

EGYPTIAN PRESS AND THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY: A STUDY OF THE CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES FACING NATIONAL PRINT MEDIA POST THE JANUARY 25TH 2011 REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

National press in Egypt has long been restricted and manipulated by the regime. For more than three decades it was the regime's mouthpiece. Paradoxically, the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011; which was supposed to bring freedom to all institutions, mired the Egyptian press resulting in its regression rather than progression. The press had begun facing a series of political and financial problems even before the January 25th 2011 Revolution due to declining leadership and advertising revenue. After February 11, 2011, with protestors jamming Tahrir Square, the induced democracy soon got stalled. Notably, all internal pressures for change were stifled. Political and legal challenges remained to be imposed on media professionals. Journalists systematically faced legal and financial pressures and other forms of intimidation hindering them from fulfilling their role in the democratization process. Indeed, a democratic state can't be built without a vibrant and independent media. (1) Surmountable causes can be linked to why the process of democratization in Egypt has been slow and retrograde, nevertheless. The question is: How can we possibly turn the Egyptian press into an independent institution whose main concern is to serve the people through providing information with accuracy and transparency? And whether there is a specific model that we can emulate to develop the Egyptian national press.

KEYWORDS: Press, Democratizing the Media, Egypt's Press, Mass Media

INTRODUCTION

National press in Egypt had long been undergoing a state of transition. It is called 'transitional' because the system is debatable and seems to be unsettled. In fact, it contains elements that favor government control besides elements that prefer freedom of expression. There are some newspapers that are owned by the government and are; thus, called 'national newspapers' like Al-Ahram, most prestigious and oldest newspaper catering the elite segment, which tends to influence public debate. Other newspapers are either owned by independent private sectors or by political parties. Paradoxically, we call the Egyptian system "transitional" but it is not clear which way it is going or that it is in transition to a different type of system that will stabilize and stay for years to come.

Despite claims after the January 25th 2011 Revolution that Egypt is in transition to democracy, the fact remains that there are still obstacles that impede the process starting from the drafting of a new constitution defining and protecting the right to freedom of expression, freedom of information and the exact role of the press.

Traditionally, the Egyptian government had not hesitated to use its economic power over print media. Eventually, such system had brought journalists to court, sent them to jail and fined them. Hence, the government got accustomed to exercising its influence through various ways starting with press ownership, censorship, litigation, economic pressure to selecting editors-in-chief of the national press.

The fact that the press constitutes the fourth branch of government and the pertinent role it ought to play, especially post the January 25th 2011 Revolution, this paper tries to tackle how freedom is constituted in Egypt, the conditions and challenges facing national print media and what might be done to safeguard its freedom. Researcher aims to examine few press models that Egypt may embrace to hasten its transition to democracy.

Ownership

Ever since President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1953 – 1970) nationalized the press in 1960, major Egyptian newspapers fell under total government control; hence, turning journalists into civil servants. Then the following presidents followed suit. It was late President Anwar El Sadat (1970 – 1981) who allowed the establishment of three opposition parties having their own newspapers and, accordingly, expressing their views. “Wanting to conceal the fact that the state directly owned the newspapers – fearing for his image in front of his new American friends – Sadat created a second House of Parliament, or the Shura Council, and it was tasked with ownership and administration of the affairs of the ‘national press’.” (2) Eventually, national press is owned by the Supreme Press Council (SPC) and the Shura (Consultative) Council. Notably, SPC has the right to issue licenses for all press including independent papers. (3) And since both councils are controlled by the regime’s political party, the president has the ability to appoint newspapers’ editors-in-chief.

The Egyptian Constitution allows newspaper ownership by public or private political parties or corporate legal entities. Article 22, Law on Press Authority, posits that “national press establishments shall be considered the property of the state and the Shura Council shall exercise ownership rights over national press establishments.” (4) Hence, this Article gives the right to the Shura Council to establish more press establishments. (Thus national newspapers are not truly ‘national’ as the law does not grant them full independence of the executive authority and all political parties. Likewise, editors become dependent.) Article 23, Law on Press Authority, stipulates “the relationship between national press establishments and all their employees, including journalists, administrative staff, and laborers shall be governed by individual employment contracts. Employees of national press establishments may, where in the interest of work, be transferred from one establishment to another by decree of the SPC.” (5)

Censorship

The first law defining the functions of the Censorship Bureau was issued in 1975. Accordingly, the Egyptian government can affect the content of the print media indirectly, or by persuasion. Moreover, journalists themselves do practice self-censorship, mindful of their paymasters, knowing that repercussions for what they publish may cost them a dear price. This goes for national and independent press alike.

There are provisions in the law that can restrict these publications on grounds that they are disrupting social peace. There are ‘taboo’ areas or ‘red lines’ where newspapers cannot, under any circumstances, venture. Evidently, newspapers are not allowed to criticize or attack or insult the country’s president, the armed forces or security-related information. Otherwise, such criticism invites the government’s strong reaction resulting in trying journalists and their newspapers as well. According to Egypt’s penal code, journalists can be fined or jailed if they cross the ‘red lines’. A famous case of state bullying freedom of expression is the independent Al-Dostour Editor Ibrahim Eissa’s who was sentenced to jail, subject to appeal, as he dared to touch a taboo when he wrote about the ailing health of Mubarak back in 2007(6) The same newspaper’s editor-in-chief Islam Afifi was also jailed years later, despite President Mohamed Morsi’s declaration on August 21, 2012 to penalize journalists instead of the jailing sentence.

Litigation

Notably, the Egyptian government exercises influence over all print media through several means. It can license newspapers or shut them down for what they print. It can impose fines on newspapers and journalists alike. It can arrest journalists and/or ban them from travelling abroad. And to further control and restrict the formation of new political parties or any dissenting press, the Egyptian government had used various laws such as the Emergency Law (1967) – until recently – and Antiterrorism Law (1992).

Between 1996 and 1999, the public prosecutor referred 175 journalism cases to court. “The law gives the public prosecutor power to ban publication of news related to a case involving national security.” (7) The Egyptian Penal Code still contains a chapter with thirty-nine articles on “Crimes of the Press.” And to add insult to injury, a 2006 Law was passed creating the offense of insulting a foreign head of state. Eventually relations between the press and the state deteriorated and reached their lowest levels in 2007 under the same old rhetoric: “Egypt must be united. The national interest is supreme. Excesses of free speech endanger national stability.” (8)

Economic Pressure

National media is owned by the government; unlike independent or private media which depends financially on advertising and subscription. The government has the power to exercise economic pressure on newspapers and journalists. Its subsidies are granted; thus, forcing opposition newspapers with limited financial means to certainly be dependent. The government also controls publishing houses including those of the opposition. Noteworthy, the government exercises import restrictions of print media published outside Egypt on grounds of protecting public order. Article 24, Law on Press Authority, posits that “the SPC shall issue resolutions and guidelines regulating the administration, development of annual budget, and profit distribution method of the press establishments.” (9)

Selection of Editors-in-Chief

Selection of editors-in-chief falls under the jurisdiction of the Shura Council by an official decree since 1970. Government officials from time to time instruct and guide journalists to portray certain issues in the media the way they would like major issues to be promoted. On occasion, there are strong ties between the government and editors. The most famous example would be that staunch relationship between Egyptian President Nasser and Al-Ahram Editor-in-chief Mohamed Hassanein Heikal who was Nasser’s confidante and the most influential journalist during the ‘50s and ‘60s.

According to Article 32, Law on Press Authority, in each national newspaper, “an editorial board shall be constituted of 5 members at least under the chair of the editor-in-chief selected by the Shura Council (...) The editorial board membership term shall be three renewable years.” (10)

Significantly, this researcher attempts to delve into the impact of this coercive and manipulative system on the content of the press post the January 25th 2011 Revolution by examining the conditions and challenges facing national print media, what might be done to safeguard its freedom and most importantly, what model should Egypt adopt to hasten its transition to democracy?

Toppling the Regime

When people took to the streets heading to Tahrir Square demanding to topple the regime, the state-run media was

unable to grasp the magnitude of the event, it only covered beneath the regime that bred it and; hence, covered the events in a biased and distorted manner that was expected of it. But then it went into a panic when Mubarak was forced to step down. It did not know how to react momentarily. Accordingly, the national press resorted to its traditional role of denial of any disturbances and played on the notion of threat of chaos if such acts continued. It even pointed to foreign elements and doubted a conspiracy theory in the making. As the regime further crumbled, the national press dashed in several directions immediately, pointing fingers at protesters one day and signaling some distance with the failing regime the next.

Mubarak's ouster placed the national press in a difficult position; nevertheless, forcing it to explain what had happened and why the change of disposition. Meanwhile, the stunning growth of social media or online journalism and blogs (introduced in the early 1990s in Egypt); known as "Citizen Journalism", seemed to call attention to its massive power by tackling issues that were considered taboo. They seemed to be the agenda setters by choosing intricate issues that needed to be addressed like torture and human rights abuses that spread in Egypt.

Temporarily, the national press chose to ignore the call for demonstrations that was organized by Facebook groups whose numbers ranged to thousands opposing police brutality. Instead, national press only reported news about protests carried out by workers demanding better working conditions and salaries. Ironically, on January 26th, 2011, Al Ahram tackled protests in Lebanon in its headline banner main position and placed protests in Egypt in a side location. It focused; however, on the killing of a security officer without revealing the reason behind his death which was due to being pushed and stepped on by his colleagues during the demonstrations. Additionally, all three main national newspapers, Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar and Al-Gomhouria rather insinuated at various instances that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was behind those protests.

As events escalated on January 28th, 2011, all such national press reported that counter demonstrations amounting to millions marched in support of President Mubarak despite the fact that their number didn't exceed thousands of workers in petroleum companies owned by businessmen who financed them to buy their allegiance to Mubarak's regime. Moreover, on February 3rd these papers totally neglected how the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) co-opted thugs to disseminate demonstrators by any means; an infamous act that came to be known as the "the Battle of the Camel".

After toppling Mubarak's regime on February 11, these newspapers started to disclose government corruption and that of the president and his family. Eventually, editors-in-chief switched their stance and played a different tune in an attempt to contain the protests by declaring that the youths' demonstrators have economic and social demands that need to be realized. Such demonstrators' power could not have been ignored any further by the national press that began to lose their readership in terms of credibility and circulation. Finally, with Mubarak's stepping down, the national press realized that they were standing alone against the society; hence, Al-Ahram; per se, switched gears and repositioned its loyalty in favor of protestors in a banner headline that likely made more Egyptians laugh than cry: "The People Brought down the Regime!"

The press suddenly got disoriented without a president to flatter, before swinging eagerly behind the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Egypt's interim ruling military, in a desperate attempt to find a new patron to rescue it from financial and political chaos. "[S]ince February and the fall of the regime that it served (and that shielded it), the national press has entered an era of profound crisis. No longer able to ignore its problems, various papers and publishing houses have faced internal revolts and demands for reform." (11) Most importantly, it had learned that losing its credibility and transparency would mean losing its readership that would easily turn to other media in search for the truth. This print media then realized that what's at stake is its share of advertisement and once large circulation.

Implications of January 25th Revolution on the Press

Significantly, January 25th Revolution's goals didn't represent one specific party as it aimed to establish a modern civil state under the slogan; Freedom, Social Justice & Human Dignity, meaning no Authoritarian, no Military and no Religious rule shall obstruct it from realizing its goals. (12) Notwithstanding the dire need for drafting a new constitution identifying the relationship between the ruler and the citizens and reflecting various political and ideological tendencies, matters went in the opposite direction.

In the wake of the January 25th Revolution; however, it was the independent press (besides social media) that projected a dissenting voice tackling corruption cases, demanding civil rights for citizens and opposing 'hereditary rule' in addition to reporting on conflicts taking place inside syndicates and civil society. Noteworthy, the impact of civil society on the press is tremendous as it represents people's voice against attempts to limit political rights of citizens. (13)

"The emergence of independent newspapers like the daily Al-Masry Al-Youm in 2004, along with online journalism, has laid the foundation for pluralism." (14) The fact that the independent press displayed credibility as opposed to national press during the revolution reflects how the former have gained more privilege over the latter whose credibility has been worn out during the past years under editors-in-chief who were deeply involved with the NDP and the hereditary scenario.

On the other hand, the national press; notwithstanding, had suffered tremendous loss due to the following:

- Lack of Vision regarding its functions and administrative procedures.
- Being manipulated by the regime and especially the then ruling NDP to serve, realize and promote its goals including ruling by 'hereditary rule'.
- Loss of people's credibility, accountability and confidence in national press due to its swinging to extremes between being loyal to the regime and then expressing its extreme animosity to the regime.
- Corruption that exceeded all limits within the functioning of these media. (15)

Non-Traditional Media & its Effect on National Press

Social media played a key role in mobilizing people. Indeed, the emergence of political blogging in Egypt is linked to The Egyptian Movement for Change; known as Kefaya (Enough), as early as 2004 when this movement called for an end to Mubarak's rule, government corruption and Egypt's state of Emergency Law. Notably, Egyptian bloggers put tremendous pressure on the political system by tackling sensitive issues like government corruption, sexual harassment, torture and pervasive human rights abuses.

After reporting on such incidents by bloggers, people have realized that this kind of police brutality and abuse is a violation of their rights and; thus, they can sue the police for criminal behavior for the first time. In fact, this kind of reporting contributed to raising people's political awareness. It has also helped in creating social awareness of feminist rights by opening up job opportunities for women in the media, per se. (16) Internet has made the practice of censorship by the government very difficult. Consequently, bloggers succeeded to get these thorny issues heard by an international audience. (17)

As early as 2007, April 6 Youth Movement called for a general strike on April 6 to protest against the massive price rises, stability of salaries and deteriorating living conditions. Evidently, the exact turning point took place on April 6, 2008 using Facebook to extend solidarity with 27,000 protesting workers of Al-Mahalla al-Kubra who were

demanding better salaries. “The strike was not an end in itself, but the means to promote a culture of peaceful protest and to encourage people to claim for their legitimate rights.” (18)

National Association for Change (NAC) is another movement which was initiated by former head of the International Atomic Energy Mohamed El Baradei. By 2009, access to internet had increased tremendously. The independent newspapers covered NAC in order to compete with “citizen journalism” which was already providing their readers with the information they yearned to know. Eventually, the Internet “opened up new global communication conduits, providing Egyptians with greater access to information while making government efforts to restrict information more difficult.” (19)

Conditions & Challenges Facing National Press

In order to devise methods of reform, it is necessary to comprehend the conditions or challenges under which print media in Egypt functions:

- Limited Independence;
- Government Domination;
- Private but partisan;
- Censorship (government & self-censorship);
- Influence of security agencies;
- Granting licensing to media institutions is restrictive;
- Growing religious & financial power of the ruling elites;
- Spread of journalists who breach the Code of Honor;
- Lack of transparency on reporting on government practices especially by national press.(20)
- Defamation laws protecting those public officials who are shielded from criticism like the President & his family, the military, security agencies, religious authorities, ministries, parliamentarians, legal & judicial authorities, leaders of foreign countries, & the flag.
- Arbitrary justice applied on journalists who cross the line by appearing before civil & military courts. Various laws are used to justify such acts; like, the Emergency Law, theory of exceptional circumstances, external breaches and government solemnity & confidentiality of information.
- Few professional standards (poor hiring standards) as journalists are often hired & promoted based on nepotism or favoritism rather than competence & professionalism. (In 1980, The Shura Council was assigned by the Egyptian government to run matters concerning national press; one of which is selecting editors-in-chief of all national newspapers.)

Notably, national press had also suffered from other troubles. First, they were quickly losing credibility. Most Egyptian readers skipped the news & op-eds of the state-owned dailies and went straight to obituaries in Al-Ahram or sports of Al-Gomhouria. In the last two decades and with satellite, people could easily turn to other sources of information. “There were suddenly places where politics could be discussed intelligently (or at least in an interesting manner) & the official monopoly of information was broken.” (21)

Second, new competitors emerged as early as the '80s and '90s like pan-Arab newspapers which entered the Egyptian market in addition to few opposition publications. Moreover, the independent Al-Masry Al-Youm, boldly entered the Egyptian scene in 2004 catering to elite readers & posing a challenge to Al-Ahram's prominent position. Al-Shorouq is another independent newspaper that introduced a high level of professionalism, long absent from national press, & cleverly maintained a calm oppositional tendency. Al-Youm El-Sabei has gained a wide popularity especially among the Egyptian youth with a tremendously growing circulation.

Third, the national press was on the brink of bankruptcy since the publishing houses hired too many workers with little training and very low salaries. With a decline in advertising and circulation, the state borrowed heavily that it could not repay without some kind of restructuring.

Fourth, those who headed the industry were reputed to pay themselves astronomical salaries, treating the institution as their own private property. Moreover, allegations of financial corruption were spread in all enterprises (Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar, Al-Gomhouria and Dar al-Ma`arif, publisher of October, & others) claiming that they were sold at below market rates to friends of top officials.

Fifth, the fact that editors-in-chief are assigned by the government reflects their vehement support to the regime. Unfortunately, top officials of national newspapers used to squander millions of pounds from their institutions on gifts presented to the regime gangsters hoping to guarantee their satisfaction. (22)

Sixth, inability to access information makes it difficult for national print media to report authentic information. The government remains to be the source of information. Thus, the right to access information is subject to government control. This is done through the Press Bureau which is under the control of the Ministry of Information; again subject to government control!

Seventh, the standard of professionalism and ethical considerations is not of high quality as it ought to be.

Eighth, the lack of training to support print and electronic journalism has contributed to the ailment of the organization and loss of vision as to where it needs to go.

Finally, a blurred mission has hindered the national press from supporting Democracy & Human Rights in Egypt.

A State of Limbo

The publishing houses are still immensely plagued by the same problems from before the Revolution. These problems have been further aggravated by the current political and economic decisions. Although many senior officials associated with the old regime have been removed, their replacements have not been any different.

Investigations of corruption charges against former as well as current officials of the national press "continue to proceed slowly if at all, fostering simmering resentments and potentially depriving the institutions of funds they desperately need to recover." (23) The only newspaper that may survive the difficulty seems to be Al-Ahram due to its circulation and advertising besides earning revenues from its printing press (which most of the independent newspapers are forced to use due to licensing restrictions on other press)

Nevertheless, Egypt's national press cannot operate as it has in the past; it has lost its economic and political base. A serious restructuring is imperative as most national press is burdened with tremendous debts, overstaffing, dropping circulation, and politically exposed (making a bailout difficult). But the path forward is extremely hazy. Seemingly, both tasks are intimidating.

Economic restructuring is difficult as Egyptian media outlets pursue limited advertising revenue, shrinking readership and loss of credibility. Whereas independent newspapers are able to rely on freelancers, smaller staffs, and wealthy backers, the national press has to strive to find a way not only to earn revenue and cut costs but also to dig out of its huge debt. It is necessary to enhance readers' participation and access to information to guarantee individual's liberty and the effective functioning of the democratic process.

Political restructuring is also problematic. Nevertheless, economic and political restructuring might pull in conflicting directions. While the former requires addressing the problem of an overstuffed, underpaid, and underperforming labor force, the latter requires answering demands of the employees by mobilizing them and inspiring real reform.

Moreover, national press may not witness any freedom "unless we take a close look at its ownership or by segregating between its ownership and administration. As for responsibility, there seems to be a grave difference between those papers that attend to scoops rather than paying attention to objectivity and credibility." (24)

In the absence of a clear process for political reconstruction, Egypt's national press may, indeed, lack the ability to restructure itself. As such, the following objectives are suggested for media reform:

- To evaluate the media performance during the last 5 years since 2005 elections until January 25th Revolution.
- To propose alternatives for media reform based on international experience that may be related to the Egyptian context.
- To enhance the capacity of media cadres by providing regular training sessions and supporting print and electronic journalism.

Successful politics mean successful government, press and people who are partners in the democratic process. (25) Furthermore, "the mission isn't yet accomplished. Indeed, toppling the regime's head doesn't necessarily mean the end of the old regime since its tools and system still exists. Perhaps, it's trying to bring it back to life." (26)

The New Constitution & the Press

Constitutions and international treaties may guarantee freedom of expression but the reality on the ground may somehow be different. Millions of people around the world live in countries where the flow of information is tightly controlled, censored and freedom of expression discouraged or restricted. Defamation laws preventing criticism are all too common and prevalent around the world. While this true in the Middle East and North Africa, Egypt is no exception. Despite the fact that on paper, the Egyptian Constitution guarantees the right to free expression, in reality government practices, laws and regulations obstruct that right.

If constitutions are insecure, governments will repress freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Imperatively, Egypt's new constitution must be founded on two basic rules: separation of powers and a strong respect for fundamental freedoms. Notably, the Egyptian press had enjoyed press freedom after 1919 Revolution; during which time liberalism spread. With Nasser's 1952 Revolution freedom of the press got to be restricted and during Sadat's era, the press witnessed a limited freedom that was severely curtailed following 1977 riots. During Mubarak's regime, all institutions declined tremendously and the media could not escape such decay.

After the downfall of Mubarak's regime, people were divided into those who envisioned a dire need for a new constitution that represents a roadmap for the ensuing period. However, others favored holding parliamentary elections before drafting the new constitution.

The latter won, unfortunately. A turbulent period followed creating a legislative vacuum after which a limited majority in favor of political Islam took over the political scene at which time, SCAF's Major General Tantawi hurriedly called for the establishment of a constituent assembly to produce a Supplementary Constitutional Declaration (SCD) aiming at limiting the power of the upcoming president while still holding onto its old entrenched power (27)

In drafting the derailed new constitution, Articles regarding the press and media do not differ much from those set in 1971 Constitution. Article 2 advocates the right to stall and cancel newspapers through judicial procedures; despite Mubarak's regime which had concurred in 2006 under journalists' pressure by cancelling the halting punishment in Articles 199 and 200 of the law. Regarding the cancellation of newspapers; whether through administrative or judicial procedures, Egyptian Laws appeared to be devoid of it since the drafting of 1923 Constitution.

The Press Syndicate (PS) has posited that no censorship, confiscation, suspension, or cancellation shall be imposed on the press or on any other media. Nevertheless, Article 3 limits the right of ownership and publishing of newspapers to public and political party figures – a statement that was added to 1971 Constitution in amendments introduced in 1980; thus, confiscating the right of private individual ownership; a right that Egypt had until 1980. Moreover, Article 5 returned jail sentence in slander and libel crimes. Notwithstanding, the old regime had agreed in 2006 to replace such offense with a fine for offenses ranging from slander, libel to insulting a foreign country representative.

The need for an interim set of rules that could fill the current constitutional vacuum in Egypt was pressing. Without one, people had no idea what powers Egypt's elected President Morsi possesses; especially with the bold measures he embarked upon when he announced on August 13, 2012 the annulment of the Supplementary Constitutional Declaration after declaring the retirement of Major General Hussein Tantawi, chief of SCAF since 1993. Nor did people know what his relationship would be with respect to other organs of the state like the judiciary and media, per se. However, the idea of putting such an important document together in haste without really reflecting all society's cross-section & without consultation was deeply worrying.

Some journalists have acknowledged that under the current circumstances, old habit of self-censorship has not disappeared completely. Undoubtedly, censorship and control of information serves the interest of but a privileged few; the rule of law is negatively affected, human rights ignored and corruption unchecked. Albeit, the new regime would still exercise its hegemony over the media bringing it back to square one!

Moreover, the same old system is still in effect and no journalist is immune to Crimes of the Press Law and the list of offenses is awaiting journalists from national and independent press alike. In fact, on August 8, 2012, the Interior Ministry's raided Dar Al-Tahrir Printing House at sunrise to confiscate independent Al-Dostour newspaper which opposes the MB on pretext that it contains material that touched Morsi's own figure and humiliated his character; thus, constituting a crime, "as if we've returned to 'sunrise visitors', no law, no principles, nothing." (29)

The Shura Debate

As editors-in-chief were appointed by the president under an institutional arrangement devised in 1970, they were eager to become personally close to the ruler and display their loyalty by writing what's in his favor and in return they were granted a free hand over their domains. One assumes a hideous desire by the Shura Council to tailor editors-in-chief who can carry out certain tasks at this time. (30) Many people wonder why the Shura Council still continues to exist. "Once more, we witness press nationalization." (31) It was agreed; nevertheless, to keep the Shura Council until discussions were held regarding the drafting of Egypt's future constitution. The fact that Egyptians hardly exceeded 10% in the Shura Council elections reflects how people did not believe it was needed to begin with.

Paradoxically, the MB “suddenly remembered that the Shura Council enjoys powers that they need to put into action. Feeling bitter towards editors-in-chief of ‘national’ newspapers whom they accuse of failing to back President Mohamed Morsi in his election campaign, the [MB] deputies announced that they will appoint new editors to all state-controlled newspapers.” (32) And so they did!

The press people should refuse new selections of editors-in-chief and hegemony by unspecialized people over the media. A national media conference is strongly needed where media people and specialists participate to examine an adequate drafting of ownership and administration of national media institutions and its relationship with the state and not the government(33) If “we want a civic, democratic, modern and contemporary Egypt (that is also based on Islamic principles)” the Shura Council should neither own it nor should a governing body like the SPC still exist(34)

Media Development & the Democratic Transition

Crucially, the Egyptian society needs a media that expresses the goals of the Revolution in which 1500 people sacrificed their lives and some 9000 who got either severely wounded or maimed. Yet, “the ways in which the media is currently studied are themselves in need of reform.” (35)

In 2008, the focus was on building capabilities of Egyptian journalists in preparation for a media in transition. Scholar Naila Hamdy focused on the need for professional training and the need for a national policy of media development by the government. According to Botros Botros-Ghali, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, media figures must be fluent in other languages besides English [and French] like Russian, Chinese and Japanese.

Eventually, a new code of ethics should be instilled to implement the following recommendations:

- Creating a legal environment and laws that protects the rights of members of the press.
- Focusing on journalists’ skills & financial stability.
- Institution building by utilizing information technology, developing new financial relationships with national & international press partners.
- Building journalists’ ethics & ensuring that they can continue improving their skills.
- Empowering experts to measure the press’s independence, integrity and competence.

This final point entails three important components that are noteworthy:

- Independence = Enacting freedom of expression, press ability to access information, absence of censorship & journalist’s professional independence.
- Integrity = Setting up clear standards & ethics for professional journalists.
- Competence = Assuring professional qualifications & providing opportunities for periodic training

Our press shall be independent. No authority shall interfere in selecting editors-in-chief or in newspapers’ political tendencies. A separation must be made between the ruling authority & newspapers’ editorial stance. In a democracy, though rulers may be changed, editorial policy may not. (36) The media should be more effective in supporting democracy & human rights in Egypt. It would first have to build a secular middle class, reach a level of economic growth & foster a democratic culture.

Repressive regimes everywhere are finding it much harder to control the flow of information. Whereas security forces have tried to close down the internet as in the case of Egypt during the January 25th Revolution, people are often quick to find ways to dispatch and receive information.

Despite the challenges facing the emerging Egyptian democracy, there is an opportunity for national dialogue that can lead to a new constitution meeting the needs and aspirations of all members of the society. Few minimum requirements of democracy are freedom of expression, the right to vote, free & fair elections. Nevertheless, democracy is not just voting as it may produce populous despotism. (37) “The most important aspect of Egyptian democracy-building will not be the elections. It will be the writing of the constitution and making sure there are guarantees for women, for minorities, for free speech and for free assembly.” (38)

Regrettably, democracy in Egypt represents some piecemeal reforms but has little to do with changing the existing power structure. While the press has opened up in a number of ways in the wake of the Revolution, reform of the media is still underway. Journalists still face government repression and state media still largely act as a government’s mouthpiece. Unfortunately, Al-Ahram new editor-in-chief cancelled a page tracing how Morsi was faring in fulfilling the promises of his first 100 days in office. No reason was given. Also, one critic was asked to tone down an article in which she criticized MB for trying to dominate the state and its apparatuses. Her article was pulled after she refused to change the phrase, “journalism has worn a veil.” (39)

Some Pointers for Consideration

Although the way forward may seem vague, rigorous developments will likely force the issue. First, corruption cases of media officials will certainly expose the decay inside these institutions. Second, the frustrated employees who chose to be discreet could easily protest if disgraced editors are not replaced, wages are unpaid, prosecutions do not materialize, or reform gets delayed. Third, elections for the PS should be free and transparent under the new regime that should not aim to co-opt its members. This entails reviewing the structure and role of the PS and transforming it into an independent institution that supervises national and independent press. This demand needs learning from other successful experience to emulate good practice. In sum, a democratic regime functions alongside a democratic media. (40) Fourth, the election of a new parliament representing all parties will create a new pressure point for those seeking reform. Fifth, the Constitution should devise a new manner rather than the current arrangement of attaching the press to the Shura Council. (41) Finally, free access and flow of information should be guaranteed to all media who shall be credible and transparent in their reporting.

In Search for a Model

Two types of press institutions have been described; the market model & the public sphere model. Whereas the market model treats the press as any other business institution, run for profit with readers being merely customers, public sphere model advocates that press should uphold the interests of the public who should be treated as citizens not customers. (42)

Revamping the Same Old Road

In her article, “Reclaiming the State Media,” published by Al-Ahram Weekly, journalist Awatef Abdel-Rahman posits a few recommendations. First, abolishing articles contained in The Press Regulation Law of 1996 restricting freedoms & clamping down on journalists. Second, guaranteeing professional & administrative autonomy of national press under the ownership of the state but within the supervision of the PS who’s responsible for ensuring complete application

of the journalist's Charter of Honor. Third, the PS should be the main body to select editors-in-chief based on a criterion of professional and ethical standards drafted by the PS. Candidates must present proposals envisioning the development of state journalistic establishments. Fourth, each newspaper should hold elections for their board of directors who shall be accountable to the Parliament. Fifth, a new budgetary and accounting system should be applied by the PS to all newspapers. Sixth, periodic professional training and awareness-raising sessions for all levels of journalists must be conducted on a regular basis after which journalists who pass certain courses obtain certificates that guarantee their promotion.

Mixed-Revenue Model

In his report for The Huffington Post, entitled, "Newspapers shouldn't be seeking – and don't need – government help," Ben Compaine suggests three proposals: One advocating that newspapers should convert to non-profit status. Hence, their operating revenues would be tax-exempt. Second proposal claims to find ways of making money from putting the newspaper's work online. Third proposal asserts a foundation-supported model whose mission is to support the press. Nevertheless, whether this final proposal safeguards a newspaper's complete independence remains controversial!

Going Private – BBC Experience

Some people claim that the solution to the debacle of national press in Egypt is in Journalism Privatization. Indeed, many journalists prefer the 'public service' model in which the press is financed by people's taxes like that of the BBC. Others assume that press privatization isn't the real solution and is difficult to achieve. They suggest abolishing the Ministry of Information & replacing it with a Supreme Council of the Media, which would be responsible for planning & coordinating between media channels within a framework of a national strategy composed of representatives of experienced journalists, scholars & a group of political, legal, cultural & social of various dispositions. This council would be responsible for electing media leadership based on professional competence, ethical practices & moral integrity.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The coverage of the January 25th 2011 Revolution by national print media proved to be a fiasco; a disaster by all means that turned Egyptian people away in search for credible and transparent news from independent press, social media & foreign media. Such coverage instilled distrust in people's minds; hence, proving that there is an internal decay that needs to be addressed & remedied at once. Consequently, the national press ought to be published for readers under a regime that does not co-opt the media, a regime that facilitates free access & flow of information. Its mission should be promoting & supporting democracy and human rights. The press must be independent in terms of finance & administration. Initially, a new constitution should be drafted defining the role of the press and media in general and guaranteeing freedom of expression & opinion. This constitution should also define the exact role of the president of the country, obligations, responsibilities & his power limitation. Once a constitution is organized, all government branches will be organized.

Nonetheless, national press should neither be owned by the government nor be fully privatized in order to continue its watchdogging role, expressing all segments of the society & not leaning toward one particular sector or expressing the opinion of its owner. The jurisdiction of the SPC should be revised to clearly indicate whether it is an administrator on behalf of the owner of national newspapers or as a council with moral powers, representing public opinion & safeguarding professional ethics.

I would recommend changing the structure of the national press, to safeguard its independence, by having its own

internal independent system in selecting its editor-in-chief & staff on grounds of efficiency, ethical practices & moral integrity rather than being selected by the Shura Council. This will guarantee that the press's employees will not be indebted to any external institution for their posts or promotions.

Egyptian press has its distinctive character; however, that requires a culturally sensitive approach that could borrow from various models. (43) Regarding its functioning, it may also be advisable to combine models – BBC Model & Collaborative Model – especially under the present political turmoil; while Egypt is staggering to put its house in order. While the first model represents a public service financed by the people, the second model can revive struggling newspapers by combining business operations through sharing articles & photos leading to a win/win situation; a public service financed by people to cater public interest. Moreover, national press can benefit from others' good practice like that of The Guardian, which has taken leaps toward conducting social audits to evaluate the impact of its overall activities ranging from news coverage, environmental effect and response of the newspaper's stakeholders like readers, journalists & advertisers regarding the paper's performance.

Toward that end, it is imperative to revive the structure and role of the PS and to transform it into an independent institution that supervises national & independent press alike. It is also advisable to extend the retirement age for national press establishment employees, beyond sixty years, year by year as long as he/she is able to do so, provided they can retire with pension at 60.

Significantly, real change doesn't happen through violence & doesn't necessarily come through NGOs. Change starts with a vision & when people desire it. Hence, progress happens when a country draws a specific and clear strategy for itself & when it knows exactly what it wants. If Egypt is proud of its past; it is likely to take good care of its present and invest in its future.

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