

After Mubarak, Fighting For Press Freedom in Egypt

Wednesday 22 June 2011, by [KOUDDOUS Sharif Abdel](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2011).

Under Mubarak, state-owned media was a propaganda arm of the government, parroting party dogma while dismissing public criticism and political opposition. During the eighteen-day uprising that toppled him, state TV tried to downplay the size of the demonstrations, depicting protesters as funded, inspired or infiltrated by foreign elements ranging from Israel to Iran to Al Qaeda.

Television is by far the most important medium in Egypt. A recent public opinion survey by the International Republican Institute found that 84 percent of the population relied on TV as their main source of information during the revolution. While state TV acted as a government mouthpiece, under Mubarak, licenses for private-owned satellite TV stations were reserved for rich businessmen with varying degrees of closeness to his regime. Private channels were closely monitored by the State Security Investigations branch of the Interior Ministry.

The struggle for greater openness in the media under Mubarak came at a high cost. Outspoken journalists and bloggers were arrested, prosecuted and harassed for reporting on controversial issues. Police and plainclothes thugs beat and detained reporters, confiscating and destroying video footage and notes. Prison sentences were imposed on members of the independent media, including newspaper editors and reporters. Elements of the state security apparatus may have even posed as journalists to monitor civil society and opposition activists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

After Mubarak's ouster, the struggle for press freedom is far from over.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which have been ruling Egypt since Mubarak stepped down, have actively clamped down on press freedom since taking charge of the country. For decades, the army was a taboo subject in Egyptian media. Laws dating back to the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser prevent local journalists from reporting anything about the military without permission. This ban became difficult to enforce during the revolution, with soldiers in the streets and daily debates about the army's role and its handling of the country, but the Supreme Council has sought to reinforce the restrictions. In late March the Morale Affairs Directorate of the Egyptian Military sent a letter to editors of Egyptian publications demanding they obtain approval for all mentions of the armed forces before publication, including "any topics, news, statements, complaints, advertisements, pictures pertaining to the Armed Forces or to commanders of the Armed Forces." The Committee to Protect Journalists described it as "the single worst setback for press freedom in Egypt since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak."

Over the past four months, several journalists have been brought before the military prosecutor for interrogation after reporting on the army. In the most recent case, on June 19, Rasha Azab, a journalist with the newspaper Al Fajr, was summoned to the military prosecutor along with the newspaper's editor in chief, Adel Hammouda. Azab was accused of "publishing false information with the potential to cause public disorder" after she penned an article detailing a meeting between the Supreme Council and activists campaigning against the widespread use of military trials against civilians. After a few hours of interrogation, she was released without bail, but she still faces a

possible prison sentence or fine. This came on the heels of the case of Hossam El-Hamalawy, a prominent Egyptian blogger and activist, who was summoned to the military prosecutor on May 30, along with TV presenter Reem Maged, after the head of military police, General Hamdi Badeen, filed a complaint about El-Hamalawy's comments on the private OnTV channel, in which he criticized abusive military police practices and held Badeen responsible for the torture of activists.

In the most serious case, a military court in April sentenced blogger Maikel Nabil Sanad to three years in prison for "insulting the military" after he wrote an article criticizing the army for not being transparent in its decision-making.

State-run media is also continuing to censor dissident voices. Last week, potential presidential candidate Mohamed ElBaradei said he was barred from a popular show hosted by Islamic preacher Amr Khaled and broadcast on Egyptian state TV. The Nobel Peace laureate and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency was effectively banned from appearing on local television channels while Mubarak was in power; upon his return to Egypt in February 2010 after many years abroad, ElBaradei emerged as a leading reform advocate.

"Policy of censure and vilification continues," ElBaradei wrote from his Twitter account after his appearance on state TV was cancelled. In response, ElBaradei's supporters set up a Facebook page calling for a protest at the Egyptian Radio and TV Union headquarters, known locally as 'Maspero.'

The pressure appears to have worked. Later that day, ElBaradei announced state TV had rescinded its decision and would allow him on. "I'm grateful to the youth who sent a strong message to Egyptian Television, which is financed by the people, that a revolution has taken place and freedom of expression is guaranteed for everyone," he said.

ElBaradei isn't the first presidential candidate to clash with state-run TV. Bothaina Kamel, a newscaster turned activist, is described as the first woman to run for president in Egypt's history (some dispute this, pointing to the feminist and writer Nawaal El Saadawi putting her name forward for candidacy in 2005). In May, Kamel appeared on the state-run Nile Culture TV to speak about clashes in Imbaba, in which two churches were set ablaze, fifteen people were killed and over 240 injured. Midway through the live interview, management cut her off the air.

Kamel has also been kept from hosting her own TV program on the Saudi-owned Orbit network. According to the *New York Times*: "When she chose to do a program, following the revolution, on Hosni Mubarak's hidden billions, station executives, expecting Saudi Arabia's alleged role in transferring the fortune would come up, informed her a half hour before airtime that the show was not going to be broadcast. Her program has been in reruns ever since."

Despite the crackdown, there is a burgeoning movement for press freedom in Egypt. Many of the revolutionary youth who helped lead the eighteen-day uprising are looking to create new, independent outlets in the post-Mubarak media landscape. The publication *El Gornal* recently printed its second issue, intentionally breaking Egyptian law prohibiting publishing newspapers without official permission. An independent media center called Mosireen (Arabic for "We insist") has opened its offices in downtown Cairo, advocating for citizen journalism—so ubiquitous during the uprising, with protesters using cell phone cameras to document the revolution—and providing services like media training, camera rentals, filming workshops and editing booths. Historian Khaled Fahmy is leading efforts to create a digital, accessible archive of the revolution in collaboration with Egypt's National Archives. A new Egyptian Journalists' Independent Syndicate has been established with the aim of defending the rights of journalists. Media advocates are also looking to reform the laws and regulations governing the traditional spaces for television and radio, to redraw the media landscape in Egypt.

"Truly independent media is going to be the only guarantee that we can really build a democratic society," says Hossam Bahgat, executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. "When it comes to women's rights and gender equality, when it come to the rights of religious minorities and the exercise of freedom of religion and when it come to social liberties and personal freedoms. We have to ensure that the media is a part of the struggle to democratize our society in parallel to our efforts to democratize the government." In this critical transitional phase in Egypt's history, the battle for freedom of the media is just beginning.

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* From The Nation, June 20, 2011:

<http://www.thenation.com/article/161555/after-mubarak-fighting-press-freedom-egypt?rel=emailNation>

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