

3.6. Egypt

Over the course of the last five years, all four main segments of the Egyptian media landscape – television, radio, printed publications and the Internet – have changed. There has been a degree of liberalisation in what can and cannot be covered by the local media. This is primarily the result of domestic pressure to free up the journalistic environment – Egypt has a relatively strong tradition of liberal media dating back to the time of the monarchy – and also of foreign, mainly American, pressure to liberalise politically. The spread of technology has aided, to a certain degree, the access of the average Egyptian to alternative sources of information. While radio and newspapers have been ubiquitous in Egypt for generations, the advent of satellite TV and the Internet has brought a host of new media forums. The number of satellite dishes has multiplied exponentially over the last several years, and Internet penetration rates, while still minuscule, are growing, with the help of the government’s ‘Free Internet’ initiative and a more recent ADSL initiative.¹ While all of these things add up to a relatively positive – if unhurried – trend towards media reform, it should be added that locally produced content in all four media segments is still closely watched, and ultimately controlled, by the state.

I. General Conditions

Egypt has done a relatively good job of combating illiteracy over the course of the last half century, bringing the number of its citizens who can both read and write from 12.5 per cent in 1960 to currently more than half the population. Despite these positive indications though, Egypt’s explosive population growth (which rises by some 2 per cent every year) tends to make illiteracy ever harder to confront. The generally poor condition of the state-run education system is another obstacle to universal literacy. The state – struggling to transform its unwieldy, command economy into a globalised, private sector-driven one, while attempting to accommodate some 600,000 additions to the labour market annually – has strained budgets to the breaking point. The generally very high pupil-teacher ratio in state schools is an oft-quoted indicator. While private schools tend to have better student-teacher ratios, these schools generally remain

Illiteracy
and education

¹ American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt (AmCham): *Business Monthly*, Cairo 2004.

- beyond the reach of the average citizen, who cannot afford the much higher tuition.
- Local media There are a large number of local radio and television stations, as well as numerous newspapers available to the Egyptian consumer.
- Radio Egyptian radio – the first radio service in the Middle East – has long played a vital role in the state’s history. Today, eight radio-broadcasting networks, all run by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), fall under the auspices of the information ministry, and transmit the Egyptian Radio Service. With the arrival of Nilesat in 1996, radio’s reach expanded with transmissions covering all Arab countries, most of Africa and Europe, and some Asian countries, as well as the United States – a total of 252 stations.² The state retained a total monopoly on radio broadcasting until mid-2003, when two privately operated music stations were launched by the privately owned Nile Production Company: Nugoum FM and Nile One, which broadcast, respectively, Arabic and Western pop music.
- TV The state also boasts eight terrestrial, free-to-air TV channels, broadcast from the country’s principle *muhafizat*, or governorates. According to Egyptian law, the state is the sole authority allowed to establish and broadcast TV or radio channels locally. Private terrestrial TV channels are still not allowed. Foreign-licensed TV or radio channels may hire air time and transmit their programmes from Egypt, but Egypt cannot be the headquarters of local or foreign private-sector TV channels. The launch of Egypt’s two Nilesat communications satellites, one in 1998 and the second in 2000, dramatically increased the number of regional and international stations available to those Egyptian households with satellite dishes, estimated to be 10 per cent of all households country wide.³ This profoundly affected the landscape of local TV. As regional competitors pulled market share away from Egyptian state news channels, Cairo had to liberalise in order to maintain its audience. This was probably why Cairo allowed the launch of the private sector Dreem TV station in the late 1990s by business tycoon Ahmed Bahgat. Now, along with the relatively progressive Dreem, the average Egyptian viewer has access to a host of regional alternatives for television news.

² Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU).

³ Ibid.

Egypt, with its long affiliation with the printing press and political broadsheets, also boasts an enormous number of printed Arabic-language periodicals. These are dominated by the state's three flagship dailies – *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Akhbar*, *Al-Gomhouriya* – each of which channels the government line while maintaining a distinctive identity. Each paper claims to circulate between 900,000 and 1 million copies per day. Unofficial reports within the industry, however, suggest that the true figures are much lower. Besides the dozens of smaller state-run publications, there is a substantial number of opposition and independent publications. The last year has also seen the introduction of a couple of new private dailies.⁴

Print

Given the lack of credible statistics, readership is thought to have remained fairly steady in recent years, though down from what it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Rapid population growth, however, may have helped some publications maintain their readership in terms of absolute numbers. While profit motives generally do not drive the state press, newspapers and magazines compete with each other for readership and advertising revenue. Private publications – of which the minority are locally licensed – take revenue more seriously. But even then, some magazines are set up for self-promotion by leading businessmen or to represent a political trend without being tied to a political party.

All state-run television, radio channels and broadsheets are de facto mouthpieces for the long-ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). These include the 'big three' state daily papers, along with a number of weekly papers and other periodicals, and the ERTU-dominated television and radio stations. It should be borne in mind, however, that the establishment of new political parties has long been considered nigh impossible. (It should be added, however, that there are occasional exceptions to this rule. One example is the liberal Al-Ghad Party, which – despite expectations – was granted a licence confirming it as a legitimate political party in 2004, even if party head Ayman Nour was subsequently arrested on forgery charges.)

Media ownership

In addition, a number of independent local Internet newspapers exist. Such local websites, however, avoid agitating the government – i.e. they steer clear of the 'red lines' – as they are still susceptible to harassment,

Internet media

⁴ AmCham 2004. Examples of non-governmental press include *Al-Wafed*, *Al-Ahaly* and others.

bureaucratic or otherwise. The government, meanwhile, in line with its recent tilt towards 'modernisation', economic integration and foreign investment, has aggressively promoted Internet use, first with the launch of the Free Internet Initiative in 2001, then, more recently, with an assertive ADSL-line campaign. The country's Internet service providers have – after a number of recent local acquisitions – fallen into the hands of four main providers, the biggest of which, Linkdotnet, is part of the Sawiris business empire. Technically, the country's Internet infrastructure – especially after the recent appointment of a technocrat as prime minister – continues to improve. While Internet penetration rates remain modest, the government has invested much time and money promoting the medium, and connectivity has become increasingly viable for average citizens. The average monthly cost of an ADSL connection, for example, is now LE 150, or about US\$ 22 – doable for most urban professionals, but hardly an option for the majority of the rural poor. Government figures put the number of Internet users in Egypt at about three million (compared to only 300,000 four years ago), representing approximately 4 per cent of the population.⁵

Media access As for the percentages of the population with access to general media outlets, the following can be said:

- Radio
 - Nearly all households have radios – there are an estimated 14 million radio sets in a country of 70 million.
- TV
 - Nearly all households have access to television, which has an estimated 96 per cent penetration rate.
 - Satellite penetration in Egypt currently stands at around 10 per cent of households nationwide.
- Print
 - Newspaper readership among literate Egyptians is low, with regular readers constituting less than 20 per cent of the adult population.⁶

Media consumption Although Egypt suffers from a high illiteracy rate, the print media often [3] serves as a source of information. The ubiquity of radios [often: 3] and especially TV [very often: 4] more than offsets the disadvantage in terms of media penetration. The Internet, which offers the most diverse spectrum of opinion – even in Arabic – is also used very

⁵ AmCham 2004.

⁶ Egypt State Information Service (SIS): *Cairo Press Review*, Cairo 2005.

often [4], but only by a small percentage of the population. Ultimately, Egypt continues to be a word-of-mouth culture. Verbal exchange probably still accounts for the vast majority of information transfer [very often: 4]. This proclivity has been aided by the relatively recent introduction of new modes of local communication, such as email, mobile phones, SMS messaging, etc.

The mass media has a significant influence [3] on the formation of political opinion. Given Egypt's long experience with the mass media (relative to other countries of the region), along with the deep penetration of almost all forms of mass communication, it comes as little surprise that radio, television and newspapers inform the vast bulk of the public. While alternative sources of information (via satellite and Internet) have become increasingly accessible, the vast majority of Egyptian citizens still get their news from state information organs. The state's long acquaintance with – and jealous guardianship of – the national communications apparatus has made it adept at steering popular perceptions, primarily over domestic issues, to its own advantage. Coverage of Israel is also subject to a certain amount of manipulation, given the impact of the Palestinian issue on popular emotion.

Media
influence on
political
opinion

All local television stations, the vast majority of local radio stations, and a large proportion of Egypt's newspapers are state owned. As stipulated in the Constitution, the press is meant to be 'a popular, independent authority,' which '...shall exercise its vocation freely and independently in the service of society through all the means of expression.' In practice, though, the longstanding domination of the government by the NDP – and by virtue of the fact that practically all national media organs come under the exclusive purview of the state – has led to a situation where news coverage in state papers is inevitably pro-NDP. Officially, all the holders of leading positions at state-owned newspapers and media authorities are appointed by the Ministry of Information. Practically speaking, though, no such appointments can be made without the tacit endorsement of the President.

State-owned
media

Currently, the state controls the vast bulk of published and broadcast opinion. This ratio is, however, quickly tilting towards equilibrium, as satellite television becomes available to larger and larger numbers of citizens. The introduction of regional competitors – freely available via satellite dish – has

State-owned
media and
published
opinion

dramatically affected the equation. Larger and larger numbers of Egyptians are getting their news from Gulf-based or Lebanon-based news stations, which are perceived as offering more objective news coverage. It should be added, however, that this phenomenon has forced Cairo to liberalise its news coverage – incrementally, at least. The notion that ‘They’ll get it anyway from Jazeera’ has, at least in some cases, persuaded the state media to report events that would have otherwise gone uncovered. Clearly, there is a dominance of state-owned media.

The coverage of the state-owned media tends to be very friendly towards the government [+2], although there is a discernible difference when it comes to treatment of the government and its policies in the three different branches of the media. Relative to the broadcast media (television and radio), the press (even the state press) is considerably more liberal in its outlook. In the big state newspapers, and in the handful of opposition ones, a certain degree of criticism of the government is allowed. Certain well-known editorialists (who presumably know just how far they can go) will often offer light to moderate disapproval of certain state policies. The President, personally, of course, is never – under any circumstances – the subject of criticism.

The broadcast media are much more conservative. Criticism of the government and its policies is rarely seen or heard. Presumably, the fact that so much more of the population relies on radio and television for their news rather than on newspapers (given the high illiteracy rate) has emboldened the state to allow greater scope for criticism in the latter. There is a notable difference between local news coverage in English and in Arabic, with news in the former tending to be more liberal. The state-run, English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly*, for example, is allowed notably greater leeway in its coverage of traditionally touchy subjects, like government election rigging and the presidential succession.

Government
press
conferences

The government has made serious attempts to become more transparent over the last five years, largely as a result of external pressures to liberalise. Presidential speeches and press conferences are almost always broadcast or carried in newspapers, while cabinet ministers – especially the recently appointed raft of reformers holding economy portfolios – are regular speakers at numerous events, which are usually covered by the local press. In another indication of Cairo’s efforts to at least appear more transparent, the government

recently appointed a presidential spokesman. State television also regularly broadcasts parliamentary sessions.

All journalists, though, are not given equal access to press conferences. Generally, journalists must get permission to cover senior-level press events from the Information Ministry's press centre. However, if a journalist does not have accreditation with a reputable media organisation, or if he/she represents a media outlet that has written over critically about Cairo in the past, permission could be delayed until the event has passed. Particular writers, known for writing over critically, will be blacklisted from events, and are often denied official press cards. This is much more common, of course, with local journalists than with foreign ones. Major press conferences at the presidential or ministerial level are usually broadcast by one or more of the state television networks. While the state media have enjoyed a monopoly in the broadcasting of all press conferences, this has begun to change slightly.

II. Legal Environment

Technically, freedom of opinion is explicitly defined as a right due to all citizens. Article 47 of the Egyptian Constitution reads: 'Freedom of opinion is guaranteed. Every individual has the right to express his opinion and to publicise it verbally or in writing or by photography or by other means within the limits of the law'.⁷ While freedom of opinion is nowhere restricted by any kind of subsequent amendment, it can, in theory, be challenged within the context of the Emergency Law, which has remained in effect ever since the 1980 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. The emergency law stipulates that, given a 'state of emergency,' the state can essentially override anything set down in the Constitution if it involves a threat – real or perceived – to national security.

Freedom of
expression

The next article, number 48, guarantees the 'Freedom of press, printing, publication and mass media.' It goes on to state that, 'Censorship of newspapers is forbidden as well as notifying, suspending or cancelling them by administrative methods.' However, this is immediately followed by an important qualifier: 'In a state of emergency, or in time of war, limited censorship may be imposed on newspapers, publications and mass media in matters related to public

Media
coverage

⁷ The Egyptian Constitution, Article 47.

safety or national security in accordance with the law.’⁸ The Emergency Law has long served as a handy excuse to stifle opposition opinion in the media, as it essentially allows the executive to do virtually anything it wants – without accountability to any other branch of the government. Ostensibly, the law is aimed at threats to national security, but such a general, unspecific mandate can be made to fit any circumstance. News reports about, say, Muslim–Coptic friction could be banned, theoretically, because such reports could potentially trigger wider interdenominational conflict – which itself could be perceived as a ‘threat to national security’.

Regulation
of media
coverage

Egypt’s defamation laws, which include prison sentences in the case of offences, are a source of longstanding controversy. Given the government’s tight control of the broadcast media, defamation or libel cases are the most common. Libel is punishable by a maximum of one-year imprisonment and/or a fine ranging between LE 1,000 and LE 5,000. If the target of the offence is a public official, the maximum penalty is two years in jail and/or a fine ranging between LE 5,000 and LE 20,000. After several high-profile libel cases, representatives of the Press Syndicate and the government reached an agreement on the drafting of a new press law to be submitted to parliament. High-ranking officials have promised that the draft law would be both in accordance with journalists’ requests and that jail terms would be replaced with hefty financial fines for offending publications.⁹ Some observers, however, express doubts that jail terms for press offences will ever be eliminated altogether.

The implementation of general media coverage is also set down in the Constitution. Article 207, under the ‘New Provision’ (amended in 1980), which, in its second chapter, deals with the Press Authority, states: ‘The press shall exercise its vocation freely and independently ... It shall thus interpret the trend of public opinion while contributing to its information and orientation within the framework of the basic components of society’.¹⁰ As was mentioned above, however, the Emergency Law ostensibly overrides elements of the Constitution.

⁸ Ibid, Article 48.

⁹ weekly.ahram.org.eg.

¹⁰ The Egyptian Constitution, Article 207.

No particular people, groups or organisations are excluded by law from working as journalists, but certain groups are given less opportunity to air their complaints via the local media. These groups are generally determined by their religious affiliations. One of the things the state is most sensitive to is the potential for inter-religious strife, particularly between Christians and Muslims. For that reason, interdenominational frictions are quickly dealt with by the authorities – and played down in the state-run media. This has to do with the state's longstanding fear of foreign intervention, with the 'protection' of a given religious minority as a pretext. The government is particularly fearful of such an outcome in light of recent instances of foreign intervention elsewhere in the region.

In most cases, media reports must be examined and approved by state authorities before publication, except in the case of self-censoring publications. The government employs official censors whose job is to peruse all printed materials registered abroad before they are printed locally. Content deemed offensive to the state or to religious sensibilities is removed.

Though news coverage has liberalised incrementally in the past few years, the legal implementation of media coverage – while receiving plenty of attention, particularly from the Journalists' Syndicate – has seen only slight improvement [+1]. The events of 9/11 totally changed the rules of engagement for Egypt as well as the United States. While no new anti-terror legislation was passed restricting the freedom of media coverage, none was really necessary, as the Emergency Law was already in place (which allows the state 'limited censorship,' as mentioned above). The one thing 9/11 did do is push the cancellation of the Emergency Law – which some observers had thought was imminent – into the distant future. Since 9/11, in which several Egyptians allegedly participated, the state has been in no mood to revoke the state of emergency. The subsequent rise in regional terrorism, along with the deteriorating circumstances in both the occupied Palestinian territories and Iraq, has made any de facto lifting of the Emergency Law practically inconceivable at the current juncture. Nevertheless, abolition of the law remains a chief demand of the increasingly vocal opposition, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood.

Changes in
the past five
years

Within the last five years, it is safe to say that free media coverage has improved, albeit slightly. This slight improvement [+1] can be attributed to two things. Firstly, pressure for democratic reform and greater government transparency – which tangentially includes improved press freedoms – has come from both home and abroad. This includes the Journalists’ Syndicate’s push for a better legal environment, as well as pressure – namely from the US and the EU – to liberalise politically. The US Ambassador in Cairo regularly criticises local journalism for its lack of accuracy and objectivity, mainly in its coverage of US and Israeli policy. Washington also tends to come down hard on anything broadcast or printed by the state media that could be construed as ‘anti-Semitic’. This could be seen in the row between Cairo and Washington caused by the airing two years ago of the Ramadan serial Faris Bela Gowaad, which was accused of ‘anti-Semitism’.¹¹

The introduction of regional satellite TV stations – and, to a lesser extent, the Internet – to a substantial number of Egyptian homes has forced the local media to make concessions in terms of what it does and does not cover. Since citizens will see the news on Al-Jazeera, or on the BBC’s Arabic-language website, the thinking goes, state media might as well run it – if they do not, they will just lose more credibility. For these reasons, some aspects of the Egyptian media have progressed, albeit slightly, in terms of reporting. One example was the daring coverage of traditionally taboo topics by Dreem TV. Still, the traditional ‘red lines’ remain.

Censorship
under the
law

The local broadcast media are – with the exception of the two music-oriented radio stations – entirely controlled by the state, and are, therefore, self-censored. Printed publications registered abroad, however, must allow government censors to check content before printing (which is done locally) and distribution. State censorship covers two main categories: the morally offensive and the political. In the first case, the state will censor any film or pictures that would be viewed as offensive to traditional Muslim sensibilities. Political censorship by state authorities is, in a state of emergency, permitted, with ‘limited censorship’ being imposed on mass media ‘in matters related to public safety or national security in accordance with the law’ (Article 48). Obviously, both terms could be applied to

¹¹ weekly.ahram.org.eg.

almost anything. In some cases, coverage of certain groups – or issues associated with those groups – is restricted. Coverage of potentially divisive religious issues is forbidden, and at least one newspaper has been closed down within the last five years because it ran an article implicating a Coptic priest in forbidden sex acts. Cairo knows that Muslim-Christian fighting would inevitably lead to foreign – probably US – intervention, a circumstance it wants to avoid at all costs. Additionally, the state will not allow a forum for its traditional enemies, the Islamists, whose ultimate goal is the foundation of an Islamic Republic. More recently, the ranks of the anti-Israel/anti-US/anti-globalisation activists – which are quickly coalescing in the post-9/11 order – have also been barred from opinion making. This is a result of the dramatic demonstration-riots of the spring of 2003, when anti-war sentiment very quickly became anti-regime sentiment.

If journalists or media organisations cross any ‘red lines’, they face a number of legal (and possibly extra-legal) consequences. If their reporting could be construed as an attack on an official figure, they could face fines of up to LE 20,000 (more than US\$ 3,000); prison sentences of up to two years; closure of the publication; and unofficial bureaucratic harassment and intimidation.

TV stations, radio stations and newspapers must be licensed by the state before they can publish or broadcast. Obtaining such licences is extremely difficult. Licences are very often simply refused rather than taken away. For businessmen and companies, the likelihood of acquiring an Egyptian publication licence is minuscule, as the authorities make the bureaucracy involved untenable. Some recent exceptions to the rule have been two music-based FM stations, and a handful of Arabic-language newspapers. The authorities responsible for licensing new media organisations are entirely controlled by the ruling NDP.

Media
licences

Official press cards are given to journalists – local and foreign – by the Information Ministry’s press centre, if the applicant works as a journalist for a state media organ or if he/she is the employee of a known and approved media service. Press cards gain the holder entrance to most ministerial-level press conferences, but a special ‘presidential card’ is needed to attend events where the President will be present. The activity of journalists – local and foreign – is controlled by this system of press cards. Occasionally,

Journalists’
status

journalists are turned down who are not accredited with reputable news institutions or are deemed hostile to the state (i.e. they have written something in the past that could be seen as reflecting negatively on the regime). Work permits are being refused quite often. Generally, journalists with press accreditation (i.e. approved by the press centre) can attend public meetings of the government and parliament. In the case of high-level meetings, for example at the ministerial level, special arrangements have to be made in advance with the press centre.

Monopolies
and cartels

While the formation of private media monopolies is almost impossible, it is not, technically, prohibited by law. Private media cartels generally do not exist, as the state tends to keep the nation's media organs under its control. There is one exception: the fledgling media group of the entrepreneurial Adeeb family, which owns the private business daily *Al-Alam Al-Youm* and also holds a significant stake in the two new FM radio stations. Both, however, have little to do with the formation of public political opinion, with the first concentrating entirely on business issues and the second focusing entirely on music and entertainment. The only thing that could properly be called a media monopoly is that of the state over government-run media organs.

The political position of media monopolies, if they were ever to become more formidable, would most probably be pro-business. This is the only political stance that would be tolerated by the current regime, which is itself quite pro-business/foreign investment. While a long-awaited draft 'anti-monopoly law' continues to await passage in parliament, the issue continues to be a contentious one, and is seen as a threat by certain entrenched business interests. Such a law, if it is ever passed, would be aimed more at real, industrial monopolies, like private-sector steel companies, rather than (non-existent) private media monopolies.¹²

In cases of state repression, journalists can appeal to the Journalists' Syndicate, which is quite active and will usually take up the cause of journalists suffering from state repression. The power of the syndicate, however, is extremely limited vis-à-vis the state. The libel law is a good case in point: despite ten years of official disapproval of the current law (which includes prison sentences), the

¹² AmCham 2004.

government has yet to revise the harsh legislation. Generally, higher courts are helpless to stop state-instigated repression, as the judicial branch of the government – like the legislative one – is ultimately controlled by the ruling party.

III. Political Conditions

There are certain groups that have traditionally been excluded, to varying degrees, from having their issues covered in the mainstream local media. Such groups can be broken down into two general categories: religious and geographic. The former include the Coptic Christians, who form a substantial minority of the national population, and have regularly complained that Christian affairs go relatively uncovered by government media.

Coverage of
marginal
groups

It should also be mentioned that, in terms of newspapers, readership is thought to be heavily concentrated in the capital, reflecting an inherent bias in the media. The publishing houses for the three major daily newspapers – which also account for a large proportion of secondary publications – are located within one square kilometre of each other in the capital. All printing is done in Cairo, with distribution to the rest of the country on a nightly basis by rail and bus or truck. More importantly, though, coverage is slanted towards issues relating to the central government or the country as a whole, with an accompanying Cairo-oriented slant in the perspective. There is hardly any such thing as a local newspaper, even in Alexandria, with a population of nearly 5 million, including affluent and well-educated segments. As one former *Al-Ahram* journalist explained, the effect is to alienate large numbers of potential readers. Even southern cities such as Luxor and Aswan, though suffering from high illiteracy rates, would also have hundreds of thousands of potential readers who might be tempted to buy newspapers that actually addressed issues of local concern. However, no such newspapers exist.

Essentially, all state-run media practises self-censorship, as the editorial staffs of these institutions are well versed in what can and cannot be covered. Foreign publications printed in Egypt, on the contrary, must be shown to state censors before printing and local distribution. Self-censorship occurs in all segments of the state-run media, as well as in certain state-friendly publications, like those of the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt. Generally,

Self-
censorship

the 'red lines' to be avoided in self-censoring publications are criticisms directed at the person of the President and his immediate family and divisive religious issues. Dangerous areas also include Egyptian cooperation with Israel, the issue of the presidential succession and political Islamism.¹³

Illegal state
repression

Today, the state has backed off from threatening or intimidating journalists – at least compared to the 1970s. Journalists are still occasionally subject to harassment by the state, although this is generally only seen when the government is on the defensive, as during parliamentary elections, for example. Generally, the only kind of state repression contrary to the law that journalists or media companies might face would be low-intensity bureaucratic impediments or mild harassment.

While there have been instances of physical intimidation, this is much less common. For example, during the 2000 parliamentary elections, where a number of extreme voting irregularities occurred, there were numerous reports of attacks by security forces and plainclothes assailants on photographers, reporters and correspondents. In an example of the judiciary's helplessness in the face of state repression, the Ministry of Interior went ahead with elections despite a number of rulings handed down by administrative courts regarding the irregularities.¹⁴ More recently, in early November 2004, the chief editor of *Al-Arabi* was kidnapped and beaten. Although the identity of the culprits is unknown, the victim officially accused the Interior Minister in a complaint sent to the prosecutor-general. He linked the incident to an article in the newspaper alleging that the real culprits of the Taba attacks¹⁵ were not the ones arrested and identified by the Interior Ministry. While the Press Syndicate condemned the attack on the editor, few observers expect the culprits – if they were, in fact, state agents – to face any legal punishment. This incident was, however, the exception rather than the rule.¹⁶

While Egypt does not have an official policy of 'censoring' the Internet, it would appear that, at least on some

¹³ Even though censorship by the government is a reality, there is also more indirect censorship exercised mainly through threats made by fundamentalists. The case of Sayyed Al-Qemni is a good example of this.

¹⁴ weekly.ahram.org.eg .

¹⁵ An incident in 2004 when bombs exploded in facilities in Sinai popular with Israeli tourists.

¹⁶ weekly.ahram.org.eg .

occasions, state authorities have taken steps to block or disrupt certain Islamist websites, particularly those – like the Muslim Brotherhood website – that tend to be highly critical of the government. While both the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology insisted they had nothing to do with the matter, many observers suspected that the government was, in fact, preventing local access. The government has also, in a few cases, closed down local sites deemed pornographic or ‘offensive to religious sensibilities’. Some observers suspect the government of using its technical control over Egypt’s four main backbone ISPs to make sites inaccessible to Egyptian web surfers. Although the government consistently denies that it has any kind of Internet monitoring unit, like the governments of Saudi Arabia and China, IT experts say such filtering would be technically possible, since the majority of Egypt’s Internet traffic flows into the country from one primary subterranean cable that could, theoretically, be accessed by the state.

Obstacles to Internet access
Changes in the past five years

The threat of state repression has not changed in quality [0] over the last five years. Despite pressures – both internal and external – to reform, it is understood that, if the state feels threatened, it will not refrain from using extra-legal forms of repression and harassment. This situation is not expected to improve in the short term, especially vis-à-vis Islamist dissent, as the US ‘war on terrorism’ has strengthened the hand of the government in its treatment of the Islamist opposition.

State-owned media monitor the production and distribution of print media. They are produced entirely by employees of the government, and therefore toe the government line. Media that are not produced by the state, meanwhile, generally have to be approved by official government censors before they are printed. In some cases, non-political periodicals are allowed to self-censor their content, meaning that they will automatically avoid whatever issues have been defined as ‘off limits’ by the government. Generally, state authorities most definitely take advantage of these controls and use this kind of repression very often.

Government control over print media

IV. Economic Pressures

Government influence on local private media institutions is done more with a stick than with a carrot. While the state does not subsidise private media by way of advertising

State subsidies

revenue (Cairo has little cash to spare these days), it does use the powerful position of its print-media infrastructure to keep private media close to the governmental line [+1]. This applies only to print media, as there is little private-sector radio and television. The state – which handles the bulk of newspaper printing and distribution – can subtly threaten publishers with bureaucratic delays or unexpected tax increases for printing/distribution services if a private publication strays too far from the accepted guidelines of what can and cannot be published. Compared to the size of the privated media advertising market, the state subsidy is, however, negligible. The state press are generally considered to be a propaganda instrument of the government [+3].

Further aspects One of the major economic disadvantages faced by media houses these days is due to the recent devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which led to a wave of inflation, especially for imported items, like machinery and paper. The local printing industry is a glaring example. According to industry sources, between 600 and 700 print houses – representing 15 per cent of the over 4,000 registered print houses – were forced to close down in the four months following last year's currency devaluation. The local printing industry imports from Europe most of the raw materials and machinery used in paper manufacturing. As the pound lost value to the dollar, importers began paying more for imported paper. The average cost of a ton of paper jumped from LE 2,500 to LE 4,000 between February and May 2003. Qena Newsprint Company, for example, saw its outstanding foreign currency-denominated debts increase by 20 per cent following the devaluation.¹⁷

V. Non-state Repression

Repression by non-state groups In the past, journalists and media organisations have been attacked by non-state religious groups for broadcasting or printing content considered offensive to Islam or contradictory to Islamist perspectives, but there have been no incidents of this kind since the 1990s. The non-state repression seen in the 1990s was primarily the work of anti-state Islamist groups, such as Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya and the Islamic Jihad, both of which were largely destroyed by the government in 1997, after the country was rattled by violent Islamist insurgency. The remnants of the two groups made a

¹⁷ AmCham 2004.

widely publicised peace with the government in 1998, and have been completely inactive since then.

State authorities prosecute attacks against journalists, if it is politically expedient. If the attacks in question were instigated by the state, there is little chance of prosecution. If they were perpetrated by anti-state groups, the culprits are prosecuted to the full extent of the law. In 1999, for example, a state-security emergency court sentenced two Islamic militants to life imprisonment after convicting them of leading an illegal group, Al-Najoun min Al-Nar, which made an assassination attempt on the incumbent head of the Press Syndicate for his liberal views.

There has been a strong to extreme improvement [+3] over the course of the last five to ten years in terms of repression. Despite rising discontent over aggressive US and Israeli policy in the region, there have been no Islamist-inspired attacks on journalists or others since the Luxor incident of 1997. The reason for the relative calm after the Islamist insurgency of the 1990s is generally attributed to two things. First, the principle group in opposition to the government in the past, Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, swore to forsake violence shortly after the 1997 incident. Second, after crushing the insurgency in the late 1990s, the state's security apparatus was boosted further after 9/11. Dissent in general effectively ended in March 2003, when an anti-war rally in Cairo got out of control and the regime itself quickly became the target of popular anger. Many demonstrators were arrested and allegedly beaten, and the security services have brooked no dissent since then.

Changes in
the past five
years

VI. Conclusions

The journalistic climate in Egypt has improved slightly [+1] over the past five years, which can be attributed both to pressure – domestic and foreign – to reform and to competition with alternative news sources provided by regional Arabic-language satellite stations and Arabic-language news-based websites on the Internet. This improvement, however, has been modest, while further improvement is expected to be slow in coming – if it comes at all.

Evaluation
of media
coverage

One way in which the Konrad Adenauer Foundation can support journalists and encourage a culture of open reporting is to offer education clarifying the function of the

KAF
support

fourth estate vis-à-vis society. All too often, journalism and the media in Egypt are seen as sources of revenue or propaganda. The function of the free media as a check on powerful interests – like the government and the business class – should be stressed to up-and-coming reporters. Such education, though, should not be restricted to speakers of foreign languages, but should be available in Arabic.

Secondly, financial support for small- and mid-sized private media projects could be extended, with the understanding that funds would only be directed towards newspapers (or radio/TV stations) maintaining certain standards of objectivity. Rather than using funding as a way to dictate content (the preferred method of the US embassy), funding could be used to encourage objective, fact-based reporting, whether in Arabic or in a foreign language. Funding would also take the pressure off media institutions to satisfy advertisers by way of favourable (non-objective) coverage. While the KAF would have to remain aware of state sensitivities regarding certain issues, it could use its clout – and its inherent affiliation with the super-donor EU – to bring moderate pressure on Cairo for more liberal coverage of relatively innocuous issues. Goals must remain realistic, though, as it will be at least a decade before Egypt can hope to have achieved total media freedom.

Freedom of
the media:
general
situation

Major
obstacles

Ultimately, one can say that the local media are generally free but still suffer under major restrictions. Most obviously, state monopolisation and control of all domestic media organs is antithetical to the notion of free media coverage. As long as the government sets down specific ‘red lines’ delineating the subjects that cannot be broached by the media, certain – highly relevant – topics will go uncovered.

Second, that the state is so sensitive to the religious sensibilities of the conservative Muslim population will also mean that news coverage of stories that could give an unflattering image of Islam will go unreported. The state will still go out of its way to avoid alienating this very formidable political bloc.

Third, the journalistic environment in Egypt suffers badly from the influence of advertisers, who will often – successfully – try to influence the coverage of media outlets in return for advertising revenue. Locally, this phenomenon is rife; it is often implicitly understood that generous advertisers will receive positive coverage in whatever forum they advertise in.

Fourth, because the government is such an avid monitor of what is being written or broadcast locally, many sources that would otherwise be quoted in the media are often afraid to go on record, fearing some measure of retaliation from the government if they were to say anything contrary to the state's wishes. This has the effect of making it harder for journalists to garner information for their articles, even if said articles are relatively innocuous or apolitical.

Finally, there is the long-held perception in Egypt that a career in journalism is not necessarily a respectable profession; that journalists are not necessarily responsible for fulfilling the function of a 'fourth estate' in the western sense. In the state media, journalists are perceived as government employees rather than reporters of news stories.

Of course, the authoritarianism of the state is the one overriding obstacle to free news coverage – this is undeniable. There are, however, some other factors as well. In terms of religious sensibilities, this aspect of media manipulation seems to be over-emphasised; it does not play as important a role in media control as some might contend. Looking at the landscape of Egyptian media over the course of the last five years, it is notable how much more – in terms of television content that could be seen as offensive to Islam, like overly suggestive music videos – is permitted now. The favours that generally define the advertiser-journalist relationship, in my opinion, represent a much graver threat to free media coverage. The last two years have seen greater pressure from the US Embassy in Cairo to conform to certain parameters in Egyptian media coverage. This includes pressure to provide coverage of the US (and Israel) and its policies in a better light, and to avoid anything – editorials or otherwise – that could be deemed 'anti-Semitic'.

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