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Zellerbach Hall

Berkeley Talks

Co-presented by Cal Performances and UC Berkeley

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Bassem Youssef in Conversation with Chancellor Nicholas B. Dirks

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Cal Performances' 2014-2015 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.

Berkeley Talks is a new series of conversations hosted by UC Berkeley's chancellor, Nicholas B. Dirks, and co-presented by Cal Performances that brings together international thought leaders, public scholars, creators, and innovators to examine the distinctive issues of our time. These luminaries will engage in dialogue at the sometimes surprising nexus between their area of expertise and the University's core mission, celebrating the Chancellor's vision of a vibrant, engaged, and forward-looking campus culture.

Bassem Raafat Muhammad Youssef is a former Egyptian cardiac surgeon, satirist, and columnist, who hosted *Al-Bernameg* ("The Program"), a satirical news program, from 2011 to 2014. The press has compared Dr. Youssef with American comedian Jon Stewart, whose satire program *The Daily Show* inspired Dr. Youssef to begin his career.

Mr. Youssef graduated from Cairo University's Faculty of Medicine, majoring in cardiothoracic surgery, in 1998. He passed the United States Medical License Exam and has been a member of the Royal College of Surgeons since February 2007. He also received training in cardiac and lung transplantation in Germany, after which he spent a year and a half in the United States working for a company that produces medical equipment related to cardiothoracic surgery. In January 2010, Dr. Youssef assisted the wounded in Tahrir Square during the Egyptian Revolution.

Following the 18-day protests of the January 25th revolution, Dr. Youssef teamed up with Tarek El-Kazzaz, Amr Ismail, Mohamed Khalifa, and Mostafa Al-Halawany to create a political satire show commenting on the political events and how the mainstream media presented them. Influenced by Mr. Stewart, host of *The Daily Show* in the United States, Dr. Youssef broadcast his talent from his laundry room, with just a table, a chair, one camera, and a mural of amateur photos from Tahrir Square. Starting with only five minutes per episode, *The B+ Show* (named after his blood type) was uploaded for the first

time on YouTube in May 2011 and gained five million views in only three months. Nine webisodes later, Egyptian channel ONTV offered Dr. Youssef the opportunity to create a weekly political satire television show, accomplishing the first Internet-to-TV conversion in the Middle East. The offer forced Dr. Youssef to choose between television broadcasting and the Pediatric Cardiology Fellowship at Cleveland Clinic in the United States.

Al-Bernameg premiered during Ramadan 2011 and gave voice to the millions of Egyptians who were seething with anger from the traditional media's coverage of the Egyptian Revolution. It became the platform for many writers, artists, and politicians to speak freely about the social and political scene. *Al-Bernameg's* success inspired a number of amateur initiatives on various social media channels, which credit Dr. Youssef as their inspiration. In June 2012, Mr. Stewart invited Dr. Youssef to *The Daily Show* for an extended interview and remarked: "I do know a little something about the humor business. Your show is sharp, you're really good on it, it's smart, it's well executed. I think the world of what you're doing down there." The segment was one of the highest in viewership on *The Daily Show's* website.

For its second season, which premiered in November 2012 on the CBC network, *Al-Bernameg* moved from ONTV's smallest studio to Radio Theatre in Cairo's downtown, becoming the first live-audience show in the Middle East. Following the move, Dr. Youssef succeeded in increasing the show's viewership by eight times in one year. For the season's premiere, Dr. Youssef made the owner and workers of his channel the subject of his show, as an assurance that he is granted full freedom of expression and that no topic was off limits. CBC did not, however, air his second episode, which also featured criticism of a TV-show host who had filed a lawsuit against Dr. Youssef. The show returned to its regular schedule for the third episode.

The show gained tremendous success through its humorous yet bold criticism of

former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, who represented the Muslim Brotherhood. Soon after the show debuted, complaints were filed against Dr. Youssef, accusing him of insulting Islam and the President and disrupting public order and peace. On January 1, 2013, the daily newspaper *Al-masry Al-youm* reported that an Egyptian prosecutor was investigating Dr. Youssef on charges of maligning President Morsi, whose office claimed that Dr. Youssef's show was "circulating false news likely to disturb public peace and public security and affect the administration."

In March 2013, Dr. Youssef began writing a weekly column for *Al-Shorouk*, one of Egypt's most prominent and independent daily newspapers, where he tackled taboo such subjects as atheism and questioning the commonly held view that apostasy from Islam should be punishable by death. On March 30, an arrest warrant was issued for Dr. Youssef for allegedly insulting Islam and President Morsi. The move was seen by opponents as part of an effort to silence dissent against Morsi's government. Dr. Youssef confirmed the arrest warrant on his Twitter account and said he would hand himself in to the prosecutor's office, jokingly adding, "Unless they kindly send a police van today and save me the transportation hassle." The following day, he was questioned by authorities before being released on bail of 15,000 Egyptian pounds.

The event sparked international media attention as well as a segment on *The Daily Show* in which Mr. Stewart declared his support for Dr. Youssef, calling him a "friend" and "brother." A month later Dr. Youssef appeared on *The Daily Show* for the second time, and in June Mr. Stewart visited Cairo and appeared as a guest on *Al-Bernameg*, marking one of the all-time highlights of the show.

In October 2013, after a four-month break, Mr. Youssef reappeared on air with a program that stirred considerable controversy and criticism. The season première marked the first broadcast for the show since the 2013 Egyptian protests had deposed Morsi from the Egyptian presidency. Dr. Youssef criticized both the

Morsi administration and the people's idolization of the Egyptian Defense Minister, Abdul Fatah al-Sisi. In response to the criticism and discontent the program caused, CBC distanced itself from the show and its creators, and decided to stop airing it on its channels. Meanwhile, more than 30 complaints against Dr. Youssef and *Al-Bernameg* were filed at the General Prosecutor's office, accusing him of insulting the Armed Forces, President Adly Mansour, and describing the June 30 revolution as a military *coup*, in addition to disrupting public order and peace. The General Prosecutor has transferred some of the complaints for investigation, which currently remain subject to his decision and judgment.

Al-Bernameg reappeared on MBC Masr satellite channel on February 7, 2014, achieving unprecedented weekly viewership ratings for eleven consecutive weeks. But the program was suspended by MBC during the 2014 Egyptian presidential election campaign, and in June 2014 Dr. Youssef announced that he was ending *Al-Bernameg*, since he felt that the political climate in Egypt made it too dangerous to continue.

Despite the controversy it has sparked, *Al-Bernameg* has been a major success. It is constantly topping the regional YouTube charts, making Dr. Youssef's YouTube channel the most subscribed to in Egypt.

In 2013, Dr. Youssef was named one of the "100 most influential people in the world" by *Time* magazine and one of *Foreign Policy* magazine's 100 Leading Global Thinkers. He was also awarded with the International Press Freedom Award of 2013 from the Committee to Protect Journalists and was announced the most searched figure in 2013 by Google. *Al-Bernameg* was chosen by SXSW, one of the largest international interactive festivals, as the first and most successful Internet-to-TV conversion story in the Middle East. *Al-Bernameg*'s YouTube channel was the first channel in the MENA region to reach one million subscribers and was awarded the Gold Button trophy.

A practicing Muslim, Dr. Youssef lives in Cairo with his wife, an Egyptian Palestinian,

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and their daughter. He continued his work as a cardiothoracic surgeon when *Al-Bernameg* was on hiatus.



Nicholas B. Dirks became the tenth chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, on June 1, 2013. An internationally renowned historian and anthropologist, he is a leader in higher education and well-known for his commitment to and advocacy for accessible, high-quality undergraduate education in the liberal arts and sciences, to the globalization of the university, and to innovation across the disciplines as well as in applied and basic fields.

Before coming to Berkeley, he was the executive vice president for the arts and sciences and dean of the faculty at Columbia University, where, in addition to his work on

behalf of undergraduate programs, he improved and diversified the faculty, putting special emphasis on interdisciplinary and international initiatives. The Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and History, Chancellor Dirks joined Columbia in 1997 as chair of the anthropology department. Prior to his appointment at Columbia, he was a professor of history and anthropology at the University of Michigan for ten years, before which he taught Asian history and civilization at the California Institute of Technology.

Chancellor Dirks has held numerous fellowships and scholarships and received several scholarly honors, including a MacArthur Foundation residential fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Lionel Trilling Award for his book *Castes of Mind*. He serves on numerous national and international bodies, as adviser or member of the board, and is a Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.