinet and, on the other hand, give hardliners what they described to me as “a revenge-slap”. Fifi explains:

To answer to your question that why this time unlike the other time [the 2012 [parliamentary election], I voted, I would say because it was an unfair election. [it was unfair because of] all these unprecedented disqualifications which we never had in any era before. It was to the extent that even the grandson of the founder of the Revolution got disqualified! And then, an influential person like Mr. Hashemi [Rafsanjani], who always behaved carefully and took minimum possible risks in all these 37 years [since the Revolutions], broke his silence and gave a controversial speech against the Guardian Council. [...] It was when I realized the situation is getting very dangerous from within. In fact, hardliners were about to take the front line. Then I thought if I boycott the election this time, how I could answer back these disqualifications? [...] And you know how I convinced myself to vote? I realized this is how they [hardliners] are eliminating reformists; first they silenced their leaders [she implied the Green Movement's leaders: Mousavi, Rahnavard, and Karroubi] by putting them in house arrest, and then they disappointed their supporters from participating in any elections. Gradually and silently, they are disappearing reformists and making the society more radical. This thought passed through my mind and frightened me very much, so I decided to vote. This fear

¹⁹ This agreement is JCPOA (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and is known as BARJAM (*Barnameye Jame Eghdam Moshtarak* in Farsi) in Iran.

still exists, but I am sure if we [reformists] had lost the elections, we would have lost many more things.

Moreover, Iran around the February elections was the Iran after the nuclear agreement.

BARJAM 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 Joyner2016 for more information on BARJAM and Iran's nuclear program). In 2015, the night the deal got signed, thousands of Iranians, including my reformist informants, celebrated this victory by pouring into streets in multiple major cities of Iran, screaming, and dancing.

Additionally, many were active on social media posting jokes²⁰ and celebratory notes which mostly thanked Rouhani's government, in particular Zarif, and blamed the incapability of former President Ahmadinejad.

Despite this national celebration, the then-parliament, dominated by hardliners, denounced the deal and began to apply pressures on Rouhani and his cabinet in different ways. Therefore, the 2016 elections provided pro-president voters with a chance to reclaim the parliament from hardliners. For my liberal and left-wing informants, their participation in the first election since the agreement was, in Fifi's words, "the announcement of [their] alliance with Rouhani and Zarif who achieved this great deal." They believed the more reformist representatives they voted for, the more politically uniformed parliament they would get. This

²⁰ The Iran-US Nuclear Deal jokes which emerged in 2015 make up the latest joke cycle on Iran's nuclear program so far. It includes jokes which mostly target negotiators; the deal; and its potential impact on the economy, international relations, and the daily lives of Iranians. In fact, it is a joke sub-cycle which belongs to the larger family of Iran's nuclear program jokes created and disseminated periodically at different times during these negotiations. The first appearance of these jokes coincides with the first phase of these negotiations during Ahmadinejad's presidency where Iran's negotiator, Saeed Jalili, had a series of meetings with Catherine Ashton, the European Union foreign policy chief in 2007.

would ultimately lead to a more harmonious state whose executive and legislative branches are in harmony.

Furthermore, given that Khamenei is more right-wing leaning, the outcomes 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, voters were left to wonder: what if two other bodies of power, the legislative branch and the Assembly of Experts which is the entity supervising and electing 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.

Indeed, the results of these elections, as Fifi puts it, were “game-changing and historical.” In Tehran, the entire List of Hope won all thirty seats in the parliament, and, with one exception, they took fifteen of the sixteen total seats in the Assembly of Experts. This landslide victory shocked conservatives and outraged the Leader. In a speech after the official announcement of the results, he asserted: “I said those who do not believe in the regime shall vote, [I did not say] send those who do not believe in the regime to the parliament!” (quoted in Farsi in his Telegram channel on March 2016)

Nevertheless, this achievement for my reformist informants meant another forward step on their slow but steady path towards democracy. The movement started with the election of President Khatami in 1997, was reborn in the 2009 Green Movement, re-emerged in the 2013 presidential election, and continued in the 2016 February elections. Combining three elemental icons, reformist voters as the wayfarers of this path borrowed the symbol of the Green Movement, (see Figure 2 for the victory green fingers,) and mixed it with a bandage (as the marker of wounds which have remained from the 2009 Green Movement) and ink-stained

fingers as the symbol of participation in these elections (see Figure 3). As my informants stated, a week before the election day, this picture went viral mostly in different channels in Telegram and soon thereafter became the main symbol of the 2016 elections for reformist voters.

In most channels from which I received this picture, it came with these phrases: “Neither our scars are healed, nor our pains are lessened, but...but I vote with confidence because it is not only a vote but a path...” (posted in different pro-reformist channels such as VahidOnline [*@Vahid_Onlin*] on February 2016). Bahar, my thirty-year-old female informant, was the one who sent me this picture on February 18, 2016, almost a week before the elections, and told me that “this picture with its powerful phrases reminded [her and her like-minded friends] of how far [they] have come in this path, and how much longer they should go to arrive at [their] goals.”



Figure 2: The Green Movement's Symbol



Figure 3: We Stay: February 26th, 27th, and 28th

Likewise, Hadis believed that it was a powerful symbol which, along with other pictures and political statements, motivated her to participate in these elections. She summarizes the stories of these elections as follows:

During Ahmadinejad's period, it was all miseries and adversities. Our votes were stolen, we were under sanctions, prices got tripled, [and] we had literally nothing! It was like a

situation which one who sees from the outside might have said: ‘they have nothing to live on, they should be totally hopeless!’ But the same miserable people made a campaign, calling on people to join them and vote again! Then, they formed a united group, voted, and changed the president. A step forward! Then again, the same group kept the same campaign alive for the parliament election, again called on people to vote. They made a list and said to all ‘it is the best of all has remained, come and vote again!’ It happened at the time of suffocation when one [an outsider] might still assume Iranians are a handful of depressed, exhausted, and miserable people who lost their path. But in the glimmer of hope, they found their path. And their hope was much as the entire List of Hope got in to the parliament, almost the entire List of Hope got in to the Assembly of the Experts.

As both Hadis and Bahar mentioned, the February elections provided pro-Green Movement Iranians with an opportunity to display their unity and support for the ideas they believe in and the goal they fought for.

The February Elections’ Joke Cycle: Their Context, Emergence, and Growth

Once the election results were officially announced, on February 28, 2016, on his official Twitter account²¹, the prominent conservative and 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, on 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. I am thankful because the most significant portions of your jokes do not target my personality and my family!

As a matter of fact, he must have come across the jokes people made about him on the Internet. I personally received many digitally-altered photographic jokes and Internet memes specifically targeting him in the last days of the elections as he was only one place behind to win a seat in the Tehran parliament. 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.

²¹ Ironically, even though Twitter is blocked in Iran, many politicians and state authorities including the Leader and the president have official, active accounts in English and Farsi.

Joke Eight/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.
***It alludes to the 2009 presidential
election in which many reformists and the
Green Movement protestors believe the
then-state cheated.



Figure 4: Joke Eight

Joke Eight was among the hundreds I received within the whole election period. From the Guardian Council's announcement of candidates' disqualifications to the time all votes were counted and the results were proclaimed, I collected more than thirty pages of jokes; verbal and visual; numerous caricatures; and several humorous videos which my friends and informants forwarded to me in Telegram, Twitter, or other online venues. The other source from which I took many jokes was the Iranian satirist and writer Ebrahim Nabavi's Facebook page. On March 2, 2016, he asked his page followers to send him "the best joke or jokes they heard about the

elections.” Only a day after his request, 423 people commented under his post, many of whom sent original jokes, mostly verbal.

The first question I asked my interviewees is: why did Iranians make thousands of jokes about the elections? Mandana, my 31-year-old female informant, believes that “political jokes have become a part of [Iranians’] daily culture [which] play an important role in shaping their understandings of the society.” Likewise, Arman, my 31-year-old male informant, believes:

Iranians are highly politicized people; not because they adore politics, rather because it has direct impact on their lives, on their bread [Bread is a metaphor for daily income in Farsi] [...] Any event which directly affects people’s bread makes them conscious and curious. That is why people follow politics and spread the word in Iran. And I believe it [politics] is best spread in the humorous language of jokes.

Therefore, any political events with direct and indirect impact on daily lives nourish Iranian appetites for jokes and provide them with substantial targets. In my joke archive, which I have established and updated since 2015, whenever there was a political occasion in Iran, for example the ten-day annual celebration of the victory of the Revolution [*Daheye Fajr* in Farsi], or a political event in progress, like Iran’s nuclear negotiations, I could find a corresponding joke cycle which had instantly emerged in response to those political matters. However, it should be noted that not all political events stimulate laughter in Iran. A very recent example of such is the sudden death of Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani in January 2017 which deeply saddened many reformists and moderates in Iran. Given his recent popularity among people and his influential contributions to the reformist movement, it was not surprising that I did not get a single joke targeting him or his death from my pro-reformist informants or online groups.

As political events with considerable tangible impact on people’s daily lives, elections in Iran normally trigger people’s humorous responses. Perhaps the only exceptions were the tragic elections of 2009 and the boycotted parliamentary elections of 2012 in which people, particularly

protesters and boycotters, did not have the appropriate mood, motivations, or, probably, time to be humorous. Bahar, my thirty-year-old female informant, calls these periods “the jokeless times as if the dead’s ashes were thrown all over the country which stole away any moods for jokes.” On the contrary, the 2013 presidential elections and the more recent ones, the 2016 elections, brought thousands of waves of jokes with them because, firstly, Iran around this time was distanced enough from the traumatic post-election years of 2009. Secondly, the results of both elections, 2013 and 2016, were in favor of the Green Movement protesters. Thus, some joke cycles that emerged during these times were celebratory jokes. For instance, several jokes in the “Thank You Rouhani!” joke cycle in 2013²² and the post-election joke cycle in 2016, were the pro-Green Movement and reformist people’s commemorations of their hard-gained achievements after all those tragic years.

More importantly, as mentioned earlier, when the 2016 election jokes appeared, Iranians were a happy and hopeful people after BARJAM. In fact, their victory in the 2016 elections doubled and reassured this happiness and hope. Accordingly, post-election jokes provided them with the language to express and embody their feelings. In other words, from a reformist’s point of view, all major joke cycles that emerged since Rouhani’s presidential victory in 2013 are comprehensible as different segments of an extended line which starts from the “Thank You Rouhani” cycle, stretches out to “Iran-US Deal”, and, thus far, ends with “the February elections” jokes.

Finally, social media had a stronger presence in the 2013 and 2016 elections than the previous ones. Facebook, in 2013, and Telegram, in 2016, dominated other social networks; they did not only facilitate the mass-circulations of jokes, but also extended this genre of humorous

²² See Rezaei 2016 for more information on the “Thank You Rouhani!” joke cycle.

folklore in Iran. In 2016, with the growing popularity of Telegram paired with the affordability of smartphones, more hands were involved in creations, circulations, and developments of the February jokes to the extent that not a single story in these times was left unnoticed, uncommented, and “unjoked”. This provides a foundation to more fully answer the central question of this chapter: why were there thousands of jokes about these elections? To expand further, I will now explore when and where these jokes appeared and, more importantly, who were their main tellers and distributors.

When did these jokes emerge? Using a thematic analysis, I have created three sub-cycle categories into which all these election-themed jokes, whether video, picture, or verbal, fit. Firstly, there are “pre-election jokes” which originally appeared as a response to the mass disqualifications by the Guardian Council. This sub-cycle expanded mainly when jokes, along with other communicative tools, were used as a means of campaigning by candidates and their supporters. Secondly “the Elections’ day” jokes were told on the polling day. 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 elections joke cycle. Describing her feelings about different cycles of jokes concerning the elections, Maral, my 27-year-old informant says: “while the jokes along with other political notes I got before the election day made me indecisive to join voters and vote for the List of Hope, the jokes I got after the election made me feel proud of my decision.”

Who made/told/sent these jokes? As Maral stated above, the February election joke cycle I come across on the Internet and through my leftist informants largely reflects reformists, moderates, and their supporters’ political views. In other words, they were in favor of reformists

and moderates' coalition, the List of Hope, and consequently against conservatives and *the Worried Ones!*

My thirty-year-old female informant, Narges, self-identifies as neither conservative nor reformist. She was one of my two informants who did not vote for the entire List of Hope. As she explained to me, she compiled her own list including both conservative and moderate candidates. To gain insights into both sides, she joined two contrasting Telegram groups during the elections period: she became a member of her hard-core reformist friends' group who were between the age of twenty and thirty years old and were residents of Tehran. As Narges defines their political affiliations, "they think much closer to the dominating political views of the country's political capital, pro-reformists and pro-Green Movement." She also joined her senior family group, whose members lived in counties or small cities far from Tehran with the average age of forty or above. She calls them "conservatives and ultraconservatives". Comparing these two groups and their activities during the elections, she concludes jokes were not the common language among her conservative family. She explains:

It was only in my friend group where many political jokes about the elections were exchanged while in the conservative group, [everything] was just serious, you would find no jokes at all. Perhaps it means the people who make jokes comprises the youth population of the country who are more creative and are more engaged in social networks. And because they are predominantly reformist, they apparently make jokes against conservatives.

Likewise, Fifi describes her groupmates who send her jokes in favor of reformists as "political activists who are mostly in [their thirties or younger], feminist, reformist, clearheaded, and freethinkers [*Azadandish* in Farsi] in terms of many issues, especially social and political ones." Similarly, Hadis characterized those who encouraged her to vote for the List of Hope by sending pro-reformist political statements including jokes as "reliable, responsible, and intellectual who share their political awareness with others."

However, it is not to say the conservative camp did not benefit from humor as a political weapon in these elections. The two closest and the most loyal groups to the Leader, Velaees [pro-leaders] and Basijis [individual members of the Basij militia], used social media to mobilize their fellow conservatives against the List of Hope. As a paramilitary force, Basij is a subordinate of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard [Sepah in Farsi], which takes its orders directly or indirectly from the Leader to get involved in political, religious, and cultural activities (For more information on Basij's various roles in Iranian society, see Golklar 2011, Ostovar 2013). Since the 2009 Green Movement, their image among the public has been associated with ultraconservatives who are not afraid of using violence to suppress the protesters. During these elections, young Basijis had a Twitter campaign, #No2UK (#نه-به-انگلیس in Farsi). In this campaign, they used verbal and visual jokes to promote their conspiracy theory that the List of Hope is the Queen's List. In Telegram, they also created and spread countless stickers with the pictures of Queen and Winston Churchill as if they were deceiving people to vote for their list (see Appendix B-Stickers: No2UK Stickers).

Moreover, like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, Khamenei has official channels in different languages in Telegram: five in Farsi, one in English (@*Khamenei_English*), and one in Arabic (@*Khamenei_Arabic*). During the time of the elections, all these channels, especially the Farsi ones, were active, posting his videos, audio files, and photos and sharing his speeches and sermons about the elections. Even though I did not find any form of humor in his main news channel (@*Khamenei_Ir*), there were numerous uses of customized stickers with his pictures in different poses while repeating selections of his speeches (see Appendix B-Stickers: Khamenei Stickers).

Where were these jokes mostly told/shared? In answering this question, several of my informants mentioned the Telegram messaging application as the main platform which they used specifically for receiving, sharing, and even creating the February election jokes. In addition, they told me of their accounts of political debates, as well as joke-telling performances in public and semi-public places like taxis during the elections. In the following sections, I explore the key roles of Telegram and taxis separately in relation to the creation and circulation of what I term electionlore.

Digital Electionlore in the “Telegramic 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

Maral read this message 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 the president. She said: “I was checking my Telegram groups 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 mobile [phones]!”

As Maral's quote shows, given Iranians' growing obsession with smartphones, communication devices, notably cellphones, entered the February political battlefield and served political purposes. Alongside regular text messaging, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram were used as digital campaigning tools to push both side's points of views. However, on top of this list, Telegram doubtlessly stands as one of the key players and game-changers in the February Elections. This instant messaging application, with over twenty million

Iranian users, provided both candidates and individuals, especially moderates and reformists, with a safe and open platform to express their political views and agendas. Through its private messaging groups, like-minded voters virtually got together to share, forward, and discuss the list of candidates and to question their decision to either participate in or boycott the elections. Additionally, through its public channels, many candidates and their supporters formed digital headquarters through which they distributed their election promises and political agendas.

Of particular note was the massive circulations of the List of Hope in various forms of pictures, videos, and even “bots” in Telegram. “Bot” is a generic name in computer science for a program which is specifically designed to run concurrently and to perform iterative operations. In Telegram, bots are accounts run by a software, not an actual individual, and are used primarily for creating polls, inventories, and surveys. The List of Hope bot enabled pro-reformists voters to access the list of candidates specific to their cities. By simply clicking on the name of a district, the bot generated the corresponding List (see Figure 5).

What can this bot do?

This robot provides information about the official lists of the coalition of reformists and moderates (Rouhani and Khatami’s supporters) in the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. To get different lists, press start or message the bot ‘List’.

[I pressed start] /start

Select your polling district from the below keyboard. If your district is not there, find smaller districts provincially divided in the end of the keyboard.

Tabriz, Azarshahr, and Oskoo	Tehran, Rey, Shemiranat, and Islamshahr
Mashhad and Kallat	Esfahan
Qom	Shiraz
Kermanshah	Rasht



Figure 5: The List of Hope’s Telegram Bot

Highlighting the essential role of Telegram, Narges calls the February elections

“Telegramic elections”²³ and explains:

As a matter of fact, this time, the city [Tehran] was not covered much with papers. Unlike the previous elections, no walls were covered with candidates’ posters, or at least the places I was [central and western Tehran] I did not find any. Probably, on the intersections of main streets like Valiasr Street or Azadi Square, you would find big billboards with the pictures of candidates. But that was all physical, tangible thing you could get in these elections. For the most part, candidates and their supporters spent all their time and perhaps money in campaigning in Telegram. It had two benefits for them: first, they saved a huge amount of money in this way. Also, it was all regular people who spread the words which is way faster, cheaper, and easier than hiring individuals or finding volunteers to hand over their fliers. The only paper thing I got was the List of Hope [which many people circulated hand to hand]. All other pictures and information I got was digital from Telegram. I easily joined candidates’ telegram channels to get to know them better. [...] Even on Friday [the election day], at the polling station, many people had their cellphones in their hands when they were filling out the ballots.

²³ This name was frequently employed among Iranians around that time. BBC Persian also used this name in the title of a report: “Iran and the Telegramic Elections?” (BBC Persian 2016).

If you remember, normally in previous elections, we took out paper lists from our pockets to write the names of candidates at polling places. This time, it was just cellphones!

Likewise, explaining the general mood of Telegram during this period, Maral asserts:

I am not personally much into politics. I mean I do not normally check news websites as the first thing in the morning. But during the elections, thanks to Telegram, I could not escape the news for a second! It was everywhere in my Telegram! In my channels, my private groups [...] The elections were the heated discussions in all my Telegram groups [then she names some of them]. There were only a few groups whose members seemed had nothing to do with the elections; [...] even in those groups, occasionally at some points, jokes [related to the elections] were exchanged.

The main reason that Telegram became the most important campaigning tool in these recent elections was its constant accessibility during this time. Since the 2009 Green Movement when protestors used Facebook and Twitter to internationally spread the footage of the fatal shooting of a young woman, Neda AghaSoltan, in a protest, these social media were labelled as “seditious” and were blocked by the Iranian authorities. During this period in Iran, extreme monitoring and surveillance were applied on people’s telecommunications and their online activities.

My own personal experience dates back to the climax of these tensions when a text message of mine did not ever get delivered, no matter how many times I tried to send it. In my text, I simply invited a couple of my friends to join me in having *Ghormeh Sabzi*, the Green Stew [a famous stew in Iran made of vegetables and meat], at my place. Ridiculously enough, this message never made its way to them merely because it included the word “green”! Soon thereafter, my account became known among my friends and inspired us to create a game: Players should come up with meaningful texts with the words composed of green just to drive the supposed surveillance agent crazy! The winner was the one with the highest number of undelivered texts!

In 2012, upon the Leader's command, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace was formed of top-ranking officials to regulate policies on Iranians' activities on the Internet and, along with the Iranian Cyber Police, to protect the country's cyber security. Regardless of all these restrictions and censorship, Iranians overcame this blocking and spying by using anti-filter apps, proxy servers, VPN (virtual private networks), and filter-busters. They also periodically switched to a new social network which had not been discovered and, therefore, filtered by the Iranian authorities. Telegram is among a few social networks which, unlike its rivals WhatsApp and Viber has not yet been the target of filtration or blocking in Iran. Fifi explains:

In these election, there were countless jokes because Telegram did not get blocked, the Internet did not go on and off [...]. After many years, it was the first election that neither Telegram nor WhatsApp got blocked! The whole time during the elections, days before, even days after, social networks [except Twitter and Facebook] were totally accessible; no crippling decrease in the Internet speed, no nerve-racking disconnections! Not at all! You cannot believe if I say it was *the* [emphasis in her tone] election in Iran without blocking and the internet disconnections!!

Several informants of mine believed that it was their reformist president whose resistance prevented the blocking of Telegram during the elections. Since 2013, when he took the office, there has been a constant quarrel between two powers, the ultraconservative judiciary and the reformist executive branch over the blocking of social networks, especially Telegram, in Iran. While reformists believe blocking and censorship violate freedom of speech, the opposing group sees these social networks as a threat from foreigners who seek to intervene in Iran's affairs. In the February elections, even though conservatives aimed hard to block Telegram, President Rouhani's administration promised all Iranians that his government would stand against these efforts, and as Fifi and my other informants attested, he kept his promises. Thus, for the very first time since the 2009 disputed elections, elections were held in Iran without filtrations and blocking, at least in Telegram's territories.

After the shocking victory of the List of Hope which many believe is owed to Telegram, hardliners have begun to apply more pressures on Rouhani's cabinet to control and restrict access to this social network. To this purpose, in January 2017, Tehran's Attorney-General officially persisted in its opposition to Telegram's unblocked access within the country and demanded that Rouhani's government make security measures regarding the full blocking of Telegram in the upcoming presidential election in May 2017 (reported in Eslahat News Telegram channel [*@eslahatnews*]). Moreover, as the first step toward controlling this app in the election, in mid-March 2017, around the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), twelve Telegram channel administrators who are pro-reformists and supported the List of Hope during the 2016 elections, along with a number of reformist journalists, were arrested by an unknown military intelligence agency, supposedly the intelligence agency of Iranian Revolutionary Guard, *Sepah*.

Given the Nowruz holidays and the five-to-thirteen-day closure of government offices, these unexpected arrests shocked the president and his cabinet and aroused straight objections from parliamentary representatives who condemned this action. They argued that it was strategically done during Nowruz with the purpose of delaying any legal response from the parliament and Rouhani. Ali Motahhari, the second deputy of the parliament, also expressed concerns over the fairness of the 2017 election if the other side insists on taking such spontaneous and damaging actions (posted in VahidOnline Telegram channel on March 2017 [*@Vahid_Onlin*]). In response to these arrests, and based on their customers' rights of confidentiality and security, the Telegram officials managed to put these channels whose administrators were arrested on hold and temporarily gain their ownerships in order to prevent

potential abuses.²⁴ This news comforted these channels' worried followers and assured them that hardliners would not be able to hack into and easily exploit them.

During the 2016 elections, many jokes exchanged in private groups were forwarded from these channels. "Joking with politics" was my father's favorite from which he shared jokes in our family group. Likewise, many of my informants told me that they relied on the materials provided on these public channels for their election-related conversations with their families and friends in private groups. Maral especially followed @Vahid_Onlin and Reforms' News channels to stay updated with and share election news.

In her long list of pro-reformists channels, Fifi particularly emphasized the role of "Political Humor" [@tanzesiasi] and "The Political Bitter Smile" [@talkhandesiasi] (the administrator of the former is among the May arrestees), as the channels whose jokes had the strongest presence in her private groups during the elections. Listing her channels and going through them group by group, she explained to me that, depending on members' interests in politics, how and to what extent their daily activities were channeled into sharing the already-made election-related materials from channels or, in some cases, creating such jokes, notes, videos, posters, and pictures. She named her family group as her most politically active Telegram private group during the elections period. This large group had more than one hundred male and female members within the wide age range of seven to seventy-four years old, most of whom were reformist and, in Fifi's words, "highly politicized and politically aware". The

²⁴ These currently on-hold channels include: "Reformists' Forum" [@majmae_eslahtalaban], "Reform News" [@eslahatnews], "Rouhani's supporters96" [Havadaranhasanrohani96], "Reformists' News" [@eslahtalabannews], and "Joking with Politics" [@shoki_ba_siasat] in Farsi. All these channels, especially "Reformists' News", were active as the main source of any political information, including humor, from the 2016 elections to their administrators' arrest.

following screenshots taken by Fifi show a selection of their activities during the last week of the elections:



Figure 6: Debates-Electionlore



Figure 7: List-Electionlore

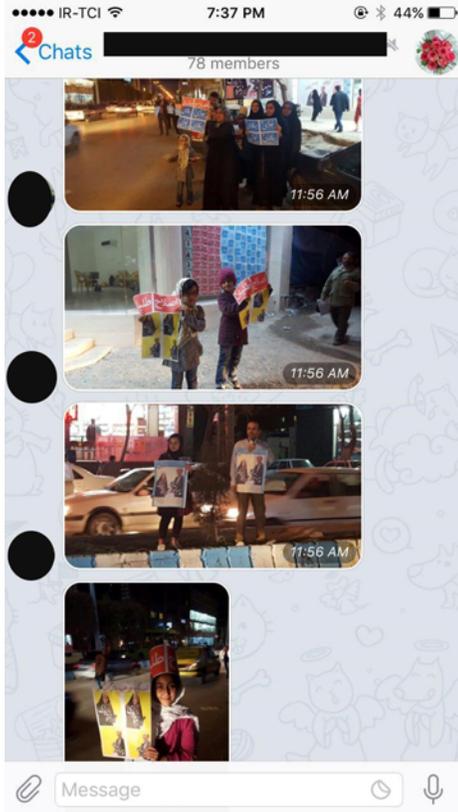


Figure 8: Photos1-Electionlore



Figure 9: Videos-Electionlore



Figure 10: Ink-stained fingers-Electionlore



Figure 11: Photos2-Electionlore

As the pictures show, during the last seven days of the elections, they debated over candidates (Figure 6), shared the List of Hope (Figure 7), posted photos capturing the city's atmosphere on the last campaigning days (Figure 8), exchanged news videos (Figure 9), and encouraged each other to vote by sending the pictures of their ink-stained fingers (Figure 10) after casting ballots and photos of political activists present in polling stations (Figure 11). More notably, they exchanged a great number of jokes: verbal (Figure 12), visual (Figure 13), stickers (Figure 14) and digitally-altered photos (Figures 15 and 16).



Figure 12: Verbal Jokes-Electionlore



Figure 13: Visual Jokes-Electionlore



Figure 14: Stickers-Electionlore



Figure 15: Digitally-altered photo1-Electionlore



Figure 16: Digitally-altered photo2-Electionlore

Indeed, what Fifi and her groupmates exchanged in their online communications in Telegram is election-themed cellphonelore. As defined in Chapter Two, cellphonelore is folklore that is adapted for, created on, and disseminated through cellphone devices. This digital folklore, which both inhabits and is shaped by this environment, takes various forms such as jokes, text-based pictures, urban legends, digitally altered-photographic jokes, animated pictures, and videos. As Fifi's group activities show, these elections politicized cellphonelore preparing the ground for the emergence and growth of a great number of what I term electionlore. Electionlore encompasses any humorous expressive forms of folklore concerning the February elections which were primarily, but not necessarily, generated and circulated on the online venues of Telegram. Different media and apps such as Dubsmash videos and Photoshop were involved in creating such humor in various forms of texts, videos, and pictures. In the following chapter, I explore the various humorous forms that emerged in the three aforementioned joke sub-cycles and argue how this mass-mediated electionlore enabled my reformist informants to make manifest vernacular politics and construct their newslore in the digital world.

Chapter 5: From Disqualifications to a Revenge Laughter: Analysing Electionlore in Three Joke Sub-cycles

The story that the February election jokes tell is like a folktale whose figures play different roles. In this chapter, I use the roles in folk narratives and retell the story of the February elections through jokes. I start by introducing the villains and the heroes who appeared in the pre-election disqualification jokes. Then, I continue by finding the donor's role as the helper of heroes in Khatamilore when former President Khatami and his supporters entered this battlefield to help the reformist heroes. My story reaches its climax when, in the post-election jokes, the villains were punished and the people celebrated their victory. Finally, in the last section, I argue that these jokes and their messages were orally shared among Iranians in taxis in Tehran.

“The Disqualification Office, how can I help you?”: Vernacularized Political Line-ups in the Pre-election Disqualification Jokes

“[The election joke wave in Telegram] started since they [the Guardian Council] began to put out the disqualifications” said Maral, my 27-year-old informant. She continued:

In *Seniors of Zange Tafrih* [her group in Telegram with her 35 university friends between 25 and 31 years old] I did not expect other than that. Since 2009 [the Green Movement], all [the members] became highly political and remained politically active afterwards, [so] not surprisingly our group's vibe was very electionary then. Perhaps the first but week-in-presence round of jokes appeared when candidates registered. These jokes were very personal, sometime sexist, just about the candidates [themselves] who wanted to run. [...] But you know, this wave got heated [*tab va tab* in Farsi] and shifted when many reformists got disqualified. You know one of our professors [Maral said her name] also registered but got disqualified! These disqualifications provoked many disputes and so many jokes. The poet *Haloo* [a pen name], who is currently in [the] Evin²⁵ [prison], wrote a long poem addressing Hasan Khomeini [the grandson of Khomeini, the founder of the Revolution] and teasing him that ‘you thought you would

²⁵ A prison located in northern Tehran and known for housing political prisoners since before the Revolution. Since Ahmadinejad's presidency, it is sarcastically called “Evin University” due to the high numbers of intellectuals imprisoned there.

get easily qualified because of your grandfather, ha ha, you were badly mistaken [*Koor khoondi* in Farsi]'. Then, it was numerous jokes about candidates who at that time were in the parliament but got disqualified to run again!! Ridiculous! Millions of pictures with funny captions got distributed in our group. [...] these disqualifications made many people vocal, at least in Telegram.

As Maral pointed out, before the mass disqualifications, election jokes evolved around the candidates, their personalities, and their gender regardless of their political orientations. Whether a reformist or a hardliner, if their names, pictures, age, or anything related to their campaign offered any sort of excuse for mockery, they would get attacked as joke targets. However, these jokes were very few in number with a relatively short life firstly, because they were primarily told in face-to-face communications without receiving large mass-mediations and distributions in Telegram. In my joke archive, I have few examples of this sort and, except for Maral, none of my informants remembered hearing or receiving them.

Secondly, they targeted customary and recurrent subjects such age and gender which can be joked about out of the election contexts. In other words, despite their targets who were potential candidates, not many of them were political, at least in message or function, as they did not serve to promote or criticize candidates' political ideologies and affiliations. Furthermore, the mass disqualifications by the Guardian Council not only prominently changed the story of these elections, but also shook up the election joke cycle and made their tellers shift gears toward the center of this political battle field: the old war between reformists and conservatives, and, in more precise words, the new political groupings of pro-Rouhani voters versus pro-Leader ones.

The old common terminologies used to specify one's political affiliation are right and left wings in Iran. Vernacularly used by my parents' generation, the 1950s, right wings [*Rasti* in Farsi], are conservatives versus leftist [*Chapi* in Farsi], who are non-conservatives which is in line with its universal use. Even though a few of my informants who were in their early thirties

used such words, most of them preferred other words such as “reformist,” “moderate,” “hardliner,” and “conservative” when they wanted to self-identify or name the other side’s political views.

“Conservatives versus reformists”, however, was not the most frequently used vocabulary in the elections joke cycle. Pre-election jokes humorously played with the old quarrel between these two groups; however, the disqualifications complicated this approach. Jokes, while underscoring party divides, directly address prominent figures from both sides without mentioning their parties. In other words, they were representative-based rather than party-based.

Corresponding to the political battle, two groups were portrayed in these jokes: reformists in the role of heroes and conservatives as villains. Painstakingly selected, villains as the target of jokes were usually conservatives from the Leader’s inner circle in opposition to Rouhani’s supporters, cast in the role of hero. While highlighting their contrasting political ideologies, these juxtapositions also reflected how ordinary Iranians make sense of political divisions in post-BARJAM Iran. Through the humorous language of these jokes, this political grouping was translated into the political battle between pro-Rouhani’s voters versus pro-Leaders or pro-the List of Hope versus *the Worried Ones* or anti-BARJAMs.

Perhaps the most familiar villain that reappeared in the pre-election joke sub-cycle is Ahmad Jannati, who has a long history of representing hardliners in Iranian political jokes. In his nineties, with a bony face and a frail figure, he is a well-known ultraconservative who was the Guardian Council’s Leader-appointed chairman and a member of the Assembly of Experts during the elections. His dogmatic take on Islam, social freedoms, and gender equality paired with his active and crucial role in politics since the Revolution despite his old age resulted in his personage in jokes in which he is portrayed as an “immortal radical politician” who, since “the

dinosaur age,” has been “reformists’ sworn enemy.”²⁶ His son, Ali Jannati, a reformist and Rouhani’s former minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Culture, stated that he, himself, received jokes about his father on his cellphone (Mashregh News 2015). His other son also commented on jokes about his father’s age and said: “We genetically live long!” (Fars News Agency 2015)

My 31-year-old male informant, Arman, believes Jannati is a hardliner who is granted “the honorary title of permanent political joke target” by Iranians. He explains:

Because of his position, Jannati honorably achieved permanency as a political joke target! [Arman laughed] He stands in a position through which he just defends the Leader and endlessly speaks against reformists. He is a member of the Assembly of Experts who is supposed to be a supervisor of the Leader while he is definitely his submissive. When people want to criticize the Leadership, or when reformists want to show there is negligence in the Guardian Council, Jannati becomes a symbol who receives attacks. The other reason of having this honorary title [permanent joke target] is because he is seen and heard from a tribune which is the most famous one in Iran, the tribune of Tehran’s Friday prayer.

Similarly, my 31-year-old female informant, Mandana, named Jannati as a “non-forbidden” target who can be joked unlike the Leader. Reviewing recent political joke cycles, she argued that “it has always been legal to laugh at and joke about Jannati” because he is not the regime’s “sanctities”.

In the February elections joke cycle, neither my informants nor I came across any direct verbal criticism of the Leader. While there were numerous Internet memes which include Khamenei’s pictures alone or alongside other politicians, no verbal attack specifically targeted him. Instead, Jannati, as one of the Leader’s confidantes, once again stole the floor from other conservatives as the main villain targeted in the election jokes.

²⁶ Words in quotations were chosen from jokes.

Appointed by the Leader, Jannati was repeatedly granted the tribune of Tehran's Friday prayer, one of the most powerful tools for making political speeches in Iran, during the elections. Using this power, he openly announced his opposition against BARJAM and directly criticized Rouhani and his cabinet. This hostility was enough for pro-reformist joke tellers to return him, once more, to the role of villain in their pre-election jokes.

From my research, his first appearance in these jokes was when, in a speech, he complained about the large number of registered candidates in this race and said: "Unfortunately, the number of people who registered in the parliament and the Assembly of Experts elections has increased. I wonder if some of them can even read just one Arabic phrase correctly" (quoted in BBC Persian Telegram channel on January 2016). In the resulting jokes, Jannati was depicted as a grumpy old chairman of the entity whose responsibility is reviewing candidates' profiles, but he is too old and exhausted to admire people's increasing willingness to contribute to their country's politics. In other jokes of this sort, the "appropriation of their incongruities" (Oring 2003, 13-26) was built on his comment about some candidates' poor Arabic. Given his record of mispronouncing hard Farsi words, as the Guardian Council's chairman, he is now the one who decides which candidates speak Arabic better while he, himself, is not fluent enough in his mother language, let alone Arabic, to undertake such a task.

Besides his responsibility as the Leader-appointed chairman of the Guardian Council, he also registered as a candidate for the Assembly of Experts. This ironic fact was, itself, a simple joke that "he is the only candidate in this race who by Leader's command can qualify himself and disqualify others!" (see Joke Nine). Such jokes got heated when he did qualify himself (see Joke Ten), but disqualified most of reformists, notably Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the founding father of the Revolution, Imam Khomeini.

Joke Nine/collected on January 2016: Today's Jannati's dialogue with himself: Hey me, do you think I get qualified? That is the question!

Joke Ten/collected on January 2016: Jannati registered in the elections whose candidacy was granted by himself, so he can supervise the Leader who chose him to qualify himself [Jannati]!

These mass disqualifications soon became the center of these jokes. Directly criticizing the Guardian Council (see Joke Eleven) or Jannati (see Joke Twelve), they sent a message about the absurdity of the qualification process, the incompetency and biased performance of the entity in charge, and, thusly, the unfairness of these elections. This message was echoed through the usage of popular personages from another recent joke cycle, the Iran-US Deal (see Joke Thirteen). Zarif, a hero borrowed from this joke cycle, and his American counterpart in Iran's nuclear negotiations, John Kerry, reemerged in the pre-election disqualification jokes. They not only resonated in the post-BARJAM political climate of Iran, but also remind voters that these elections are the battles between pro-Rouhanis and anti-BARJAMs.

Joke Eleven/collected on January 2016:

I just made a phone call to the Guardian Council. A guy answered: The Disqualification office, how can I help you?

Joke Twelve/collected on January 2016:

Now, our special thanks are reserved for Jannati, a decent, innocent old man who made his great sacrifices and big efforts in making these elections even more greater and more passionate! Thanks to his disqualifications, the number of qualified candidates is now equal to potential seats!

Joke Thirteen/collected on January 2016:

John Kerry [U.S Secretary of State]: You got disqualified?

Zarif: I am a minister for gods' sakes [Baba in Farsi]!

*** The word Baba [literally 'father'] is used here at the end of Zarif's statement to express his desperation of proving and establishing his position as a minister.



Figure 17: Joke Thirteen – Pre-electionlore

The other heroic face introduced by these jokes was Hassan Khomeini, a middle-aged, well-respected reformist with close relationships with the reform movement's pioneer, former President Mohamad Khatami, and influential politicians, notably Hashemi Rafsanjani. As the grandson of Khomeini, his name is tied with the Revolution and its ideals. Therefore, it was not surprising that his disqualification was not only strongly condemned by prominent politicians, but also outraged and deeply worried the 1950s and younger Iranians as the generations who, like my parents, made this Revolution happen and still have high respect for Imam Khomeini and his families.

Hana describes how her mother's generation feels about Imam Khomeini as the Revolution's founder:

And not only Khomeini but also his families are highly respected in Iran, and Iranians, my mum's generation *baraye harfeshoon tare khord mikonan* [literally meaning 'they cut chives for their words'; here used to imply 'they admire them and listen to their advice']. Actually, his place in my parents' generation's minds is as holy as a saint. I somewhat agree he was a charismatic figure. [...] Khomeini is a person whose face was seen in the

full moon! [In early years of the Revolution, this belief was common among a big group of Iranians that Khamenei's face is carved in the full moon, and this was a proof of his high spiritual and supernatural level] Did you forget that? [She laughed] I am not saying us [our generation], but look at other people from older generations who regard him as a super human. For example, in 2001, I was on a trip in Shiraz where I encountered a woman at my mum's age who said – I remembered what she said word-by-word because I was shocked! – She said: 'I cannot go to Mashhad to pay my tribute to *Agha* [Imam Reza, the 8th Imam of Shias whose shrine is in city Mashhad], but I will go to Tehran on *ertehal* days [the anniversary of Khomeini's demise] in order to *pa boosiye Agha beram* [literally meaning 'to go and kiss Agha's feet'; metaphorically used to imply 'to visit his shrine humbly as a pilgrim']. Can you believe some people are [still] so fond of him?

The February elections were about to happen two weeks after *Daheye Fajr*, the ten-day annual celebration of the victory of the Revolution. Starting from the 12th of the Bahman month in the Persian calendar and ending on the 22nd, *Daheye Fajr* is annually held in early February across Iran and is supposed to be celebrated by all Iranians who presumably still feel faithful to the Revolution. This coincidence, paired with Hassan Khomeini's disqualification, drew the attention of joke tellers to another fundamental matter in the election battle and made old ashes flame: the old story of the Revolution, and how it ate its children.

One of the first jokes about Hassan Khomeini's disqualification, which I received in Telegram, mimicked a news format:

Joke Fourteen/collected on February 2016:
The Guardian Council disqualified Khomeini's Revolution.

When I told my father this joke, he remained silent for couple of seconds and then, with a short smile, he shook his head and said: "regrettably". The bitter laughter this joke aroused in him made me realize how serious such jokes might sound to the ears of a group of Iranians who, like my father, gradually lost faith in *their* Revolution or, like Hana's mother, must have felt heartbroken to witness Khomeini's family treated disrespectfully by the Revolution.

The post-Hassan-Khomeini-disqualification jokes magnify the existing and deepening divisions in Iranian politics from another angle: the reformist children of distinguished

revolutionaries and well-esteemed Revolution ideologists versus hardliners (see Jokes Fifteen and Sixteen). These jokes overlapped with the *Daheye Fajr* joke cycle in their use of Khomeini's pictures and quotes when they underlined his expected discontent, if he were still alive, at his grandson's disqualification (see Joke Seventeen and Eighteen).

Joke Fifteen/collected on February 2016:

The daughter of Taleghani,
The son of Martyr [Shahid in Farsi] Motahhari,
The son of Martyr Ashrafi Isfahani,
The grandson of Imam Khomeini,
Another grandson of Khomeini,
Hashemi's children,
Dr. Aref's son,

All are disqualified! Do your best in raising children!

*** All people whose names are listed in this joke are the children of highly recognized revolutionaries. As the instrumental ideologists, Taleghani and Motahhari nurtured the sapling Revolution by their thoughts in its early years, and it is believed that Ashrafi Isfahani and other Martyrs secured its stability by their blood in the unsettling time of war during the 1980s.

Joke Sixteen/collected on February 2016:

The guy grew up in Khomeini's house, was trained in Hozeh [a seminary where Shi'a Muslim clerics are trained], and now as it turned out, he is not righteous enough to be a politician! Nothing is expected from us, guys! Relax! Take it easy!

Joke Seventeen/collected on February 2016:

The rumor says: "Khomeini is sulking [Ghahr karde in Farsi] and does not intend to return tomorrow!"

*** I received this joke on the 11th of Bahman, a day before the beginning of *Daheye Fajr*. The beginning of this period, the 12th of Bahman [February the first] marks Khomeini's arrival day in Iran in 1979 after spending more than 14 years in exile. On this day, millions of Iranians went to the airport to welcome him.

Joke Eighteen/collected on February 2016:

[Ayatollah Khomeini in the photo]: Let me pour a cup of tea for my beloved grandson, so it washes away the grief of his disqualification.

*** This photo is very famous among the “1980s and 1970s kids”, the Third and Second Generations of the Revolution. My informants, the Third Generation, recall it as the first pictures in their school textbooks accompanied with a quote from Khomeini to exemplify and promote his modest life style.



Figure 18: Joke Eighteen: Pre-electionlore

Even though these mass disqualifications at first disappointed reformists, as discussed earlier, in the end it led to revenge votes from pro-Green Movement Iranians who supported the coalition of remaining moderate and reformist candidates in the List of Hope. In the next section, I explore those parts of electionlore which mobilized and unified my informants to take this revenge.

“I repeat, vote for all the individuals in both the lists”: Making Popular Alliance Through Khatamilore

“What is your favorite joke in these elections?” I asked Fifi. “Let me think” she hesitated for a second and then said:

Maybe not only my favorite but also, I can say the most powerful jokes I got were the ones about Khatami’s [Iran’s former president who is best known as the pioneer and leader of the reform movement] video. You know I believe we won the elections indeed just because of the massive circulations of that video message in Telegram, and not because of posters or fliers! You must have seen the video and heard the jokes, Right?

I nodded. She continued:

His message was so very persuasive. It generated many jokes and many videos, and I think it is because he is beloved and has an influential personality among us. He is subject to a media ban, and his ban aroused many objections. Who could believe that a popular president, [who] I can say is definitely the most popular politician ever this Revolution sees in its 37-year-old lifetime and who is the mastermind [*Maghze motefaker* in Farsi, meaning behind the idea] of the ‘Dialogue between Civilizations’ [On his suggestion, the year 2001 was named so by the United Nations], is on a media ban in his own country!?![...] It was in his video where he introduced the List of Hope and called on people to vote for it. [...] and as it turned out, many people listened to him because they still deeply love and trust him.

As the fifth president of Iran, Mohamad Khatami was in office from 1997 to 2005, preceded by Hashemi Rafsanjani and succeeded by Ahmadinejad. Among my generation, the “1980s kids”, and older, “the 1970s kids”, he is known as the icon of enlightenment, democracy, intellectuality, and reform in the post-revolutionary Iran. Before he became president, he served as the minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Hashemi’s cabinet through which he was recognized as the advocate of freedom of speech, tolerance, and liberalization. His brilliant career in culture, his training as a political philosopher, accompanied with his powerful and poetic language resulted in a charismatic cultural image among young pro-reformist Iranians (see Wastnidge 2016 for more information on Khatami and Iran’s cultural and political climate under his administration). Like Fifi, many other informants of mine named him as their favorite and “the most popular politician” in their life time. Some of them even expressed regrets that they had not been born earlier, so they could have gone to universities and spent their youth when it was “Khatami’s Iran”.

In a recent Iranian joke cycle that emerged after Trump’s victory in the US election, Obama’s America is compared to Khatami’s Iran, which was succeeded by Ahmadinejad. In these jokes, Trump seeks help from Ahmadinejad as his mentor on how to make America great after Obama, like what Ahmadinejad did with Iran after Khatami! To emphasize these similarities, these jokes made a double comparison and contrast: On one end, there are Trump

and Ahmadinejad, side by side, as the symbols of chaos, populism, low language, not-statesmanlike-looking politicians [*chehreye gheir siyasatmadarane* in Farsi] while on the other end, Khatami and Obama are portrayed as good-looking, charismatic leaders of democracy and tolerance.

In 2013, on the eve of Rouhani's victory in the presidential election, I was in a taxi in Tehran heading home when we got stuck in a traffic jam caused by a big crowd dancing and screaming in the streets. Many of them held up Rouhani's photos besides Khatami's. As a very common topic in taxis in Iran, the driver, a man in his forties, began to kill time by talking about politics. I clearly remember what he said about Rouhani's victory. Pointing at Khatami's photo in the hands of people in the street, he said, "You see, even after these many years [it was seven years after Khatami's presidency], people still voted only for whomever he [Khatami] said. I voted for Rouhani because he said Rouhani is trustworthy." In the February elections, history was repeated one more time when many Iranians trusted their beloved reformist leader and voted for the List he asked them to.

Khatami's video, which Fifi mentioned in our interview, was originally released on social media on February 22, 2016, four days before the election day, and soon went viral, especially in Telegram. In this video, Khatami first criticized the Guardian Council for disqualifying "competent, well-respected, well-trusted, and well-known figures among Iranians." Then, he asked all Iranian voters to come and support the reformist movement one more time, as they did in the 2013 presidential elections. He indicated that by supporting the coalition between reformists and moderates, they would take a step toward a "parliament aligned and along with the present and his ideals," especially BARJAM. Finally, he urged them to participate in both the

parliamentary and the Assembly of Experts elections and vote for the List of Hope. He emphasized:

Those who care for reforms, improvement, progress in the country as well as removal of threats and limitations, need to try to vote for both the lists, all the individuals in both the lists, I repeat, vote for all the individuals in both the lists, to take steps on the path of the country's dignity and to boost stability and security in the country as well as to optimize and improve the affairs.

Since 2015, when the judiciary branch of government issued a prohibition on Iran's national media from publishing Khatami's images or even mentioning his name, millions of Iranians have formed a digital campaign and launched the hashtag "we will be Khatami's media" (in Farsi #رسانه-خاتمی-میشویم) to spread his words, videos, and pictures in the alternative space of social media. Through this campaign and during the elections, his supporters circulated his video primarily in Telegram and Instagram, as well as Twitter and Facebook, with the same hashtag, (#رسانه-خاتمی-میشویم), and new ones, including "I repeat" (#تکرار-میکنم) and "the List of Hope" (#لسیت-امید).

Given his popularity and charisma among young political activists, most of whom were familiar with the language of humor and technology, Khatami's video soon became a rich source of inspiration for humorous political activism in social media. Along with his original video, thousands of mass-altered and self-customized replicas of it were widely spread through Telegram. In a digital movement initiated by movie stars and followed by Internet celebrities, such as VahidOnline, Iranians called on each other to become Khatami's voice by making selfie videos miming to the last part of his speech; using the Dubsmash video application, they filmed themselves while lip-syncing over the last sentences: "Vote for both the lists, all the individuals in both the lists. I repeat, vote for all the individuals in both the lists." They shared these

Dubsmash videos with the hashtags: “I am Khatami’s Media”, “List of Hope,” and “I repeat” in Farsi.

Narges told me that she first received the Dubsmash video of the prominent young actress, Baran Kosari, in Telegram before seeing or even being aware of the existence of Khatami’s original footage. In her video, Kosari, whose images are also banned on Iranian National TV due to her political activities in the Green Movement, holds a photo of Khatami in her left hand while holding up her right victory bandaged ink-stained fingers (like Figure 3). Miming to Khatami’s famous lines, she opens her right-hand fist in front of the camera to display “30+16” written on her palm when Khatami’s voice was saying “vote for all the individuals in both the lists” (see Kosari 2016 and Figure 19). Inspired by her, many of her followers in Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram made and released their Dubsmash videos while emphasizing the phrase “30+16” (thirty stands for the number of representative in the parliament and sixteen for the Assembly of Experts) in creative and humorous ways. Not only limited to voters inside the country, Iranians in diaspora contributed to this digital movement. Some of my friends in Canada, the U.S, and France joined this campaign by mouthing along to Khatami’s words in their Dubsmash videos.



Figure 19: Baran Kosari's Dubsmash Video: Khatamilore

Soon thereafter, Khatami's phrase, "I repeat," became the golden slogan of this humorous political movement. As a first response, a large series of stickers emerged in Telegram in which Khatami plays with his sentences while in different poses (see Figure 20). Subsequently, a large number of verbal jokes were dedicated to Khatami, his influential speech, and his golden words. Like the disqualification jokes, these ones resonated in post-BARJAM Iran by borrowing the heroes of the Iran-US joke cycle, notably Zarif (see Joke Nineteen). Up-to-date with international cultural and political events, they benefited from the U.S. 2017 presidential election (see Joke Nineteen and Twenty) and Oscars ceremony (see Joke 21) in forming their appropriate incongruities. Moreover, they not only expressed joke-tellers' and distributors' support for and trust in their beloved politician and his list, but they also made a political statement against his media ban (see Joke 22).

Sticker One: “I voted for all the individuals in both the lists.”

Sticker Two: “Shall I repeat?! For all individuals in both the lists.”

Sticker Three: “I repeat, vote for all the individuals in both the lists.”

Sticker Four: “Hi [Allo in Farsi]?! Can you hear me? All the individuals in both the lists.”

Sticker Five: “Do not ditch it [Napichoon in Farsi]! All the individuals in both the lists.”



Figure 20: Khatamilore: Stickers

Joke Nineteen/collected on February 2016:

Zarif’s text message to Kerry:

Hey Dude! If Trump really wants to sabre-rattle for you, just lick your lips [Lab Tar Kon in Farsi, meaning doing a friend or a loved one a favor pleurably and so quickly without losing time], so I can ask Khatami to give out a video speech!

Joke Twenty/collected on February 2016:

Clinton’s campaign costs thus far: 44 million dollars

The List of Hope’s campaign costs thus far: Just a video and couple of Dubsmash videos!

Joke 21/collected on March 2016:

And the Oscar goes to Mr. Mohamad Khatami from Iran whose two-minute leading role in a film before the elections fundamentally changed all political equations in this country!

Joke 22/collected on March 2016:

A few moments ago, Tehran's attorney general announced: 'From now on, Mr. Khatami is subject to Repetition ban!'

Even today, two years after these elections, whenever a jokable political event with great significance happens domestically or internationally, Khatami's "I repeat" phrase gets recycled in political joke cycles in Iran. A famous example is the 2017 U.S. election jokes in Farsi in which Iranians replaced Khatami's role with Obama. When Obama officially endorsed Clinton, according to these jokes, it was Obama's "Repetition turn." Additionally, when she lost to Trump, these jokes blamed Obama's neglect in giving out a "Repetition-full" speech and Americans' ignorance of "applications called Telegram and Dubsplash" in "the low-tech" American culture!²⁷ (all the words in quotation marks are taken from jokes). In addition, during the Iran's twelfth presidential elections in May of 2017, Khatami's slogan, especially his "Repetition" slogan, inspired and fed a large number of political jokes in which reformists humorously "repeated" the importance of the elections and called on each other to support the reformist movement one more time as they did in the 2016 February elections.

Like pre-election disqualifications jokes, Khatami electionlore shows how my informants analyse and reflect on politics in their everyday lives. Not only do they mirror the political climate and public mood of the society around the elections, but the elections jokes are also the collective and humorous political manifestation of Iranians, focusing on the elections and their relations to other significant historical and political events like BARJAM and the Revolution. Indeed, they are the expressions of what I term "vernacular politics": the ways in which

²⁷ All the words in quotation marks are taken from jokes.

individuals live out politics on a daily basis while interpreting complicated political events that directly or indirectly affect their everyday lives.

In the vernacular politics of jokes, it is in joke tellers, makers, and distributors' hands to decide what events get more highlighted, which politicians become heroes or villains, which faces are remembered, and whose words are revived. In other words, the vernacular politics articulated and promoted in the language of humor are not just a simplified, vernacularized version of the so-called official politics; it is, indeed, a painstakingly selected, carefully modified, and intentionally subverted version whose multiple layers reveal different unspoken details about politics.

Re-narrating the February elections and their stories through vernacular politics, joke tellers recreated the existing political battle between reformists and conservatives by contrasting heroes like Zarif, Rouhani and Hassan Khomeini with villains like Jannati and Haddad-Adal. Firstly, they juxtaposed the Revolution and its ideals with the results of the Guardian Council's qualification process to magnify their conflicts in the pre-election disqualification jokes. Secondly, they unbanned a banned politician and put him in the center of this battle field in the Khatami electionlore as a donor who came to the aid of the reformists with his speech. And, finally, in the post-election jokes, the villains got punished, as people disqualified the Guardian-Council-qualified candidates. I will explore the latter in the following section.

“The conservatives left the group!”: Constructing Newslore with a Revenge Laughter in the Post-Elections Jokes

“What were your favorite jokes?” I asked this question from all my informants. This time, Hadis answered:

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 me who voted and won! Jokes after jokes 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 conservatives' *heavy humiliating* defeat! [emphasis in her tone]

Maral's reply was:

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 in the end of 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 Hamshemzaee, 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!

The largest and, as Fifi calls it, "the most passionate [*Por Shour* in Farsi]" group of jokes during the February elections were the post-election jokes which were all over Telegram, reporting the election outcomes second by second when votes of each voting district got counted and officially announced by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. According to my informants, it is not an overstatement to say that not a single newsworthy story during that time remained uncommented 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.

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 counting votes:

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 so far. The jokes I received at this stage are as follows:

Joke 23/ collected on February 2016:

Now, Haddad has come to Agha [Sir in English, vernacularly and humorously used to refer to the Leader²⁸], put his head on his laps, 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!'

Joke 24/collected on February 2016:

A typical day in Iran's tenth parliament: the speaker says: 'Okay, any objections from Mr. Haddad?'

[The audience's laughter] 'So, the law is passed!' the speaker continued.

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

Joke 25/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 they vote for me! I am losing my reputation!



Figure 21: Joke 25: Post-electionlore

²⁸ Behzad, my thirty-year-old male informant, once mentioned to me that Agha is a title used by Basijis when they want to address the Leader. Since this title is normally reserved for religious figures like Shia Imams, the vernacular use of this word among Iranians is interpreted as a mockery of Basijis's blind love for the Leader.

Joke 26/collected on February 2016:
On the left, Aref, the leading candidate in the Tehran parliament election, is talking to Haddad: Look! You are getting removed!
Haddad: For God's Sake, do not refresh the damn page anymore!



Figure 22: Joke 26: Post-electionlore

On the other end, on the Assembly of Experts final list, only two of the Leader's confidantes, Jannati and Mesbah-Yazdi, had, so far, made it to the winners' list in the last two places.

Joke 27/collected on February 2016:

Jannati: I've never had such stress in any century as I have in the 21st!

Joke 28/collected on February 2016:

Jannati's text message to his son [the then minister of Culture]: My sweetheart, you know daddy loves you and daddy 'doret begrade' [literally meaning 'may I stroll around you' is an expression in Farsi used by parents to show their affection to their children]. Do you know anybody in the Ministry of Interior Affairs?

Joke 29/collected on February 2016:

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

Along with people from within the country, Iranians in 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 verse²⁹ (see Appendix C-The Ebi Joke). As a result, when Ebi sang this verse in Montreal around the vote-counting time, the audience creatively used an already-existing form to make a spontaneous joke influenced by the top election news. Soon after the concert, this joke went viral in Telegram:

Joke Thirty/collected on February 2016:
Without opening the gift [Hedyaro baz nakarde]
. . .
The elimination of Mesbah! [Hazfe Mesbah!]

Stage Three: It seemed to people that in these elections, the vote-counting process took longer than usual. Given conservatives' step-by-step fall, the more votes that were counted, the closer voters got to a conservative-free parliament and Assembly.

Joke 31/collected on February 2016:
Jannati: If I had known that it was going to be like this, I would have disqualified the Nation as well!

*** The word 'Nation' or 'Mellat' in Farsi is a common word used officially by politicians to address people in order to provoke their sense of nationalism during significant political events such as elections. The choice of Mellat in this joke instead of the less-official word 'Mardom' (meaning people in English) amplifies its humorous language.

²⁹ This joke is parallel with the modern folkloric genre, mondegreen. Mondegreen is created when one mishears a verse or a phrase, substitutes the misheard words with new ones, and gives it a new and sometime different meaning.

Joke 32/collected on February 2016:
Khamenei: Please stop counting the votes! Don't push it longer!



Figure 23: Joke 32: Post-electionlore

Joke 33/collected on February 2016:

A few minutes ago, Ayatollah Makarem [a conservative Shia clergy who is best known and also targeted in jokes for his Haram fatwas] just issued a fatwa, declaring ‘the continuation of counting votes’ as forbidden [Haram in Farsi and Arabic]!

In their criticism, some of these jokes flashed back to previous elections, especially the disputed 2009 election. In line with Green Movement 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 Joke 34 and 35). 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 35).

Joke 34/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 3/collected on March 2016:

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

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

Joke 36/collected on March 2016:

I was thinking if Jannati would not acquire enough votes to remain in the Assembly, we should pour into streets and protest like 2009. We would pretend that we are his supporters, so they will put him in 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 the 31st. On the other end, despite having Leader's support, Mesbah-Yazdi, along with other prominent ultraconservatives, namely Mohammad Yazdi who was the 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 37/collected on March 2016:

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

Joke 38/collected on March 2016:

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

Joke 39/collected on March 2016:

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

With the elimination of Mohammad Yazdi, Hashemi Rafsanjani placed on top of the elected candidates would probably become the next chairman of the Assembly of Experts. Once again, in the final scene of these jokes, heroes faced villains in order to punish them (see Jokes 39 and 41).

Joke 40/collected on March 2016:
Hashemi Rafsanjani on the left talking to Mohammad Yazdi on the right: “Say Ya Ali and stand up!”
***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



Figure 24: Joke Forty: Post-electionlore

Joke 41/collected on March 2016:
Hassan Khomeini on the right offering a place to Jannati on the left:
“Please sit in the end of the line!”



Figure 25: Joke 41: 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 their incongruities (see Joke 42-43).

Joke 42/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 26: Joke 42: Post-electionlore

Joke 43/collected on March 2016:

Haddad-Adel left the group.

Joke 44/collected on March 2016:

I am so happy to see even if Fars News [State-run news agency³⁰] 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 elections 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 44). Additionally, they reminded their listeners of the violations of freedom of speech and the press, and political freedom in Iran (Joke 45 and 46).

Joke 45/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 prison?!?

³⁰ Although this news agency officially describes itself as “independent,” my informants and many other reformist Iranians feel it echoes the government’s voice.

Joke 46/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 agency 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 a bitter news to the national TV indirectly governed and directly supervised by the Leader.

Hana 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 discourses 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 39 and 40), the previous election (Jokes 34-36), and government-dependent news agencies (Jokes 44-46). 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” (ibid., 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. Narges 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 receive 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 numbers and can win the elections, so they came out and voted. [...] Even in the polling station where I casted my vote, I witnessed once a person brought out their cellphone to write the List of Hope from 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 discourses 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.

Even though electionlore is primarily generated and shared on online venues, most notably Telegram, it is not limited to the virtual world. Indeed, a significant amount of electionlore, especially verbal jokes, were performed in face-to-face communications in private or public places such as taxis. In the following section, I specifically explore the key role of Tehran's taxis in the elections in relation to creation, performance, and circulation of electionlore.

“The last taxi you get on the election day determines which lists you will vote for!”: Unwhispering election jokes in Taxis in Tehran

“One day around the elections, I was in a taxi coming back home from work” said Hadis in our Skype interview. “I love taxi stories. Give me all the details!” I shouted. She laughed and continued:

Ok, let me remember: There were two passengers sitting in the back, two men but I cannot exactly picture their faces now [because] I was in the front, and all I saw was through the mirror. On our half way toward [the destination], one of the guys from the back who was fairly young broke the silence and asked the driver: ‘Gentleman, have you decided to vote? If yes, do you mind if I ask for whom?’ He kept a wide smile on his face, and you know he was trying to make the atmosphere more intimate. Oddly, the driver remained silent! [Hadis laughed] Then the guy handed him the List of Hope, and [one other copy] to the passenger sitting next to him. Then he leaned a bit forward and stretched out his hand to give me one too, but I did not take it. You know I was too exhausted to get into another political lecture; I had enough that day, plus I knew I was going to vote for the same list, so I refused it and said: ‘Thank you, I am not interested’. He was polite enough not to insist more. Shortly after, he opened a discussion, I suppose indirectly addressing me. I think he thought I was not going to vote because he said ‘I know the country is ruined, so on and so forth [*folan o folan o folan* in Farsi] [and] it is getting worse and worse every year, but let’s vote to prevent more damages. [...] He breathlessly talked for couple of minutes; mentioning BARJAM, Khatami’s support of the coalition, Rouhani’s struggles with the parliament, so on and so forth [*Folan va bahman* in Farsi]. Then the driver jumped into his lecture and then the other passenger joined them too. And the whole time I was just listening. [...] I remember when I got off the car, their debate got just heated! I was kind of tempted to participate, but it was too late!

Hadis’s account was among millions of people’s daily encounters in taxis in Tehran. In Iran, public taxis, usually in yellow, green, white, and orange, are shared between, at most, four passengers in 405 Peugeot, Kia Pride, and Iran Khodro Peykan cars and more than 6 people in green minivans who all go in the same direction. Since Tehran is a big busy city, its main streets and even highways are often overcrowded especially in rush hours. During these hours (7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.), public transportation, such as taxis, are used frequently to their fullest capacities. For example, in Tehran taxis, strangers have to sit side by side for hours for an often long period of time; depending on driver’s mood, they chat with each other to pass their

time. A very typical topic of taxi conversations is first and foremost politics and second, as its inseparable twin, economics. It is not surprising that during the elections or other important political events, these discussions proceed with more passion and persistence from both passengers and drivers. Drivers, usually male, act like panel chairs who lead the discussions and decide when passengers should stop talking.

In the February elections, political chats in taxis reached their climax, especially before and on the election day, because of the four already-discussed reasons: the significance of the two elections, BARJAM, the mass disqualifications, and Khatami's call for support of the List of Hope. The old questions of "whether we should vote or not" and "if yes, for whom" arose again and became the main thread of taxi political chats. My informants told me, as in online venues, it was primarily pro-reformist, or, in other words, pro-Khatami and pro-Rouhani voters who started and led the political discussions in taxis, obviously in support of the List of Hope. When I asked why it was the case, Nikou, my 27-year-old female informant answered that "while [the opposing group] have always benefited from the state tribune to deafen people with their loud coarse [*nakharashide* in Farsi] voice, we use these social places [like taxis] creatively to spread our voice."

Another significant factor that kept conservatives and pro-Leader voters silent in public or semi-public places like taxis during the elections was their fear of confrontation. I remember, for a year of my stay in the University of Tehran residence, I was randomly assigned a room with a hard core conservative student who as I figured out later, after my graduation, was the head of Student Basij Association in our university, known as the most powerful and active force in promoting the Leader's ideologies across academic institutions. Knowing my absolute opposition to and perhaps resentment against her political orientations, I do not remember a

single instance in which she accidentally leaked out anything even generally related to politics, let alone discussed important matters like elections with me. Indeed, she not only avoided political conversations, but also successfully managed to hide her political beliefs that, for about a year, I was wrong in my thoughts that she was just a regular Basiji, fond of the Leader with an occasional and rare interest in politics.

This roommate always kept a framed photo of Khamenei, placed on top of her shelf, facing down whenever I was in the room, and her non-academic books were always locked inside her drawer, out of my sight. Additionally, one day during the 2013 political election when her friends came over to help her organize speeches and make posters, she asked them to whisper and not to leave out their posters on the desk uncovered. Another of our roommates who, like me, guessed that our conservative friend was somehow affiliated with Basij once told me that she thought our roommate was afraid to talk to us about her political activities because she feared the fact that she and her people were not welcome among us, a majority in number but a minority in power.

During the February elections, pro-Green Movement voters took advantage of conservatives' silence or perhaps fears in semi-public spaces in Tehran such as taxis, and soon turned them into alternate spaces for campaigning and criticizing politics. Like social media, taxis provided passengers with a relatively open and, to some extent, safe venue for their political activism. As my informants told me, the shortness of taxi trips, the anonymity among passengers, and their contractual intimacy that expired at the end of each trip, all came together to foster an environment which is neither as skeptical and unreachable as state-dominated public spaces nor as trusted and open as Telegram for pro-reformist voters. In other words, taxis became liminal spaces between the digital world and the state-controlled public in these elections

where people temporarily built trust to orally create and circulate electionlore in their face-to-face communications.

Maral told me about one of her personal encounters in a taxi whose driver told her a joke about the defeated conservative candidate, Haddad-Adel. As she elaborated her taxi story, at the time when the serious political debate was in progress, neither listeners nor speakers, distracted or de-emphasized the argument by telling a joke. However, once their points were made, humorous language was used to both lighten the heavy and serious atmosphere and to reinforce their political statements. While it is not only impossible, but also unnecessary, to draw dividing lines between digital Telegram and oral taxi electionlore to show which one came first or which borrowed from which, it should be noted that these two forms of electionlore, either analog or digital, constitute “hybridized folklore” (Blank 2013, 20). Like other folkloric expressive forms, the February electionlore did not only remain in a single birthplace; it was both digitally and orally created, shared, and converged as online jokes entered taxis and vice versa.

Not only as a venue for exchanging jokes with Telegram, taxis and their contributions to these elections provoked a large series of verbal jokes about themselves which were widely spread in social media. The main subjects appearing in these taxi-themed jokes were namely heated political taxi debates around the elections period, highly politicized passengers and drivers (see Jokes 47-49), and the key role of this space in shaping and influencing voters’ minds, especially on the elections day (see Jokes 50-53). As main targets, drivers were ridiculed for their confidence in commenting on politics regardless of its complexity (see Jokes 47, 48, 52, and 54) and their authority in leading political taxi debates (see Joke 49). In this way, some of these jokes slightly and implicitly touched upon the recently growing and concerning issue of the unemployment of educated young Iranians some of whom, despite of having graduate degrees,

ended up driving taxis as their main jobs (see Joke 55). Additionally, these jokes along with other electionlore, especially the pre-election disqualification joke sub-cycle, reflect the vernacularized political groupings among ordinary Iranians: Pro-reformist versus pro-conservatives (see Joke 53). Therefore, they empowered pro-reformist voters by assuring them they are the majority in numbers, even in taxis.

While jokes frequently speak for themselves, the taxi-themed one that emerged in these elections is in Davies's terms "social facts" whose existence in a large set "needs to be explained in terms of other social facts" (2011, 8). In addition to Iran's political climate, Iranians' political divisions, and their avid interest in politics, these jokes reveal the significant role of a social space where strangers build temporary trust with each other to discuss important political events such as elections.

Joke 47/collected on February 2016:

This morning, I asked a taxi driver: 'what do you think of these elections?' He smirked: 'He-he, for 1000 Tomans [less than one Canadian dollar], I'll tell you my ideas just about traffics. If you want my interpretations of the elections, you should charter the taxi!'

Joke 48/collected on February 2016:

Today in a taxi, the driver said: 'sorry my passengers, today I am not planning to participate much in your political debate. I am saving for a house visiting where we are supposed to have a heavy political discussion!'

Joke 49/collected on February 2016:

I was in a taxi talking passionately about the elections that all of a sudden the driver stopped and tapped on my shoulder: 'Dude! Feel completely free! Just take my seat and you drive!'

Joke 50/collected on February 2016:

The last taxi you take on the election day determines which lists you will vote for! Please make a smart choice!

Joke 51/collected on March 2016:

All 435,000 people who voted for Haddad were those who chose a wrong taxi *on* the election day!

Joke 52/collected on February 2016:

Tonight [the election night] taxi drivers are busy following the election news, so tomorrow morning, they can give their passengers first-hand political analyses!

Joke 53/collected on February 2016:

Today, on taxi stations in Tehran, taxi drivers were shouting: conservative-Poonak Square only one passenger, reformist-Vali-Asr Square three! Obviously, they were not in mood for hearing any opposition!

***I got this joke exactly on the election day.

Joke 54/collected on March 2016:

When you take a taxi, all money you pay to the driver is just a reimbursement for political research he conducted during the elections, plus the fees for the discussions they offer you. In fact, transportation is totally free!

Joke 55/collected on March 2016:

My friend is studying political science at master's level at university. His father has promised him if his GPA gets higher than 18 [out of 20], he will buy him a taxi!

According to what my informants describe, Iranian election jokes told and spread in taxis differ from the so-called “whispered anecdotes” or “Flüsterwitze” (Draitser 1979; Lipman 1991, 18) in Nazi Germany or some parts of the former Soviet bloc. As its name explains, whispered jokes are the ones that “people were reluctant to tell strangers” and even “informants usually spoke in low tones after glancing around to see if there was anyone else listening” (Dundes 1971b, 51). Therefore, it is not surprising that un-whispering whispered jokes in such countries brought severe punishments for tellers and even listeners (see Beckmann 1969 for examples of these punishments). Drawing on German scholarship on joking during World War II, Davies defines whispered jokes as dangerous “jokes about the forbidden which could not be expressed in other ways” (2010, 26). Likewise, Oring calls joking under repressive regimes “a risky business” which is not “merely socially hazardous but physically dangerous” (2004, 210).

Even though the February electionlore targeted primarily conservatives close to the Leader or political entities under his command, these political jokes were not whispered in Iran, and, as my informants assured me, their tellers were not even slightly punished or threatened by

the authorities. I suggest there are several reasons why. Firstly, these jokes very rarely questioned or directly criticized the Leader himself. Describing this intentional avoidance, Behzad, my thirty-year-old male informant, used a famous Farsi expression: “We know that we should not play with the lion’s tale!” Therefore, most of my informants’ criticism in jokes was directed at the entities under the Leader’s control such as Iran’s national media, the judiciary, and the Guardian Council or politicians from his inner circle, notably Jannati, Mesbah-Yazdi and Haddad-Adel.

Secondly, this kind of electionlore did not circulate underground, nor was it encrypted or regarded as secretive; oral taxi jokes were told among total strangers. Telegram, as the main online venue for the creation and the dissemination of this digital electionlore, was not only a campaigning tool only in the hands of my informants, ordinary Iranians and supporters of Leader-disfavoured reformist politicians such as Khatami, but it was also *the* unfiltered free social media which was not only approved by the president but was also used by the Leader during the elections. Haddad-Adel’s tweet, mentioned in the previous chapter, also bears testimony to the un-whispered nature of these jokes. Acknowledging the numerous jokes about him, this defeated conservative, who is also a relative of the Leader, used a filtered social network in Iran, Twitter, to thank joke-tellers for not attacking his personality and his family in their digital jokes.

Finally, as earlier discussed, the February electionlore is a hybridized genre commuting between two domains. Its oral performances and disseminations in semi-public places like taxis, as well as its exchange in the digital world similarly proves that regardless of its undesirable messages and the consequences for conservatives, it was widely known and orally and digitally performed in different social spaces in Iran. In this regard, the taxi-themed jokes that appeared in

Telegram (Jokes 47-55) also reinforce the claim that the February electionlore was un-whispered in semi-public social places when people passionately discussed the elections with each other.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Main Disagreement

There is an open-ended question in humor studies as to whether humor is capable of “real” political change in a society. Is it, using Davies’s metaphor, only a “thermometer” and not “thermostat” (Davies 1990) because as he argues, it merely reflects the political climate without having effective long-term consequences. Taking different approaches toward this question, humor scholars are generally divided into two groups: the first group constitutes a large number of scholars who insist that political humor has only micro-level effects, such as achieving moral victories (see Kishtainy 1985; Benton 1988; Cochran 1989; Davies 2001, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2011; Oring 2004; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Laineste 2013). In their views, political jokes are regarded as just “indications of the truth” (Davies 2010) which are “not a form of active resistance” (Benton 1988, 54), and their “critique was in many cases harmless and playful” (Shifman, Coleman, and Ward 2007, 466). Holding to this lens, they conclude that political humor 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).

In opposition to this perspective, another group of scholars see political jokes as inseparable from and key player in political activism believing that, as George Orwell writes:

Every joke is a tiny revolution, [...] Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from the seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. [...] A joke is a temporary rebellion against virtue, and its aim is not to degrade the human being but to remind him that is already degraded ([1945] 1969, 184).

The early studies of these scholars were primarily concentrated on Nazi Germany, Franco’s Spain, and the Soviet Union in which political jokes were regarded as “a weapon” used against

enemies (Speier 1969, 182; Larsen 1980), “the oral equivalent of Spanish guerrilla warfare” (Pi-Sunyer 1977, 187), and “a nail in Hitler and Stalin’s coffins” (Mikes 1985, vii). These views were seconded by a group of young scholars, mostly specializing in digital humor. In their recent studies of political humor 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), they not only broaden the scope of American- and Soviet-Union- centered scholarship in humor studies, but also provide contemporary contextualized case studies in which jokes appear not just as decoration, rather playing effective and active roles in bringing political changes such as mobilization and dissent. Asking the same question here, I locate my study of Iranian electionlore in these two bodies of scholarly literature and indicate how it contributes to, converges with, and diverges from the existing theories.

The Dilemma: A Passive Resistance or An Active Revolution?

In his book, *Seriously Funny: Mexican Political Jokes as Social Resistance*, political scientist Samuel Schmidt examines the critical but not seemingly serious roles of political jokes in contemporary Mexico. Identifying different roles, he emphasizes that political humor is a “subterranean confrontation between politics and the society” (2014, 8) because it “is an act of transgression that undermines the rituals, symbols, and values of politicians, and it is an instrument to get even with the politicians.” (ibid., 233) He also argues that “the importance of the joke depends on the political system. If the system is open and democratic, the impact of the joke is low, but if the system is closed, with restricted liberties, the joke can play a delegitimizing role” (ibid., 236).

Among the numerous examples Schmidt provides, the 2006 Mexican election jokes were a powerful example of online humor which recovered the historical memory of a people by reviving and disseminating old jokes about corrupted political parties (Schmidt 2014, 222). Additionally, the undeniable role social media played in this election led to breaking censorship and changing traditional humorous expressions by enriching its language with sound and picture (ibid., 246). Studying jokes that emerged in different presidents' times, he concludes that "not only [the Mexican] society yanked³¹ monopoly of power, but with jokes, it has stripped politicians of the sweetness of being beloved and even idolized" (ibid., 238).

With the same approach, in her book, *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance*, Majken Jul Sørensen explores the ways through which political activists in Serbia and Sweden combine humor with serious actions to challenge and attack the dominant power in their discursive guerrilla war (2008, 173; 2016, 17). She believes that "although political humour operates within a play frame and generates laughter and amusement, this should not be confused with not being serious" (2016, 6).

While Schmidt's study of Mexican election jokes and Sørensen's research on political humorous activism stand on the Orwellian side, Limor Shifman, Stephen Coleman, and Stephen Ward's study of the 2005 UK election jokes swings more toward the first group of scholars who believe in the passive role of political humor. In their exploration of humorous texts from three genres of games, cartoons, and online and offline posters in different campaigns of the UK election, they reach to the conclusion that "politics is a cynical game and nothing more" and these various forms of humor "rarely dealt with key election issues and tended to focus on the

³¹ This sentence is taken from the English translation of the original Spanish. Any inaccuracy is the translator's.

‘horseshoe’ attributes of the campaign” (2007, 483). Therefore, they insist that “far from their igniting Orwell’s ‘tiny revolution’, or toppling ‘the mighty from their seats’, online humor served to soften people up for ‘politics as usual’” (ibid.).

Likewise, in his comparative study of jokes and their targets, Davies analogises political jokes to “aspirin” which people take to “suspend their political pain”. He argues:

Given that the jokes had no discernible effect in or on the Soviet empire, despite being concentrated on a single target and being so important to the jokers that they would in times of terror defy persecution in order to tell them and in times of decadence make them an important part of social life, we can be certain that jokes have no effects in democratic societies with freedom of speech (2011, 248).

There is a missing point in the conclusions of both groups; neither Orwellian scholars nor Davies and his like-minded colleagues carefully notice the societal and political complexity of the birthplaces of humor. Additionally, even though both groups come to different conclusions, their contemplations start with the same hypothesis for the function of humor; they both view humor as a form of resistance against the dominant power.

While the Orwellian scholars interpret every attempt, including humorous activism, in light of a *revolution* and a *drastic change*, those in the second group close their eyes to the biased divisions they imposed upon other countries. For these scholars in the second group, notably Davies and Oring, there is a neat dividing line between two groups of countries whose people use humor in their political activities: these countries are either democratic or repressive. If democratic, people are guaranteed an abundance of different forms of freedom including freedom of political humor and mockery. As a result, in such countries, humor in many forms is not forbidden or “whispered” (Draitser 1979; Lipman 1991, 18); therefore, it is condemned to be “ineffective” and “decorative” (Davies 2007, 302). According to this view, humor’s

“effectiveness” is in reverse relation to freedom of speech; the more democratic the countries are, the less effective is their humor.

From this binary perspective, if the political system of a country, usually non-western, does not match the Western definition of democracy, it must be under a kind of totalitarian dictatorship with varying degrees of oppression. In this general assumption, people of these countries must live under the dominance of a dictator who stifles all forms of criticism, even humor. Consequently, joke-telling in this long list of “repressive” countries (see Oring 2004, 210 for this list) is analysed as a “risky business” and frequently labelled as “dangerous”. With this implicit supposition, scholars tend to explore humor in relation to the monopoly of power and the stolen freedom of people. The theory of “resistance jokes” (Obrdlik 1942; Powell and Paton 1988; Bryant 2006) has risen from this point.

In such totalitarian societies, resistance jokes are twinned with the concept of “resilience” which enables the suppressed people of countries to do “quiet protest” (Davies 2007) or “blame” the existing power (Davies 1997). These modes of protest, according to the first group, are considered “merely symbolic and joke-telling [does] not have any real-world consequences” (Oring 2004, 229); whereas, to pro-Orwell scholars, it equips people with serious, “non-violent” and “active resistance” (Schmidt 2014; Sørensen 2016).

Resistance jokes were firstly studied in different parts of Soviet Union (Adams 2005; Krikmann 2006; Davies 2007; 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. Since then, most studies written on the political humor of non-Western countries, such as contemporary Egypt (Helmy and Frerichs 2013), Serbia (Sørensen

2016), Mexico (Schmidt 2014), and Azerbaijan (Pearce and Hajizada 2014), evolve around the theory of resistance humor, regarding it either as an active or passive form. This pattern is extended even to the Eastern-European scholarship concerning humor in post-socialist countries which once belonged to the Soviet bloc. This is exemplified in the recent work of humor scholars Astapova and Laineste into contemporary online and oral humor, respectively in Belarus (2015) and Estonia (2008; 2009), wherein they still analyzed political jokes in their relations to “dictatorship,” “fear,” and “resistance.”

What if, however, a non-western country, neither democratic, socialist, or 100% totalitarian, is not in need of a revolution nor is in a state of resistance? Is it possible that people seek shelter in jokes beyond a “liberation” (Limon 1997, 74) from their desperations? With the departure from the resistance theory, my study of Iranian political humor suggests another possibility for the function of humor in societies whose political system stands in the gray area between democracy and dictatorship. “Humor as reform” is the approach I propose to take for understanding political jokes born out of such countries.

Iranian Jokes in Suspense: Neither Revolution nor Resistance

Post-Revolution Iran has a complex hybridized political system of authoritative theocracy and liberal democracy. At least in theory, according to its constitution, unquestionable monopoly of power should not exist in a both *Islamic* and *republican* country, where religion is armed with politics to bring people freedom and security. All these paradoxical factors gathered in this system not only divide politicians into different camps, but also make people politically line up in support of either theocracy or democracy. As discussed in the previous chapters, this dichotomy has been mirrored in political jokes.

Oring argues that “humor 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). Being both *republican* and *Islamic* makes the Iranian joke tellers’ jobs easy by handing them two ready-made incongruities. Using mechanisms of making these incongruities “appropriate” in the frame of a joke (Oring 2003, 13-26), my informants, as the pro-reformist and pro-president joke tellers/distributors of the afore-discussed February electionlore, target pro-Leader politicians and juxtapose them with their reformist heroes to magnify the bipolarity in the system. Similarly, the reverse situation may be true for pro-Leader joke tellers who cheer in favor of theocracy and Islamicized civil rights restrained and redefined by religion. Thus, it is a simplistic reading if we say Iranian jokes (in this case let us consider only pro-reformists) serve merely as a means of protest and resistance against the *Islamic* Iran by indicating its illegitimacy, fragility, and weaknesses. Indeed, they do more than just reflect a nation’s discontent and resilience; they serve as a means of *reform* and are expressions of support and unification for the *republic* Iran.

Furthermore, post-Green-Movement Iran is a post-revolutionary society with a thirty-year distance from the climax of the 1979 Revolution and an eight-year distance from its awakening uprising in 2009. Correspondingly, political jokes that emerged in this society are not in-time-of-conflict jokes since they reflect the opinion of the nation not in desire or perhaps need of another revolution, but in demand for reform within the deep layers of their existing system. As my informants indicate, post-Green Movement Iran is a country on an uneven path toward democracy and reform, not a society close to eruption for overthrowing the regime. This notion of reform is embodied in the heart of these jokes, bolder than concepts of resistance, and this makes these jokes different from humor under repressive regimes.

Additionally, unlike anti-Nazi or anti-Soviet humor, post-Green movement Iranian jokes have not risen in the height of extensive repression. On the contrary, they emerged when my reformist informants found a patron at one of the highest level of politics, a president - the head of the Executive Branch of the government - who stood by them against blocking and silencing. Therefore, it is not surprising that the February jokes, as the most recent example of post-Green Movement humor, evolved more around action-demanding concepts such as *unification*, *mobilization*, and *revenge* as a means of reformation instead of attacking the whole “ideology of the system” as it appeared in Soviet and post-Soviet jokes (Astapova 2015) and even the Tahrir-Square jokes in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (Helmy and Frerichs 2013).

According to what my informants told me, it can be concluded that my study of their political jokes neither belongs to the Orwellian group nor promotes Davies’ and his like-minded colleagues’ views. Indeed, what it offers is a new starting point in thinking about and analysing political humor. Rather than seeking resistance and identifying its types in our enquiries, I suggest we change the initial question and embark on our exploration from a different perspective. Instead of asking “what kind of resistance,” I propose, we ask “whether resistance” and try to find other forms of response to the dominant power. Iranian political jokes show people do not always wish to be on the other side of the politics as the resilient or revolutionary force; rather, they sometimes ally with and assist some parts to defeat or reform other parts. In this way, if we assume politics as a scale with two trays, and the dominant power in one tray, it should not be necessarily resistance or revolution on the opposite side to balance out the pressure and repression. The weights in this scale are mixed as power, official politics, and vernacular politics all come into play together.

Seeing jokes as a means of reform rather than resistance is an attempt to solve the inherent problem with the views of both groups. In fact, this approach stands in between both groups' viewpoints by offering an intermediary standpoint. On one hand, it invites the Orwellian scholars to seek other forms of change brought by humor in a society. Reform is one such example; in a non-democratic society, revolution is not the only way to resolve issues with the dictator. The system itself might provide people with opportunities to improve the situation from within. With "their disguise" in their language (Schultz 1995, 62), jokes facilitate this reform and bring about a change, as minor as awakening people's ideas and as major as shaking up the elections.

On the other hand, replacing resistance with reform unbounds the pro-Davies scholars from their essentialising persistence in dividing countries into democratic and repressive ones, and associating repression alone with resistance. Consequently, in this new approach, the direct relations between repression and humor's effectiveness become pointless, and humor's roles, otherwise limited to "quiet protest" and "a narrative of blame," become extended. In this way, my proposed approach also opens up a new possibility in this group of scholars' rigid conclusions about democratic countries. If not only repression gives birth to powerful political jokes, other responses to the dominant power have the potential to produce numerous and effective jokes under any circumstances, either humor is free or suffocated. As a result, jokes which are born out of freedom and not conflict are capable of making real changes in their societies.

However, while my proposed theory insists on the visible and non-decorative role of humor, I do not aim to romanticize its effect and exaggerate its power in non-democratic countries like Iran with several instances of violation of political freedom, freedom of speech,

and human rights. Doubtlessly, humor's reform is limited as the criticism embedded and expressed in jokes' vernacular politics is cautious. My informants told me over and over that in Iran, they pursue their political activities, even including making and sharing political jokes, under the constant fear of the authorities. The recent mass arrest of Telegram channels' administrators who were politically active during the 2016 February elections (mentioned in Chapter Four) was among several reasons which they named as the cause of this fear. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter Five, to get political jokes to live life to the fullest, my informants must self-censor and watch their steps, so as to not cross the red line which is targeting unquestionably unjokable targets: the Revolution's leaders. Through the construction and manifestation of vernacular politics and newslore in these jokes, they not only express their counterhegemonic political ideas in a humorous way but also protect their safety in its "cryptic" (Schutz 1995) language as if they are professional tightrope walkers who artistically and courageously hold their balance on the thin rope of their freedom.

The 'Seriously Funny' February Electionlore: Sword and Shield

In this thesis, I have examined the stories and the reports of twenty-five articulate and involved Iranians with regards to their consumption and distribution of political jokes in the past several years. I have analysed online venues, mostly Telegram channels, and semi-public places like taxis in which my informants created, (were) told, and participated in the distribution of these jokes. Through this I have thought of the metaphor sword and shield which was first introduced to humor studies by neuroscientist Mohamed M. Helmy and his colleague Sabine Frerichs in their research on political humor used among revolutionaries in Tahrir Square of

Cairo. They use “sword and shield” to explain the undeniable role of humor in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. They argue:

As a sword, [...] [humor] made a thrust at Mubarak that he could not parry as he only knew how, with senseless violence, without him appearing powerless and silly. As a shield, [...] it brought the Square together in an experience that was at worst tolerable, at best inspiring (2013, 476).

With a slight twist, this metaphor is applicable to the post-Green-Movement Iranian jokes, especially the February electionlore, because being both sword and shield mirror these jokes’ dual nature: attacking and defending. In the election battlefield, as a weapon, they villainized the conservatives while, as a protective shield, they support my reformist informants and give their beloved politicians heroic faces. By doing so, they reinforce the pro-reformist voters’ group cohesion while dragging the conservative enemy down. The combination of three meta-theories about laughter, “superiority” (Hobbes 1962; Berlyne 1968; Morreall 1987), “relief” (Freud 1960; Meyer 2000), and “incongruity” (Beattie 1776; Oring 2003) explains these effects.

The relief theory explores humor as a tool to relieve stress and alleviate anxiety by discharging the nervous energy through laughter (Freud 1960, 146-149). In this cathartic explanation of humor, laughter is viewed as “an aggressive weapon and a safety-valve at the same time” (Mikes 1971, 109). Relying on this theory, Charles E. Schutz calls the creator of humor the “aggressor against a political personage or social institution” who has “translated his anger or resentment into a satirical attack in which his target is made the butt of humor for an audience. The target becomes a victim and the aggressor’s anger is expended peacefully” (1997, 77).

According to the superiority theory, laughter is interpreted as an explicit message of superiority from the humor’s creators to their victims (Carell 2008, 306), thereby reinforcing the group’s unity against the target (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009). Drawing on this interpretation,

Gruner sees humor as a “game” which involves two opposite groups of winners, joke tellers and those who laugh at the joke, and losers who are victims (1997). Rather than focusing on people’s motives and engendered emotions, the congruity theory concentrates on the perception and the message of humor (Billig 2005) and analyses it as the unexpected “appropriated” (Oring 2003, 13-26) encounter between two incongruent components (Beattie 1776).

As discussed in the previous chapter, according to my informants, vernacular politics constructed and manifested in jokes challenges the formal politics and criticizes different key players in the game of power. In all three analysed joke sub-cycles of the February electionlore, the confrontation between reformist heroes and conservative villains in the vernacular political battlefield of jokes not only magnifies the growing political divisions in Iran but also highlights the existing duality between democracy and theocracy in the Iranian political system by juxtaposing two seemingly incongruent components. According to relief theory, the pre-election disqualification jokes specifically served as an aggressive weapon as well as a safety-valve. They alleviated the tension and anxiety among my reformist informants, which was caused by the mass disqualification of the reformist candidates, while attacking the Guardian Council and blaming hardliners for the unfair elections.

As the large component of jokes’ vernacular politics, newslore subverted the hegemony of the elections’ power dynamics in favor of reformists. While Khatamilore mobilized my informants and other the pro-reformists’ supporters by evoking their sense of solidarity, the post-election vote-counting jokes empowered them by engendering the feeling of superiority. In this way, the February electionlore not merely served as a spirit lifter but also, along with other campaigning tools, mobilized and unified my informants to make a political alliance which, in the end, led to their victory.

Additionally, analysis of the February electionlore suggests a broader definition of humor not limited to “spontaneous,” “anonymous,” and “non-strategic” (Davies 2001, 395 and 409) collective creations of witty minds. With the advent of new technologies and the growing popularity of applications such as Telegram and Dubsplash, humor is not only constructed through oral communications between tellers and listeners, and, likewise, the stimulated laughter is not restricted to the face-to-face action of laughing. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, my informants used different forms of stickers, Dubsplash videos, and digitally-altered photos in constructing their online electionlore, and, similarly, expressed laughter in forms of smiles and animated pictures. These customized stickers and photo-shopped or digitally altered photos were not spontaneously and unintentionally created and circulated all over the digital world at the height of these political competitions. Furthermore, as my informants emphasize, the essential role of Dubsplash Khatami videos in these elections provides a good example of an *identified*, *pre-planned*, and *strategic* form of humor which came into play in favor of the List of Hope.

Moreover, in my informants’ online political activism in the language of humor, the boundaries between the serious and the funny were blurred during the February elections. In the digital campaigns, both my informants and their opponents used humor in its different forms along and in line with serious language. As Maral, my 27-year-old female informant, explains, non-humorous political notes, speeches, and agendas were usually accompanied by and assisted with unquantifiable humorous electionlore. Hadis, my thirty-year-old female informant, describes this online movement as “a wave both rational and humorous” and argues:

It was a beautiful wave which took many people along and brought them together! What I love most about it was it had both rational and fun parts all together. It was both serious and humorous. No part outweighed the other. There were jokes as well as serious political notes. [...] All I want to say is they were not just jokes, they had serious rationales behind them. Also, beside this rationality, it was a wave of emotions. It gives you a feeling of *hamdeli* [‘compassionate’ as the closest translation. The word-by-word

translation is ‘united in hearts’]. All that was going on in the digital sphere echoes these messages to me that *we are united* and *we are numerous* [emphasis in her tone].

In addition to this intertwinement, the February electionlore is a hybridized folklore which converges in both digital and analog realms as online jokes entered semi-public places like taxis and vice versa. This hybridity made the role of February electionlore in the Iranian society more effective and tangible as if it sharpened the sword and rounded the shield.

Appendix A-Maps



Map One: Provincial Divisions of Iran



Map Two: Ethnoreligious Distribution Map of Iran

Appendix B-Stickers

Local Stickers

The stickers below are, respectively, in the Mazani dialect (Sticker One-Three), the Kermani-accented Farsi (Sticker Four-Six), and the Shirazi-accented Farsi (Sticker Seven-Nine), including local words and expressions. Farsi and Mazani are not 100% mutually intelligible. Forough, my 29 year- old Mazani informant, translated these stickers for me.

<p>Sticker One: I want you! [It is a local expression of love.]</p> <p>Sticker Two: What happened?!!!</p> <p>Sticker Three: Hi! How are you doing?</p>	
<p>Sticker Four: [a Kermani expression which literally means “May all your pains and suffering be mine” and is locally used as an expression of affection]</p> <p>Sticker Five: [a Kermani expression which literally means “Don’t grow acne” and is locally used to imply “don’t stress”]</p> <p>Sticker Six: Thank you in the Kermani accent.</p>	

Sticker Seven: Bravo! [in the Shirazi accent]

Sticker Eight: [A Shirazi expression which literally means “What do they mean bro?” and is locally used for expressing confusion.]

Sicker Nine: [A Shirazi expression which literally mean “now, wait!” and is locally used to imply “don’t rush” and “take it easy”]



NO2UK Stickers

Sticker One:

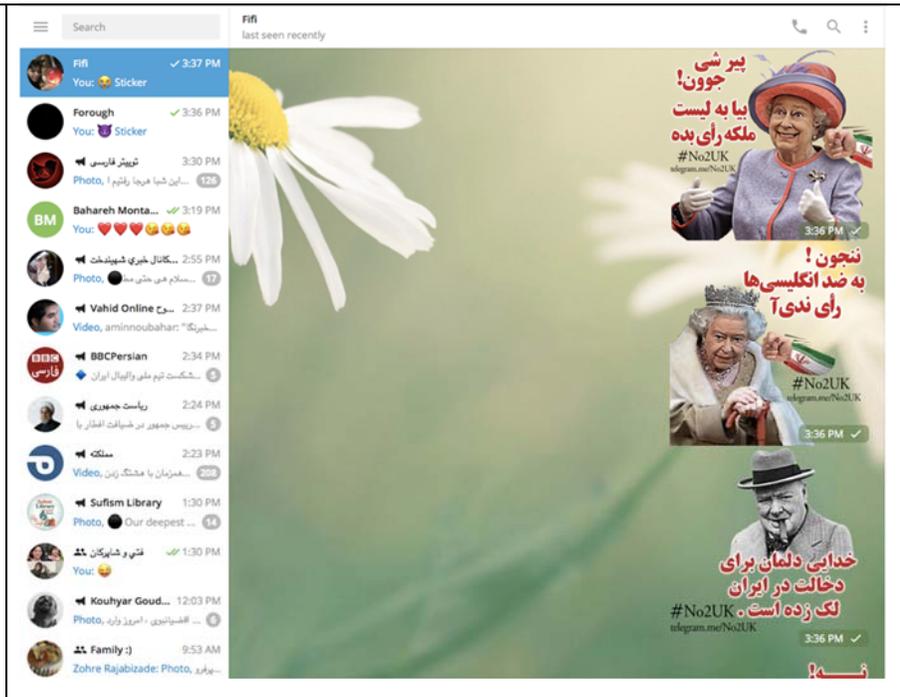
Queen Elizabeth: May you, young fellow, grow older [Pir shi javoon in Farsi, mostly used by elders to thank youth]! Come and vote for the Queen's list!

Sticker Two:

Queen Elizabeth: Kido! Don't you ever dare to vote to anti-British candidates!

Sticker Three:

Winston Churchill: I really miss interfering in Iran!



Sticker Four:

Jack Straw: No!! For God's sake, don't vote to the Revolution supporters!

Sticker Five:

David Cameron: You vote for whom I say! It is obvious from your eyes! [az cheshmat maloom in Farsi, implying "you cannot hide it!"]



Khamenei Stickers

All the italic words are those which are written in the red ink in the Farsi original.

Sticker One:
Khamenei:
When the *enemy* speaks highly of you to make divisions between you, express your hatred instantly.

Sticker Two:
In the *enemy's* political language, *hardliner* is the one who is most *adherent* to the *Revolution*.

***For hardliners, Khamenei's use of enemy has specific connotations. In the context of the 2016 elections, they interpreted it as BBC Persian and consequently, UK.



Appendix C-The Ebi Joke



Ebi on the stage: “Without opening the gift”, [waiting for the audience to answer him back with the second verse]

The Audience [some of the words do not have any meanings]: “Brain and surgeon”, “sent in the evening”, “the beginning of Islam”, “the start season”, “KaperSky”, “Iftar season”, “sent a horse”, “sent it back?1?”, “Feskeresko”, ...

Appendix D: Informants

Almost all the names listed in this table are pseudonyms that I use upon my interviewees' requests to protect their identities. All the interviews are conducted by me in Farsi either in-person or via Skype.

	Interviewee's Name/ Pseudonyms	Year of Birth	Gender	Education	Date of the Interview(s)	Type/Place of the Interview(s)
1	Ahmad	1985	Male	Master	April 30, 2015	In person (informal)/ Tehran
2	Arman	1985	Male	Master	June 20, 2015	In person/ Tehran
3	Asghar	1984	Male	PhD	June 17, 2015	In person/ Tehran
4	Bahar	1986	Female	PhD Student	#1: July 2, 2015 #2: August 9, 2016	Both interviews in person/ Tehran
5	Baran	1986	Female	Master	June 21, 2015	In person/ Tehran
6	Behzad	1986	Male	PhD Student	#1: June 22, 2015 #2: August 14, 2016	Both interviews in-person, Tehran
7	Eli	1986	Female	Master	June 17, 2015	In person, Tehran
8	Fariborz	1984	Male	Master	June 26, 2015	In person/ Kerman
9	Forough	1987	Female	Bachelor	June 11, 2015	In person, Bandar Gaz
10	Fifi	1986	Female	Master	#1: June 26, 2015	#1: In person/ Kerman

					#2,3: March second and third, 2016	#2: Skype
11	Hadis	1986	Female	Master	March 11, 2016	Skype
12	Hana	1983	Female	Master	#1: June 15, 2015 #2: August 10, 2016	Both in-person/Tehran
13	Khale Moshtari	1946	Female	High School Diploma	June 13, 2015	In person/ Bandar Gaz
14	Mahdi	1978	Male	High School Diploma	June 12, 2015	In person/ Bandar Gaz
15	Mandana	1985	Female	PhD Student	June 23, 2015	In person/ Tehran
16	Maral	1989	Female	Master	March 5, 2016	Skype
17	Mari	1994	Female	Master	June 27, 2015	In person/ Kerman
18	Mehran	1988	Male	Bachelor	June 11, 2015	In person/ Bandar Gaz
19	Narges	1986	Female	PhD Student	#1: June 18, 2015 #2: March 6, 2016	#1: In person/ Tehran #2: Skype
20	Nikou	1989	Female	Master	#1: June 23, 2015 #2: August 7, 2016	Both interviews in person/ Tehran
21	Rezvan	1984	Female	Bachelor	June 20, 2015	In person/ Tehran

22	Sajad	1987	Male	Master	June 16, 2015	In person/ Tehran
23	Sharon	1986	Female	PhD Student	July 17, 2015	Skype
24	Shohreh	1995	Female	Master	June 27, 2015	In person/ Kerman
25	Ziba	1991	Female	Master	June 25, 2015	In person/ Kerman

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

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