

For Muslim comedians in the US, Trump is a mixed blessing

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Comedian Hasan Minhaj has a keen sense of irony, so he was quick to remark on the fact that he, as a Muslim, was chosen to poke fun at US President Donald Trump at a high-profile get-together in Washington.

"No one wanted to do this, so, of course, it falls in the hands of an immigrant," the 31-year-old, who is of Indian descent, said at the White House Correspondents' dinner in Washington last month.

Minhaj and other Muslim comedians in the United States are trying to come to terms with the mixed blessing of a populist president who gives joke writers plenty of material but is seen by many as a dangerous politician who targets minorities and wants to ban Muslims from America.

■ The Muslim Funny Fest, a 3-day comedy festival in New York scheduled for mid-July, is expected to take a tough line.

"Trump is already the worst president in my lifetime," said Dean Obeidallah, a comedian with Palestinian and Italian roots. "Trump used hate to win the White House especially directed against Latinos and Muslims. He's truly a danger to the fabric of our nation," Obeidallah wrote in an e-mail in response to questions.

Political comedy has acquired a sharper edge under Trump. Television comedian Stephen Colbert faced demands to step down after he attacked Trump with a lewd remark during his "Late Show" on the CBS network.

The White House Correspondents' dinner provided another opportunity to crack jokes about the head of state.

"Only in America can a first-generation, Indian-American Muslim kid get on this stage and make fun of the president," Minhaj told the televised event on April 29. He also said he could not resist adding a reference to a political climate marked by a sharp polarisation between supporters and foes of the president. "My name is Hasan Minhaj, or, as I will be known in a few weeks, Number 830287," he said.

With Trump skipping the traditional dinner, the first US president to stay away since the 1980s, Minhaj got plenty of laughs with a joke about the commander-in-chief and his tanned look. "I get why Donald Trump didn't want to be roasted tonight," he said. "By the looks of him, he has been roasting non-stop for the past 70 years."

Conservative commentators accused Minhaj of spreading insults. Ben Stein, an economist speaking on Fox News, a channel that is generally supportive of Trump, criticised the comedian for "throwing up, spitting on, dumping on the president of the United States." Stein called Minhaj a "tenth-grade comedian" who had delivered comments that could be considered defamatory.

Comments on Twitter went further. "Another racist trash Muslim bashing America and white people," read one tweet about Minhaj.

Trump and the controversies he stirs have heightened interest in



Sharper edge. Hasan Minhaj (R) of Comedy Central walks past veteran Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward (C) and Reuters Editor-in-Chief Steve Adler as he takes the lectern to perform at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington.

(Reuters)

comedy. Obeidallah said his show on SiriusXM satellite radio was expanding from one to three hours every weekday and moving to a more popular section. Satirical television shows such as "Saturday Night Live" have also seen a boom.

"There is a reason why 'Saturday Night Live' is seeing its highest ratings in decades and Stephen Colbert's ratings are skyrocketing," Obeidallah wrote. "People are looking to political comedy to learn about issues and for a cathartic release from the stress."

There are also negative side effects to the Trump boom on comedy stages. "I have seen Trump supporters heckle comedians who mock Trump," Obeidallah recounted. "I have not been heckled myself but I can see the anger in the faces of the Trump supporters when I tell jokes about him."

Maysoon Zayid, a comedian of Palestinian descent, said she has felt the change personally. "It is no pic-

nic being a Muslim in America right now," she wrote via e-mail. "The amount of hate I've received online has multiplied exponentially since Trump began his ill-fated run. The Muslim ban is proof he wasn't just spewing bigotry to get elected, he is actually a dangerous bigot."

■ Trump and the controversies he stirs have heightened interest in comedy.

Zayid said her stage routine reflected the changed political atmosphere since Trump's election last November. "The one thing that has changed in my comedy is that I am a lot more angry and a lot more political," she wrote. "I don't feel like telling jokes about my cat while my country is being destroyed."

That feeling is echoed by Zahra Noorbakhsh, a Muslim comedian of Iranian descent who said she and

her colleagues should "illuminate for everyone what is a moment of crisis" instead of trying to reassure non-Muslim Americans with tame jokes.

Writing in the New York Times, Noorbakhsh supported Minhaj's sharp attacks on bigotry at the White House Correspondents' dinner. "The idea that jokes will stop the tide of fear, hate and misunderstanding about people who practise Islam is seductive," she wrote. "As a comedian, though, I'm not convinced. We have tried this before."

The Muslim Funny Fest, a 3-day comedy festival in New York scheduled for mid-July and co-produced by Zayid and Obeidallah, is expected to take a tough line. "Amid a political culture dominated by fear-mongering, xenophobia and rampant racism, some of America's top Muslim stand-up comedians test the limits of free speech," said a statement on the festival's website.

Arab leaders should be wary of bromance with Trump

Viewpoint



Mark Habeeb

When US President Donald Trump travels to Saudi Arabia this month he likely will meet with many regional leaders in addition to Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. The Saudi government has invited heads of state from several Arab and Muslim countries to join him and Trump in the Saudi capital.

Although he has been in office less than four months, Trump already has met with the leaders of Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, as well as with the very influential Saudi deputy crown prince. Each of these meetings was spun as a great success by both parties, with Trump and his guest heaping personal praise on each other.

Trump likes receiving praise – and returning it (as long as he receives it first). Arab leaders, understandably frustrated after eight years of an Obama administration that was intent on pivoting away from the Middle East while lecturing about human rights, are delighted to have a president who talks tough on Iran and has no desire to tell them

how to run their countries.

However, these leaders should be wary of being seen as too close to Trump, too aligned with his world view, whatever that is, and too enamoured of him. My warning to Arab leaders is: Do not be perceived as having a bromance with Trump.

First, remember that if you were not a head of state, this president probably would have tried to have immigration officials deny you a visa to visit the United States because of your religion – a religion that Trump has often disparaged.

Second, while the Trump administration is willing to sell you armaments, it also plans to slash the US foreign aid budget and has no interest in helping build economies or societies in the Middle East. Similarly, Trump talks about pursuing bilateral trade deals but he means those in which the United States comes out on top. Trump is not interested in win-win relationships; he is interested in we-win-you-lose relationships.

Third, no one knows yet where Trump truly stands on any issue, Middle East-related or otherwise. He praises the last person who praised him; he listens to the last person who had his ear; he flips and flops on issues like a fish on land. Consider North Korea, where one day he threatened war and the next he praised that country's leader, Kim Jong-un, as "a smart cookie."

Here is the main reason Arab leaders should be wary of cuddling too closely with Trump: His presidency is in free fall and the odds are growing by the day that he will be ejected from office in the 2020 elections and possibly sooner. Trump's approval rating stood at 36% in the most recent Quinnipiac Poll and 56% of respondents said they disapproved of his job as president. And this poll was conducted before Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, who was investigating the Trump campaign's connections to Russia. Comey's firing has caused outrage not only among Democrats but among many Republican leaders as well.

On the international stage, Trump has embittered Mexico; alienated German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Europe's most powerful leader; saw his favoured French candidate, Marine Le Pen, lose in a landslide; and now must deal with a South Korean president who opposes his stance towards Pyongyang.

David Rothkopf, editor of Foreign Policy, wrote on May 10: "Trump is a laughingstock in the best of circumstances, a disgrace based on his known behaviour to date and a threat to global order and security with each action he takes. He discredits the office he holds and the government he leads."

The Cook Political Report

Trump likes receiving praise – and returning it (as long as he receives it first).

recently increased the odds that Democrats would seize control of both houses of Congress in the 2018 elections. If this happens, expect the impeachment process to begin almost immediately.

Clearly, Arab leaders, like other countries' leaders, must deal with the American president they have, not the one they want and they are right to try to develop a good working relationship with him, to be gracious and cordial in meetings and to seek common understandings on shared issues.

But Arab leaders need to play the long game. The current US president is increasingly unpopular with the American public and hated by Democrats and by most establishment Republicans, even if they do not all say so publicly.

Arab countries need to build institutional relationships with the United States, not only with government agencies, many of whose bureaucrats and experts will stay in place regardless of who is president, but also with the private sector, civil society organisations and educational institutions.

A bromance with a mercurial president may produce short-term benefits but it is not the way to have a relationship with the United States.

Mark Habeeb is East-West editor of The Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University in Washington.

No one knows yet where Trump truly stands on any issue, Middle East-related or otherwise.