

# Egypt's Draft Media Law:

## The Debate Continues

Egypt's new draft media law was discussed during a seminar held on December 16, 2008, by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Egypt, and One World Foundation (OWF) at Pyramisa Hotel, Cairo. The event brought together a group of prominent journalists, politicians and human rights activists to discuss the new draft bill, which was leaked to the independent Egyptian newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* on July 9, 2008. The draft law is available online on the newspaper's website and is concerned with the establishment of a new government agency, named the National Audiovisual Broadcast Regulation Authority. The new agency will have a board of directors and will be responsible for regulating broadcast media. Under the new draft law, all media must be licensed and the Authority will have the power to punish a number of violations whether through imprisonment or fines.

Waheed Abdel Mageed, deputy director of *Al Ahram* Centre for Strategic Studies high-

lighted the different aspects of the draft law in his speech in the opening session. This was followed by Andreas Jacobs, resident representative of KAS, Egypt who welcomed the speakers as well as the audience stressing the importance of such gatherings in making a difference.

Abdel Mageed started the discussion by speaking about the new draft law and its expected effects on freedom of expression. He was followed by Negad El-Boraei, a

lawyer and human rights activist, who stated that the new Egyptian law is not unique, whether on the national or regional levels. He said, "In February 2008, the Arab ministers of information signed a non-binding charter which regulates audio-visual media and satellite broadcasting in the Arab World." He pointed out that this charter includes a prohibition of content that damages "social peace, national order, or public unity" or discredits "national leaders and religious icons" which are terms



A group of prominent media representatives and journalists discussing Egypt's new draft media law during the seminar held by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

that are subject to many interpretations. El-Boraei also explained that according to the new law, a journalist will need to obtain a licence to work which could be invalidated whenever it is thought to be appropriate by the authorities.

Agreeing with the previous speaker, Hafez El-Merazy, representative of El Hayat Satellite Channel, Cairo office, said that the charter was proposed to the Arab League by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He expressed his belief that the proposed Egyptian legislation is to be considered as the first step in a process of anchoring the pan-Arab charter into national law, expecting other Arab nations to follow Egypt's example in the near future especially considering that of the 22 members of the League, only Lebanon and Qatar refused to sign. He said that an authority for regulating media should be an independent, non-governmental body that is trusted by the public and is capable of evaluating as well as of ensuring the quality of broadcasting performance. "A media should be able to express itself freely but under clear regulations to ensure its objectivity and the provision of accurate information."

As the debate continued, Ihab El Zalaky, the managing editor of the Egyptian daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, was particularly concerned about digital media and the use of social network sites such as Facebook, which he thought were the real reason behind the issuing of the new

legislation. He added, "Bloggers, who have become equally troubling to the Egyptian government in the last few years, are widely believed to be the main target group of the new law and the proposed law would negatively affect blogging the same way as TV and radio channels." According to El Zalaky, the issuing of regulations in the electronic area has long been postponed or delayed. "Until now there are hardly any laws that address online content. Most of the regulations have been in the telecommunications and technical areas." He said that a clear, well-defined bill clarifying what should or should not be published on the internet is important, which should also regulate broadcast media without the possibility of its being misused by authorities.

In his statement, Essam Shiha, a lawyer, expressed concern about the possibility of exercising censorship on the internet and how this may affect the free access to information.

According to estimates of participant experts, the technological changes sweeping the world will increase the pressure for change and make issues of censorship obsolete as journalists are able to find diverse, free, multinational outlets. Despite the fact that most attendant journalists and speakers question this new law, yet it has been already approved by the parliament on July 17, 2008, and referred to the Shura Council (upper house of Parliament). ▲