

# Signs of Trouble: Egypt's 2010 Media Crackdown

By Mervat Diab\*

Before thousands took to the streets of Cairo in early 2011 in historic protests that slowly but surely forced Egypt's three-decade ruler out of power and shook politics in the Middle East, the tension between the government and the media had reached new levels.

The debate over whether President Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal should succeed him intensified as the elections of the upper and lower houses of Parliament neared and Mubarak's regime fiercely cracked down on privately owned media outlets to stop the discussion.

Not even sports reporters were safe. One striking example of the increasing tension between the government and the media took place in the aftermath of a football match between Egypt's Ahly Club and Tunisia's Al-Taragy club, which ended in a riot when the defeated Tunisian fans stormed into the stands, tore down flags and battled with security officers.

Alaa Sadeq, a sports commentator, publicly and harshly criticized the stadium security arrangements and the conduct of law enforcement officials that day, wondering if the tight security grip usually maintained by the Ministry of Interior Affairs had been "on leave."

In response to Sadeq's remarks, Ans Al-Fiqi, then-Minister of Information, issued a decree that banned Sadeq's two sports programs that aired on Nile-Sate, a station under the ministry's jurisdiction. The decree specifically stated that Sadeq is not "to be seen or heard throughout Nile-Sate networks."

## The First Signs of Trouble

But Egypt's censorship problems run much deeper than disputes over security at a football match. For over a year, both government and privately owned media outlets had engaged in fierce debates about whether Gamal Mubarak is truly the legitimate successor to his father, President Mubarak; the constitutional issues surrounding Mubarak's succession; and the influence of the businessmen who dominate the Cabinet.

The situation started to intensify in early 2010 when Ibrahim Issa, former editor of *The Constitution (Al-Dustour)*, was sacked by the company, even though he was the founder and the leader of the

popular newspaper. In response to his dismissal, 150 of The Constitution's journalists went on strike.

A couple of weeks earlier, Issa had been banned from presenting a TV show on ONTV network, which is owned by Nageeb Saweeris, who also owns one of the three major mobile telecommunication corporations in Egypt. Issa and The Constitution openly opposed the planned succession.

Cairo Today (*Al Qahera Al Yum*), a talk show presented by Amr Adeeb, was the second TV show to be banned. In this case, the official reason given by authorities was "financial dues" (it was late paying rent to the state-run Nile Sat studios). The program, aired by Orbit Network through Nil-Sat studios in Egypt, criticized Gamal Mubarak's semi-official media coverage, calling it, among other things, "hypocritical." The context in which the ban took place created little doubt that the accusation regarding financial dues was only pretext for silencing the program.

The crackdown continued. More than 15 minor and less politically oriented TV channels that were aired through the government-sponsored Nile-Sat were later banned over financial dues. This move was seen by many as a cover-up for the real reason for closing down the major talk shows: Silence any doubts the public could possibly have about Mubarak's succession.

The government went on to also shut down three popular TV talk shows. TV cameras and print-media reporters were denied access to major court trials by the Judicial Higher Council and even cell phone messages promoting election candidates were censored.

Additionally, the future of the 150 striking Constitution journalists, among other issues, was to be decided by the government-controlled Journalists Union and the court (the reporters sued the owners), while private TV networks operating through the government-owned Nile-Sat required special permission to broadcast any live program.

The tense relationship between the government and the media was exacerbated by the tight control held by the country's security apparatus, said Osama Ghazaly Harb, head of the Democratic Front Party, and editor of the International Foreign Affairs Magazine at the semi-official Ahram Foundation. Since the 1950s, Harb says, the state and the national security apparatus have kept a close eye on the government-sponsored media and are now closely watching the more recently created, privately-owned media, especially the TV networks.

One Government, Two Factions

The parliamentary elections and the debate about the succession highlight the source of the friction. In this light, according to Harb, media entities in Egypt were caught between two major government factions.

The new, and younger, faction supported Gamal Mubarak for the presidential election, scheduled to take place in early 2011. This faction provided a platform that was open to the privately owned media debating the peaceful exchange of power. In opposition, the old guard wanted to maintain the status quo and keep Hosni Mubarak, Gamal Mubarak's father, in power for a sixth term. They believed that free speech and open debate has negatively affected the regime's image, both internally and externally.

The chaotic situation experienced by journalists in private, partisan and semi-official print and TV media outlets reflect the chaos that is taking place in the ongoing political scene. Trapped between the two government factions, the local media tried hard to appeal to the people with reports on corruption, poverty and the ailing educational and health service systems. Issues of election fraud, succession, and corruption of big businessmen who are close to the government were reported and discussed by both the private and partisan media.

Harb believes that the security apparatus usually served both government factions so when the media crossed toward either side, the government flexed its muscles to bring both parties back into line.

One casualty of this debate was the privately owned media, also known in Egypt as the independent media. In fact, in the 2010 election year, the independent media proved itself to be utterly dependent.

#### The Role of Media Owners in the Crackdown

Not only was 2010 a year of discord, but it was also the beginning of a "collaboration between dirty money and the regime, with the goal of putting an end to free private media," Gamal Fahmy, board member of the Egypt Journalists Union (EJU) said in his comments regarding the sacking of Ibrahim Issa.

The "dirty money" Fahmy refers to relates to the attitude that some media owners have been taking. The two new owners of The Constitution, who sacked Issa, had also agreed to special terms in order to maintain the editorial control of the paper. Sayed Badawy, who heads the liberal opposition party, the Delegation (*Al-Wafd*), was one of them and he shocked the media community with his approval of Issa's dismissal.

The other owner, Reda Edward, a well-known businessman, took over Badawy's shares to become the sole owner of the newspaper, which was already being published with a new team of journalists whose reports reflected pro-government positions.

The main purpose in banning talk shows and changing the editorial policies of private newspapers in such a dramatic way, as many journalists have said, is to stop the ongoing debate about parliamentary election fraud and the presidential succession. According to Ahmed Abdel-Tawab, head of the Ahram Foundation Media Agency, privately owned media have been the only outlet for the opposition that is capable of promoting opposition views on transfer of power through elections, a process that has been traditionally marred by fraud. Until the crackdown, the private media was able to strike a balance by presenting both the government and the opposition views on these issues.

Abdel Mohsen Salama, deputy head of the EJU, thinks the government was using a kind of "soft power" to exercise pressure on private media outlets. He points to restrictions on press freedom and laments the lack of clear-cut rules concerning the relationship between the owners of private media and journalists. Privately owned media personnel had been acting as spokespersons for businessmen and thus journalists were involved in unprofessional relationships, he said.

Throughout the growing discord, many journalists are concerned that they might be fired, sidelined or banned from publishing their articles. Many TV talk-show hosts are worried that they might be dismissed for making the slightest reference to the elections or the succession. As a result, they maintain a very low profile when it comes to political issues. The major talk shows have been presenting programs on health, environment and social issues, instead of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

### Dissent Equals Rebellion

The government's actions don't stop with attacking the media organizations. They also go after individual reporters. For example, blogger Karim Amer, accused of atheism and jailed for four years, remains in prison. Another example is the then-Minister of Finance, Yousuf Boutrus Ghaly, who referred Wael Ibrashy, the chief editor of Sawt Al Omma, a private media outlet, to court to be tried under criminal law because of his campaign against a new mortgage tax.

In defense of Ibrashy's prosecution, Ghaly, who was also Deputy Prime Minister, said the campaign tried to get the public against the new tax and called it something close to "civil disobedience." Although the new mortgage tax has yet to be even endorsed by the new Parliament, the editor will be tried in Egypt under an infamous criminal law that is usually applied only to radical Islamic

groups accused of attempting to overthrow the government. The term criminalizes any acts that encourage the public to take action to destabilize the regime.

Ibrashy said the editorials asked Egyptians to not file their mortgage reports for the new tax, an action that he described as unconstitutional. Ghaly said the newspaper's counter-campaign negated the impact of an expensive campaign launched by his ministry to convince the public that the new tax was necessary.

As the February 2011 crisis later proved, the security officials might have had the right instincts in 2010 when they feared signs of increasing regime destabilization or "civil disobedience," but it wasn't coming only from the media. Thousands of Egyptians put an end to the debate and no Mubarak, neither father nor son, would continue in power.

Now, along with the opportunity of building a real democracy, comes the opportunity for the Egyptian media to become a truly free independent actor for the first time in a very long time.

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