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Media Freedoms in Egypt

Despite hopes that Egypt would witness an era of greater respect for fundamental rights and freedoms following the fall of Mubarak in 2011, the Egyptian authorities continue to use the same methods – and even develop new strategies – to silence media. Moreover, non-state actors have joined the ranks of those who threaten freedom of expression, with no attempts to stop this made by the presidency and ruling party. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) categorically condemns these violations and affirms that freedom of expression is unequivocally critical for democracy, as without the ability to express diverse views and to be well-informed by an independent press, citizen participation – the essence of democracy – is utterly undermined.

Legal Harassment

As under Mubarak, legal charges continue to be used to intimidate journalists and media outlets. According to Gamal Fahmy, deputy chairman of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate, over 600 cases have been brought against journalists in Egypt since Morsi assumed the presidency, most based on charges of “insulting the president” and filed either by the presidency itself or by supporters of the ruling party. Notably, more cases have been brought against journalists in the last ten months than in all 30 years of Mubarak’s presidency.

One complaint filed¹ against Dream, CBC, Annahar, Al-Qahera wa An-Ness, and MBC Masr television channels by Sheikh Yousef al-Badry called for the channels to be prohibited from broadcasting and for prominent figures and media professionals Wael al-Ibrashy, Mahmoud Saad, Bassem Yousef, Lamees al-Hadidi, Amr Adib, Ibrahim Eisa, Yousef al-Husseini, and Hani Ramzi to be banned from appearing on television, due to their having “insulted the president.”

In addition to journalists and other media figures, editors-in-chief of major Egyptian newspapers – most known for their critical stances against the current ruling party – have also been targeted. On 1 January 2013, a complaint was filed² against Magdy al-Galad, editor-in-chief of *Al-Watan* newspaper, political

¹ Case no. 20100 of judicial year 67, postponed until 18 May 2013.

² Complaint no. 19/2013; see http://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/107544#.UOWF_XV4BZw.twitter

activist Mahmoud Abdelrahman Abdelgalil, and Mohamed al-Amin, president of *Al-Watan*'s board of directors, for "insulting the president." The complainant called for the paper to be shut down for having "contributed to the collapse of the economy by publishing false news" and "defamatory pictures" of the president.

On 2 January, the complaint filed³ against Abdelhalim Qandil, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Sawt al-Omma*, for "defamation of the president" was referred for investigation. The case came after the paper published an issue with the headline: "100 Days of Lies, Morsi"; Qandil wrote an article in the same issue criticizing Morsi's policies.

On 10 January, Khaled Salah, the editor-in-chief of *Al-Youm Al-Saba* newspaper and journalist Alaa al-Shafa'i were summoned for questioning following a complaint filed by the presidency after the paper published an article by al-Shafa'i criticizing the violence used by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) against opposition protestors at the Ittihadeyya presidential palace and describing the president's subsequent speech as defending this violence.

Other charges are also used to target media. On 2 February, television host Dina Abdelfattah and the editor of her program, Kheiri Hussein, were summoned for questioning on charges of "spreading propaganda for a terrorist group" after "Black Block" members appeared on Abdelfattah's show.⁴

Multiple complaints have been filed against Bassem Yousef, the presenter of a satirical satellite TV show, including for mocking the president and defaming Islam.⁵ A stand up comedian* was also called for questioning based on charges of defaming Islam⁶ when he appeared on Yousef's show.

On 2 April, MB lawyers filed complaints against Shaimaa Abul-Kheir, advisor to the Committee to Protect Journalists in Cairo, and Gaber al-Qarmoty, renowned television personality,* based on charges of "threatening national security" and "insulting the judiciary" after Abul-Kheir commented on the investigation of Bassem Yousef.⁷

Finally, state-owned media has also faced similar attacks for criticizing the new authorities since Morsi took power. Intisar al-Ghareeb was dismissed and referred for investigation after hosting a political activist on her program on

³ Complaint no. 3703/2012; see <http://is.gd/pjIu5O>

⁴ Complaint no. 1574/2013; see <http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=10022013&id=ebc04609-a22e-416b-ba55-41f6bfd02c3>

⁵ See <http://www.afteegypt.org/pressrelease/2013/01/03/796-afteegypt.html>; <http://is.gd/zWrrXx>

⁶ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8bIHVOUPAXs

* This information has been corrected since original submission.

⁷ See <http://cpj.org/ar/2013/04/021503.php>

state-owned Youth and Sports Radio who criticized the “fascist” new regime and condemned the Ittihadeyya clashes.⁸

Security / Military Interference

Another pattern that has continued from the Mubarak era is the security apparatus’s blocking of free expression. In March 2013, the film “The Jews of Egypt” was banned from being shown because the security apparatus objected to its title and content.⁹

Similarly, military trials continue to be used against journalists, as with Reuters journalist Mohamed Sabry, who was arrested on 4 January 2013 and referred to a military court¹⁰ on charges of “being present in a military zone which civilians are prohibited from entering” and of “taking pictures of places which are forbidden to approach or photograph.”

Physical Assault

In addition to continued Mubarak-era policies, a new trend of physical attacks of journalists has emerged. CIHRS firmly asserts that journalists should never be targeted for covering events, no matter what their views or affiliations, as their professional role is essential to enabling citizens to participate in political life in an informed manner. Moreover, it is the state’s responsibility to ensure that journalists are able to carry out their professional duties safely.

In contrast, statements made by the authorities, including the president, have included direct threats and claims that the media is responsible for fabricating or exacerbating the problems in Egypt¹¹. On 23 March, Essam al-Arian, vice-president of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), stated about several media outlets: “I am preparing a surprise for you... which will make everyone in the media know his limits.”¹² Moreover, statements amounting to verbal harassment were made by the minister of information in response to female journalists who asked him about protections for the media.¹³ Such stances not only reflect a blatant disrespect for freedom of expression but implicitly give license to both security forces and supporters of the FJP to attack journalists and media establishments.

⁸ See <http://www.anhri.net/?p=68017>

⁹ See <http://www.anhri.net/?p=72716>

¹⁰ Misdemeanor 3/2013; see <http://www.cihrs.org/?p=5799&lang=en>

¹¹ See President Morsi’s speech of 23 March 2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wx57Xssdyhg>

¹² See www.elwatannews.com/news/details/152814

¹³ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0w3O0MgKlk>

Attacks by Security Forces

On 2 March, security forces raided the offices of local media group “Wilad al-Bilad,” destroying equipment and severely beating those present. The executive editor of Wilad al-Bilad in Mansoura was also attacked by security forces and dragged through the street until he lost consciousness.¹⁴

On 9 March, Mohamed Saad, a photographer with the online newspaper *Al-Badeel*, and Sabri Kamel, a photographer with the rights-related website “hoqook.com”, were among the journalists attacked by police while covering clashes near Qasr al-Nil Bridge. They were beaten and insulted by police, who destroyed or stole their equipment. Saad was held in a security vehicle for five hours;¹⁵ Kamel sustained injuries to his head and face and bruises all over his body.¹⁶

Attacks by Non-State Actors

Particularly during Friday protests, non-state actors have also attacked journalists based on their affiliations, i.e. supporters of the ruling party attacking journalists affiliated to critical news sources and vice-versa. Such attacks became extremely clear during the clashes which took place at the Ittihadeyya presidential palace in December 2012, when Al-Husseini Abul-Dheif, a journalist with al-Fagr newspaper, was killed by a bullet to the head.¹⁷

Similarly, numerous journalists covering the clashes at the MB headquarters in Moqattam on 16 March 2013 were also targeted by unknown assailants. Mohamed Mukhtar, one of the team from the channel *Russia Today* which was covering the events, sustained injuries to his head and his camera was broken. Amr Addib, editor of the online forum *Veto*, and Ahmed Ghanim, journalist with *Al-Watan*, were beaten, and *Al-Watan* photographers Amr Diab and Mohamed Nabil were beaten with iron rods, leading to a broken bone in Nabil’s foot.

During these clashes, Mahmoud Shaban Biyomi, the editor of *Al-Watan*, was also attacked by the bodyguard of Kheirat al-Shater, deputy supreme guide of the MB, as he was covering the events. In addition, MB members beat and cursed Mohamed Talaat Dawood, journalist with *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, until he lost consciousness, after he attempted to interview those who were organizing the painting of graffiti in front of the MB headquarters.

¹⁴ See <http://www.cihrs.org/?p=6056>

¹⁵ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUg00uOducs&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁶ See <http://is.gd/RIPc0N>

¹⁷ See CIHRS’ report on the Ittihadeyya events: <http://www.cihrs.org/?p=5361&lang=en>

At later clashes in the same place on 22 March, journalists Mostafa al-Khatib and Tarek Salama of the Freedom and Justice paper were also subjected to violent attacks.

In all cases, the security forces did nothing to prevent or stop attacks on journalists.

Threats and Abduction

Further worrying is that the situation is clearly escalating: What began as destruction of equipment and attacks during coverage of protests has now intensified to include death threats and abductions.

On 20 March, Mona Madkour, a journalist with *Al-Watan* newspaper, received several death threats and threats of disfigurement from having acid thrown on her. These threats followed an interview she conducted with Sherif al-Baheiri, the only eye-witness of the killing of political activist Mohamed al-Guindi.

Similar threats were chanted by the supporters of the ruling party who have blockaded Media Production City three times since Morsi became president. They further kept workers from entering and physically assaulted several media figures, including Riham al-Sahali and Hussein Abdelghani.¹⁸

The intimidation of journalists in Egypt has culminated in the abduction of several media figures, including Mohamed al-Masry, the administrator of the *Geil Al-Tagheer* webpage, whose fate remains disputed to this day. Abdo Abbas, a sports announcer on Egyptian television, was also abducted and disappeared for several days before being found dead in his apartment.¹⁹

¹⁸ See President Morsi's response here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIPibCF711c>

¹⁹ See interviews with friends and colleagues of Abdo Abbas here: <http://today.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=372067>