

One of the most devastating tools against tyranny is humor. Dictators cannot stand being laughed at; they work hard at being feared. On a bitter cold New Year's Eve of 1989, the long-time dictator of Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu, summoned his people to the square below his palace to deliver a speech. The crowd shuffled and seethed with anger over their short rations, lack of fuel, and daily insults while Ceausescu and his nasty wife lived in an obscenely lavish palace. As he continued to rant, someone laughed and was joined by others, until the whole crowd was laughing. The enraged dictator ordered his soldiers to shoot to kill. The soldiers hesitated and then turned their guns on the dictator, arresting him and his wife. The Ceausescus were tried, found guilty, and executed at dawn.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, suffering from drastic overpopulation and an AIDS epidemic, the government had little luck in changing terrible sexual habits, socially taboo to discuss in public. What turned this around was the use of TV soap operas, in which there were characters who not only discussed sex, but talked about contraceptives and safe sex. The public was shocked and then hooked by these new ideas. Their AIDS rate plummeted, and so did their fertility rate.

Using TV soaps has also been very helpful in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, where so many people are still illiterate, but can learn from watching telenovelas (soaps). See National Geographic, September, 2011: "Machisma: How a mix of female empowerment and steamy soap operas helped bring down Brazil's fertility rate and stoke its vibrant economy."

Turkish soaps that show young Muslim married couples who behave entirely differently than couples in oppressive Arab society have been translated and picked up in Egypt and Jordan. Women learn that a husband can be considerate, not just selfish. This is causing plenty of domestic turmoil as women compare what they see with what they have. Saudi clerics are not happy about this, of course.

A group of Iranian Americans have been running a subversively funny comedy show broadcast from Beverly Hills that by chance turned up on Iranian TV (through satellite). Iranian audiences loved it, and their laughter gave the ayatollahs fits. Imagine a comedian playing a cleric with a call-in-show: "Ask the Mullah." His answers to questions were not that different from what an actual mullah would give, but the stupidity of these answers were hilarious and, alas, familiar.

Now it is Afghanistan's turn. Tolo TV in Kabul has produced a wicked comedy called "The Ministry," says David Ignatius (Washington Post). It features an imaginary Ministry of Garbage Collection in the fictitious country of Hechland (Nothing Land). The minister, he says, is a larcenous man in a three-piece suit who presides over a collection of deadbeats, thieves, and petty bureaucrats. Some have relatives in the drug and extortion business---incompetents all, including the bodyguards---but all squeezing money out of the public. In another humorous news show, a mythical political candidate (Pro-Corruption Party) shouts: "Who do we steal from? The People! What do we steal? Money!" Absolutely true. We have a few like that ourselves.

Ignatius says that reform minded journalists and TV producers are some of the smartest and bravest people he knows. Way back in 2008, this same network promoted a program called "Afghan Star" (like American Idol). This show is in its seventh season, delighting audiences, despite the threats of Taliban fanatics. Under the Taliban, singing was forbidden.

The daring Moby Media Group, owners of Tolo TV, are now dubbing "Oprah" into Farsi and "Sesame Street" into Dari. They are also producing a drama series called "Eagle Four," featuring an Afghan anti-terrorism squad. It promotes old-fashioned patriotism, something new for Afghanistan.

This is a country where telling the truth can get you killed. These TV people are doing it anyway. The best thing is that people are finding the power of laughter and mockery themselves. Laughter and story telling are splendid tools for societal change.

668 words

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