

Egyptian Journalists and Power

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Any analysis of the role of the press in the democratisation of Egypt must take into account the long history between journalists and those in power since the 1952 revolution. The Egyptian press, which has been controlled, marginalised, silenced and fragmented, was late to join the revolution. It has not been easy for them to find a voice under the new regime.

The social sciences have rarely acknowledged the relevance of the journalistic profession outside of Western democracies.¹ Journalism and democracy are often associated with each other, since the former is seen as being an integral part of freedom of speech. As Érik Neveu notes, many analysts consider it to be the “wheel of democracy” due to the fact that its very origins are “historically linked to the building of democracies.”² Some go further and describe journalists as crucial players in the process of democratisation, because they are able to put the

¹ Cf. C. Lemieux, « De certaines différences internationales en matière de pratiques journalistiques : Comment les décrire ? Comment les expliquer ? » (“Certain international differences in journalism practices: how are they to be described and explained?”), in J.B. Legavre (dir.), *La presse écrite : objet(s) délaissé(s)?* (The written press: neglected object(s)?), L’Harmattan, 2004 ; B. Mostefaoui, « Professionnalisation et autonomie des journalistes au Maghreb » (Professionalisation and autonomy of journalists in the Maghreb) in *Réseaux*, n°51, 1992.

² E. Neveu, *Sociologie du journalisme*, La Découverte, 2001, p. 4.

“democratic transition” into words and to use it as subject matter.³ However, this association of ideas is not always an obvious one to make. While it is true that certain societies have undergone a cathartic process of greater freedom of speech, of which the most tangible sign is increased press publishing, there is no denying the ephemeral and fragile nature of this pluralist impulse of expression.⁴

Egypt provides a good counter-example to the frequent association made between the press and democracy. Although the country has been run by an authoritarian government since at least 1952, Egypt has a long tradition of journalism which is evident in the large, particularly diverse industry which developed during the last ten years of Mubarak’s presidency.⁵ The following essay will provide a brief socio-historical account of the Egyptian press since the Free Officers Movement of 1952, in order to contextualise the current situation, and will then address the role played by the different elements of the Egyptian press during what Egyptians refer to as the “January 25 revolution.”

The Ups and Downs of Authoritarianism

The history of the press in republican Egypt is one of carefully controlled, marginalised and silenced opposition. Under each of the country’s three main presidents emerged three separate models of state-press relations, each in response to specific social or political

³ Transitology is a field in political science which was popular in studies on the Arab region during the 1990s. Following the successive waves of democratisation across Southern Europe, Latin America and later Eastern Europe, advocates of transitology attempted to understand how to facilitate democratic transition in Arab society. Despite their laudable efforts, the literature on this topic suffers from its own teleological hypotheses, and serves more as confirmation of the conceptual failure behind attempts to graft democracy onto the Arab world rather than depicting any empirical rejection of democracy by the Arab world itself. For further reading on this theory regarding Egypt, see Yvan von Korff *Missing the Wave: Egyptian Journalists’ Contribution to Democratization in the 1990’s*, Deutsches Orient-Institut, 2003.

⁴ Such was the case both in Morocco’s pre-succession period at the end of the 1990s and in Boris Yeltsin’s post-totalitarian Russia.

⁵ You need only look at the first Egyptian paper, dated 1828, to understand the historical foundations of Egyptian journalism. *Al-Waqâ’i’ al-misriyya* (Egyptian news) was created by the governor Muhammad ‘Alî, who took inspiration from the Napoleonic model of propaganda and made use of the printing houses introduced during Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaign. The fact that Muhammad ‘Alî was personally in charge of editing and that the paper effectively monopolised the Arab press scene for 25 years points to the slow drawn-out process of social and political differentiation of Egyptian journalism under Ottoman rule.

challenges.⁶ Nasser (1956-1970) officially banned pluralism in favour of unanimity which, for a certain amount of time, was fairly successful, thus creating what came to be known as the “national” press (*qawmiyya*). Al-Sadate (1970-1981), who kept the opposition political parties at a safe distance from decision-making mechanisms, gave partisan structures conditional freedom and allowed certain publications. This formed the model for the partisan press. Mubarak (1981-2011) followed the same model, with the exception that he authorised, not without some difficulty, an “independent” press, which is to say that a press operating with private capital and able to escape the restraints of a “national” or partisan system.

The 1952 revolution originally succeeded in garnering the support of many journalists because it represented hope for change. However, these journalists very soon became the object of suspicion, and the coup d'état and radical change which followed brought with it complete reorganisation of the press. Between April and May of 1954, Nasser halted all opposition publications and arranged denouncements in the press which later lead to arrests. Between 1956 and 1960, still unsatisfied and looking for a different press model, he rejected the advice of his official advisor, journalist Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal, who suggested that control of the press should go to the state. In 1960, Nasser stated “I cannot reasonably and fairly dictate control of society [the state] over the economy and leave the media in the hands of a group of individuals.”⁷ Law 156 thus set the foundations for the only model of journalism which existed at that time, that of the national press.

⁶ I have not included the first President of the Republic, Muhammad Naguib, who remained in power a year and a half only, from 18 June 1953 until 14 November 1954.

⁷ Quoted in M. H. Haykal, *Bayn as-sahâfa wa as-syâssa* [Between press and politics], Cairo, Dar al-Shurûq, 2003, p. 69. Haykal, an important commentator on the political and journalistic history of modern Egypt, started his career in 1942. He collaborated on several publications, displaying a certain amount of independence. After working as a parliamentary journalist, he became correspondent for *Akhbâr al-Yawm* and covered numerous international conflicts. His network of contacts proved particularly useful to Nasser, as did his nomadic editorial work, which kept him separate from the partisan system, and his ability to analyse the situation outside Egypt. He was an official information source and acted as the President's spokesman in his writing for *al-Ahrâm*. He was also seen by some as one of the regime's ideologists, someone who did not limit himself to the inner circles of power. In 1957, he was appointed Chief Editor of *al-Ahrâm*, during which time he trained an entire generation of journalists based on a new system of professional ethics, as part of the new regime's social policy. He surrounded himself with the greatest names in Egyptian journalism and literature, including Tawfiq Hâkim, Yûsif Idris and the future Nobel Literature Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, adding to a literary tradition already well established in the profession.

This legacy of Nasserian interventionism outlived its founder, but was later relaxed somewhat by Sadate, who remodelled it to fit his own policy of liberalisation (*infitâh*). While this policy was largely based on economic rather than political principles, Sadate officially reintroduced a multiparty system in 1978. However, the opposition had no choice but to leave institutional life in the hands of the new presidential party, the so-called “National Democratic Party” (NDP), and content itself with an ersatz of political existence through the press. As a result of its opposition to the 1979 Camp David agreement, the partisan press were quickly banned. This early sign of the extensive policy of repression which was to come was followed by wide-scale opposition within society. In other words, if demands for increased public freedoms were peculiar to the press, there was widespread discontent across a society which had tremendously suffered from the new orientations of a socialist economy suddenly subjected to the laws of the free market.

In September 1981, two months before his assassination, Sadate ordered the arrests of more than 1500 opposition figures, including campaigners, intellectuals and journalists. This period, referred to as “Black September,” was a pivotal point in the contemporary history of journalism. The regime then proposed an agreement with the different opposition fractions who had been arrested, with the notable exception of the Islamists, and promised them increased freedom of speech in return for an end to their protests.⁸

Fear of a popular uprising echoing the 1977 “bread uprising” was a typical characteristic of the authoritarian regime’s perpetual search for legitimacy. The early period of Mubarak’s rule, during which freedom of speech in Egypt enjoyed its “honeymoon period” and the partisan press was reintroduced, should be viewed within this context.⁹ It did not last long, however. Mubarak’s regime was quick to introduce a whole host of measures aimed at controlling journalists, thereby silencing critics while simultaneously maintaining the illusion of an open, free and pluralist press.

⁸ Interview from 2 June 2006 with Tewfiq Aclimandos, specialist historian on the “Free Officers” activist movement and journalist at the AFP during the events. The terms of the agreement were to be fiercely evoked in June 1982 during protests against the invasion of Beirut by the Israeli army.

⁹ Galal Amin, *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak 1981-2011*, AUC Press, 2011, p.114.

Through the three main national press conglomerates —*al-Ahrâm* (The Pyramids), *al-Jumuhûriyya* (The Republic), and *al-Akhhbâr* (The News)— the regime was able to control the entire information production chain. Al-Ahram Advertising Company’s almost total control over the advertising industry allowed national press newspapers to corner the lion’s share of advertising revenue, whilst also denying the opposition press (both partisan and independent) any financial security. Similarly, for a long time state-run printing houses had sole authorisation to print newspapers, which in turn meant they were able to retain some of the revenue.

From early 2000 onwards, measures such as these became increasingly rare, and the national press, which had control over the distribution network, was able to choose when and where to distribute opposition papers. Prior to this reigning-in of public criticism, each paper had had to undergo annual authorisation from the High Council of the Press which, along with the ambiguous legal framework outlined in the Press Code, greatly encouraged self-censorship.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of these “security nets,” several independent publications grew in size during the second phase of Mubarak’s rule. The big names in this division of the press were *al-Dustûr* (The Constitution) and *al-Misrî al-yawm* (The Egyptian Today). The latter was an independent press pioneer in a market of daily papers so far monopolised by national press publications, which had reduced the daily opposition press to a role of mere spectator. After the creation of *al-Misrî al-yawm* in 2004, *al-Dustûr* became a daily at the end of 2007, and was joined by *al-Shurûq* (The Dawn) in early 2008, bringing down the last bastion of the national press.¹⁰

It is against this backdrop, and with the advent of second-generation Internet, that a new group of actors appeared on the Egyptian media landscape. Freeing themselves of the aforementioned constraints, bloggers made their presence increasingly felt in the Egyptian public arena, not without some difficulty, thereby providing valuable competition to the independent

¹⁰ We should add that *al-Tahrîr* (Liberation), which came out after the January 2011 revolution, is a daily. With regards to the creation of *al-Dustûr*, cf. Dina El-Khawaga, « Sisyphé ou les avatars du nouveau journalisme égyptien » (Sisyphus, or the avatars of new Egyptian journalism), *Égypte Monde Arabe*, series 2, n°3, 2000.

press.¹¹ Their major achievement of successfully penetrating into the institutionalised media arena seems in retrospect an early sign of what was to become online social networking's contribution to the "January 25 revolution."

The Role of the Press During the "January 25 Revolution"

There was significant praise of the role played by online social networks in the wave of protest movements which led to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. Calls to protest on 25 and 28 January 2011 came from two Facebook groups, the April 6th Youth Movement and "We are all Khaled Saïd" (named after a victim of police brutality). These groups kept social network users informed of the event's organisation, and also provided estimates of how many people were expected to turn up (80,000 on 24 January.) Those involved were also able to invite other Facebook users to take part, which added to the very particular nature of how the online movement grew. Facebook effectively functioned as the back-room during the initial phase of the protest movement. A look at tweeting trends goes further to show how Twitter also contributed to the efficacy of the movement.¹² Even when access to internet and 3G networks was cut (between 27 January and 2 February), the movement kept its momentum. Indeed, it even gained momentum, carried forward by its own energy. Social networking sites undeniably played an important role in the events which brought an end to Mubarak's rule, particularly in helping to mobilise the two initial protests. However, its role was not decisive.

To talk of a "Facebook revolution" actually ignores the crucial role of physical protest. The protestors who gathered on Tahrir Square did so in peril of their lives¹³. Such an interpretation also contributes to a segregated view of public space in Egypt, by failing to take into consideration the important role of the traditional media in bringing about these events. The

¹¹ See Enrique Klaus, « La presse à l'épreuve des weblogs » (The press and the challenge of weblogs) in Vincent Battesti and Ireton François (dir.), *L'Égypte au présent. Inventaire d'une société avant révolution* (Egypt now: an inventory of a society before the revolution), Actes Sud, 2011, p. 953-970. A slightly different version of this chapter was published in English: Enrique Klaus, "The Integration of Weblogs in the Egyptian Media environment," in Heineman Arnim, Lamoum Olfa, Weber Anne-Françoise (dir.), *The Middle-East in the Media. Conflicts, Censorship and Public Opinion*, Londres/ Beyrouth, Saqi Books, 2010, pp. 252-267

¹² Cf. Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, *Tweets from Tahrir. Egypt's revolution as it unfolded in the words of the people who made it*, OR Books/Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2011.

¹³ Official figures for the 18 days of protest place the number of deaths at 860, with thousands believed to have been injured.

day before the aforementioned Facebook groups organised their meeting, Egypt's most popular political talk-shows featured opposition movement representatives calling for protest. One such example is *al-‘Ashira masâ’an* (10 p.m.), hosted by television star Mona al-Shadhî, who invited one of the creators of the “We are all Khaled Saïd” site, Wâ’îl Ghonîm, before he was arrested. These programmes echoed the call to protest, and lead to greater audience numbers by reaching the vast majority of Egyptians who do not have access, or who have limited access, to the internet and to social networking sites.

Those commenting on the “2.0 revolution” also ignored the role of the written press during the movement. According to Fathy Abou Hatab, online-community manager for the *al-Misrî al-yawm* newspaper, the market was flooded by half a million new readers during the revolution. Beyond the Internet blackout, Abou Hatab believes this is because “during this troubled period, people wanted to follow events. They were particularly interested in the opinion pages, as they did not want to follow only what was on television. They also wanted to read the opinions of the writers and the press on the future of the country.”¹⁴

The protest movement which developed on the streets also became a media war, waged on several fronts – nothing new for Egyptian journalists. The war spread across press columns and turned into a pitched battle between the various papers. It is interesting to read side by side the titles of the national and independent press, as the comparison highlights the rift which formed from within the journalistic “camp” itself, a phenomenon that was particularly obvious during the events of January and February 2011.

From early on in the movement, the national press did their best to ignore what was going on in the streets of Egypt. One Twitter user tweeted on 29 January that “The state media are showing nothing of what is really happening, in an attempt to minimise it all, and yet it really is huge!”¹⁵ The first three days of protests, the front pages of the national press showed only outside events, such as new developments in the Alexandria church bombing (*al-Ahrâm*, 25 January), a

¹⁴ Interview with the author on 30 July 2011.

¹⁵ Cf. Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, *op. cit.*, p.68.

speech by Mubarak on social policy (*al-Jumuhûriyya*, 25 January), and the pro-Hariri protests taking place in Lebanon (*al-Ahrâm*, 26 January). When they did mention events in Egypt, it was solely to state that “protesters were disrupting traffic” (*Al-Jumuhûriyya*, 26 January), or to express alarm over the Muslim Brotherhood, part of the regime’s strategy to blame the group for the unrest in order to crack down on protesters without risk of criticism from the ever-watchful United States.

Meanwhile, the independent press stood firm during the whole course of the revolution. Over the eighteen days of protests they devoted themselves entirely to covering the events in Egypt. Unlike in the national press, the events made headlines almost immediately, and no attempt were made to hide support for the opposition movement. The independent press is also in part responsible for turning Tahrir Square into the centre of the protests. As early as 26 January, *al-Misrî al-yawm* published pictures of the crowds on Tahrir Square with the title “Warning,” as though the paper had itself become the voice of the protest movement. Meanwhile, *al-Shurûq* described, rather lyrically, how “a volcano of anger is invading the streets of Cairo and exploding across Tahrir Square.” (26 January).

The independent press also attempted to follow the movement as it unfolded and give it a rhythm, as when *al-Shurûq* wrote after the first five days of protests, “The people are coming forward, Mubarak is stepping back.” (30 January). It also recorded large-scale protests with headlines such as “Indiscriminate violence and excessive military force during second day of anger” (27 January), and “The fourth protest of over a million transforms Egypt into Tahrir Square” (9 February). Support for the movement was particularly obvious when they reprinted slogans used by protesters across Cairo, such as “Angry Egypt” (25 January), “The people want change” (28 January) and “Religion for God and the Square for all” (7 February).

A crucial date in the unfolding events and a pivotal one for the position of the press was February 2. Renamed “The battle of the camel,” it was on this day that the *baltagiyya* (thugs generally hired during elections) attempted to take over Tahrir Square and to forcibly evict protesters. The next day, the break between the different press divisions opened up noticeably.

While *al-Shurûq* lead with the headline “The *baltagiyya* declare war on change” (3 February), *al-Jumuhûriya* chose to report on events at Mustafâ Mahmûd Square, where pro-Mubarak crowds were assembled, with the headline “Millions come out to support Mubarak out of love for the President” (3 February).

While the independent press refused to waver from its original stance of support for the movement, there was a noticeable difference in national press coverage. *Al-Jumuhûriya* listed the “achievements of the people’s revolution” (4 February), and *al-Ahrâm*, rejoicing over the nomination of ‘Umar Sulaymân to the post of vice-president, a post which had remained empty for 30 years, described what it saw as a “new era.” This may in some part be a reflection of the protest movement which developed from within the very papers themselves, a further example of multi-sectoral protests which had sprung up around Tahrir Square. News in the foreign press of Mubarak’s personal family fortune also meant that the national press could no longer continue as before.

In a rare moment of unity between the different divisions of the Egyptian press, Mubarak’s departure was celebrated the following day by each of the papers. Against all expectations, *al-Ahrâm* incorporated the Tahrir Square slogan into its headline “The people have brought down the regime” (12 February), and over the course of the next two months following on from this historic moment, the paper published a daily supplement of soft news on the events at Tahrîr Square, contributing to the collective documentation of the revolution. However, this editorial change in tone in the national press did not last long. Finding that there was a conservative readership seeking stability, the national papers quickly reverted back to their previous role of spokesperson for the government and military, the latter now running the country.

The Press, the Revolution and Democracy Under Question

The rather significant contribution by the independent, and later national, press in the events leading to Mubarak’s removal from power should not lead one to overstate the democratic role of Egyptian journalism. More significant was the role of the activists and citizens who took

over Tahrir Square, as well as the social networking sites which helped to energise the movement. The legacy of three decades of control was a particularly heavy one to bear for the press: it went from being the state's exclusive propaganda tool under Nasser, to being used by Sadate and Mubarak as a form of false compromise, allowing the regime to pacify demands from the opposition. The Egyptian press was tolerated only because it was considered to be a third-rate public space, and an inferior substitute for institutional partisan debate.

Furthermore, an evaluation of the press' contribution to democracy in Egypt should not assume that the events of January 2011 actually lead to a genuine democratic transition. If a transition has taken place, it is not so much in the accession of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which has claimed it wants to secure transition, nor in the "interim" government, but rather in the fall of a president who had ruled over Egypt since 1952, longer than any other. There is no way of knowing which direction this "transition" will take, as Egyptians celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution with the SCAF still in power.

Several incidents in relation to the press and media occurred during the transition period of the SCAF (which was initially supposed to last only six months). In April 2011, the blogger Mikael Nabil was sentenced to three years in prison for criticising the role of the army during Mubarak's removal. Two months later, proceedings were started against the chief editor and a journalist at the independent paper *al-Fajr* (The Dawn) for having publicly demanded the end to military tribunals. Proceedings were later dropped, but their arrest sent out a strong message to other journalists. In August 2011, a Twitter user was prosecuted for "insulting the military institution," before being pardoned by Marshal Tantawi, supervisor of the SCAF.¹⁶ From October, the 30th to December, 25th 2011, prominent blogger 'Alaa 'Abd al Fattah was detained pending investigation on charges of "inciting violence against the armed forces" during rioting in the Maspero demonstrations, "stealing a firearm belonging to a soldier," "attacking military personnel," "destroying military property," "murder with premeditation," and "intending to

¹⁶ Cf. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13038937>, <http://thedailynewsegypt.com/human-a-civil-rights/al-fagr-journalist-released-pending-further-investigations-dp1.html> and http://bikyamasr.com/39446/egypt-rights-activist-sent-to-military-court-over-twitter-statement/?utm_source=WordSocial&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=WordSocial

commit a terrorist act.” He was released on Christmas’ Eve but charges were not dropped.¹⁷ He was released at Christmas’ Eve but charges were not dropped¹⁸. Self-censorship by journalists is another sign of continued tension with the representatives of the state, as illustrated in December 2011 by the banning of an article criticizing military rulers in the newly-launched English version of *al-Misrî al-yawm*, ironically called *Independent Egypt*.¹⁹

Despite the revolution, the army’s coup d’état and the legislative elections, status quo has prevailed over change. The Egyptian political system has retained all the characteristics of an authoritarian regime, one which is “symptomatic of procedural restrictions on expression and regulation of a pluralist reality”.²⁰ The words of blogger 3arabawy on Twitter still ring true: “Under dictatorships, independent journalism is by default a form of activism: sharing information is basically an act of agitation.”

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