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Egypt's Private Press and Inciting for Violence Against Journalists During the 2013 Military Coup

Maher Hamoud

Abstract

This article aims at critically analysing the hegemony of Egypt's business elite and the private press they own during the military coup of 2013. It is a hegemony requiring the exercise of power to maintain consent under changing conditions, which witnessed significant violence against critical voices. This study answers the question of how the demonisation of critical news in Egypt's controlled media caused chaotic street violence against journalists. Situated within the interdisciplinary domain of Critical Theory, this article discusses the status of freedom of expression and violence against the media. The findings of this study show that the Egyptian private press has become more controlled since the coup period: it initially incited for violence against critical journalists, later on this turned into chaotic street violence. Many journalists, including those from the pro-coup camp, have fallen victim to such chaotic violence.

Keywords: Egypt; 2013 Military Coup; Business Elite; Private Media; Street Violence

Introduction

One of the major outcomes of Egypt's revolution in 2011, which was the democratic election of civilian president Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012, was apparently unacceptable to the historically politically-engaged Egyptian military. It reacted with a coup in 2013, led by then field marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The military coup was supported by the masses who headed to the streets in unprecedented numbers across the country, regardless of existing aspirations for democracy that brought Mubarak down only two and half years earlier. News agendas controlled by political, business and military elites, besides fatal political mistakes by the Muslim Brotherhood, were main reasons behind the mass support of the coup.

This article focuses on the social relations, particularly the power relations, in the coup period governing the production, distribution, and exchange of resources, as well as problems of control and survival.¹ Autocrat rulers, then and always, envisaged media regulations and censorship not to prevent media concentration but to curb political opposition and foster a submissive public. The authoritarian powerholders could live with the rise of media tycoons, and the media tycoons could live with them.² Ownership concentration has spurred the downswing of

pluralism in Egyptian media. For example, prominent outspoken journalist Ibrahim Eissa, who founded al-Tahrir TV right after the fall of Mubarak, sold it to Suleiman Amer, a businessman closely connected to Mubarak's elite.³

Generally speaking, profit-seeking in the Egyptian and Arab media cannot be an overriding expectation, because distortions in the advertising market and restrictions on editorial content do undermine the commercial potential of media operations. Controlling a network of media is a good way to demonstrate loyalty and thus carry favour with the rulers of a country,⁴ which is the main goal of the investment. The business and the political elites were threatened by the 2011 revolution, and for them taking an anti-revolution position was necessary for survival. The revolution made them experience fear: fear of being prosecuted, the least to say, for all the corruption and favouritism that they flourished under when Mubarak was in power for about thirty years. And because of this fear, and their desperation to survive the revolution and convert it into something else in their favour, they did all what they could to make the 2013 military coup work. Their response to the revolution and support of the coup, however, may have gone too far.

After the coup, media ownership started shifting towards newly founded companies indirectly owned by the security apparatus: General Intelligence, Military Intelligence and National Security, still an ongoing process that intensified in 2017.⁵ However, understanding the role of the business elite's private press as support for the political elite around the military coup period can play a significant role in understanding what was happening in Egypt at that moment in history and why the public choose to support a coup. And one of the many issues of concern around that period is street violence by civilians against journalists, not only the 'usual' violence by the police or the military.

One of the ways to understand this issue is to understand the power of the Egyptian private media market in Egypt, which was clearly dominated by the business elite then, who largely owned its news outlets and controlled them. And under this understanding of the relationship between the business and political elites within the private press market, Egyptian journalists then struggled to incorporate the facilitative normative roles in their daily practices after Mubarak's fall. However, the radical-oppositional role against the Muslim Brotherhood government suited Egyptian journalists much better, after which most of them re-assumed their traditional collaborative role in the service of the ruling (military) elite. This was also associated with the lack of a tradition of investigative reporting, poor professional skills, and a legacy of reverential journalism. This was further exacerbated by the strong links between the owners of private media back then and the political and military elites.⁶

Most Egyptian media outlets have gone to extremes to support the post-Morsi military regime, with a few individual exceptions trying to maintain some balance. Overall, radio and television waves are replete with patriotic songs and talk shows glorifying the military. For weeks following Morsi's deposal, Egyptian state television as well as most private satellite channels ran a graphic banner with the Egyptian flag that stated, 'Egypt Fights Terrorism,' in reference to the confrontation between the army and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Most talk show hosts did not shy away from biased commentary and leading questions, and their carefully selected

guests responded with exclusively pro-military answers. Facts were routinely mixed with opinions on these highly popular shows, which have become the main source of news for many Egyptians.⁷

The presenter Ahmed Moussa, known to be vocal in his support for the military, claims to have received exclusive ‘information’ from them, warning his audience: ‘The free army officers decided that anyone suspected of killing a security member will be killed by them directly in the street. There is no need for courts anymore’. The statement of this talk show host, clearly advocating unlawful killing in the streets, is not a unique feature in Egyptian media today.⁸

With the above quote, Fatima El-Issawi gives a brief and dim image of the media in post-coup or post-Morsi Egypt. Open calls for violence against opponents, Muslim Brotherhood or others, became a norm to the ears and eyes of media consumers in whatever format. This demonisation not only targeted political opponents; it was simply opposed to all critical voices, including those of journalists. And since journalists do not wear uniforms to differentiate themselves according to political affiliation (only a vest with a press sign, if any), many, including pro-military ones, have fallen victim to chaotic street violence by civilians, as the article will discuss in detail later.

And with this assumption of the deliberate incitement against opponents and critical news of the 2013 military coup in the private media, I choose to situate this study under the domain of critical theory. With a focus on the country’s top two newspapers, al-Masry al-Youm and al-Watan and other private media, this article answers the question of ‘How did the demonisation of critical news in Egypt’s controlled media cause chaotic street violence against journalists?’

Theoretical Approach and Methodology

The instrumental character of media is obvious, not only when one investigates the relationships between the owners of media and the ruling elite, but also when one considers the content produced.⁹ This notion reinforces the need in this study to take a critical approach, which occupies a significant space in the history of the political economy of communication from a multidisciplinary perspective.¹⁰ This is an approach that is needed to understand the case of Egypt’s private press, especially around the military coup, which in some occasions resulted in violence against journalists with critical voices and other journalists at random.

Max Horkheimer, as one of the founders of critical theory, distinguishes it from the ‘traditional’ theories based on a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human ‘emancipation from slavery’, acts as a ‘liberating influence’, and works ‘to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers’ of human beings.¹¹ The theory is a normative approach based on the judgment that domination is a problem, which is an essential theme in this study. The theory applies approaches that place emphasis on the unequal distribution of power and criticises the arrangements whereby such inequalities are sustained and reproduced.

The concept of reproducing power is also very important to understanding how the business elite and ‘Mubarak’s state’ managed to survive the 2011 revolution and come back strong with the 2013 military coup. The term ‘critical’ is usefully broad and encompassing, yet it also has distinctive practices and values of critique in intellectual enquiry like questioning, interrogating, and challenging the adequacy of explanations of phenomena,¹² which are suitable for critically analysing power struggles in a country undergoing challenges between revolutionary and counter revolutionary entities.

Generally speaking, the vast domain of critical theory stands out in its focus on studying a society in terms of how it is influenced by the media.¹³ A critical approach in understanding a political phenomenon would question the media as an attack of money and power, and in turn, as a structure used by elites to dominate a society.¹⁴ This attacking media is a system that functions to communicate messages and symbols to the general populace, as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky explain. The media’s function, according to them, is to amuse, entertain, inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that integrate them into the institutional structures of larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interests, fulfilling this role requires systematic propaganda.¹⁵

The ‘consent’ notion in Herman and Chomsky’s work goes hand in hand with Vincent Mosco’s understanding of hegemony, as he argues that hegemony requires the exercise of power to maintain consent under changing conditions. And communication here plays a central role in hegemony as vital to the successful maintenance of hegemonic control as well as to resistance and the construction of counter-hegemonies.¹⁶ Critical theory has always seen rises in its use during times of crises, like the 1968 protests in several countries and the world’s financial meltdown in 2008. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that it will also be used here in this article, which investigates a mass-supported military coup in 2013 that occurred in reaction to a revolution that took place two and half years earlier.

Based on the chosen theoretical domain mentioned above, the methodology of this research is designed to conduct critical qualitative analysis of the issues of press freedom in general and violence against journalists in particular. The analysis discusses the available literature covering inciting against the Muslim Brotherhood, violence against journalists by both the state forces (police and military) and civilians. The discussions in this article reflect occasionally on the country’s top two privately-owned newspapers, al-Masry al-Youm and al-Watan, both of which engaged in producing news frames of ‘fear’ of the Muslim Brotherhood and ‘promotion’ of the military as a protecting power.¹⁷

This article additionally benefits from responses by Egyptian senior media professionals interviewed for this research. These responses are embedded into arguments and analyses throughout the article when relevant. These interviews play an important role because of each interviewee's special access to information not usually available to average journalists in the private press industry. The sources I interviewed are all influential media professionals who provided a significant portion of the daily news production in Egypt’s private press market around

the coup period, whether by being actual content producers or managing a news production business.

In the second half of 2015 (two years after the coup), I interviewed five of these high-profile sources via email for this study, as a part of my PhD thesis. Four of them were influential journalists and editors, and one was a CEO of a private media company. Their ages ranged between late 30s and late 40s. I gave relatively little detail about the interviewees with the intention of eliminating any information that might reveal who they are in order to avoid exposing them to security risks, especially considering that they are all still living in Egypt. The country then was considered one of the worst jailers of journalists worldwide¹⁸ and this still is the case.¹⁹ Therefore, I decided to process their interviews anonymously giving them gender-neutral pseudonyms as Nour Magdy, Shams Zakareya, Reda Abbas, Wesam Shawkat, and Ihsan Sameer.

Freedom of Expression: Only Against the Muslim Brotherhood

Chomsky and Herman showed how the US government and the elite-controlled media waged a war against communism, communists and anyone that may seem sympathetic towards them in the early 1950s. This has had a long-lasting influence on American political life until today:

Communism as the ultimate evil has always been the spectre haunting property owners, as it threatens the very root of their class position and superior status. The Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions were traumas to Western elites, and the ongoing conflicts and the well-publicized abuses of Communist states have contributed to elevating opposition to communism to a first principle of Western ideology and politics. This ideology helps mobilize the populace against an enemy, and because the concept is fuzzy it can be used against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with Communist states and radicalism. It therefore helps fragment the left and labour movements and serves as a political-control mechanism.²⁰

Egypt's elites adopted almost the same approach and declared a media war against the Muslim Brotherhood and anyone that may sympathize with or sound slightly critical of the military coup. A facilitative role emerged through various attempts to tell stories from different angles and to bring political opponents onto the same debate platforms. This was short-lived. As a result of the increased polarisation of the political scene, ideological opponents of the military's media-supported political agenda were more and more portrayed as the ultimate enemy, as 'terrorists' whose destruction is legitimate.²¹

We return again to Herman and Chomsky as they discuss the phenomenon of those who 'converted' from communism to the 'centre' and were elevated by the media in the United States as eyewitnesses, very similar to the phenomenon that took place in Egypt. Former 'radicals', mainly from the Muslim Brotherhood suddenly 'saw the light' (a phrase Herman and Chomsky

use) and were labelled as 'experts' and turned into stars all over the media. Former Muslim Brotherhood member Tharwat al-Kharabawy is a clear example. Al-Kharabawy, a lawyer, was a leading member of the Brotherhood until he left it in 2002. His fame spread all over the country when his book 'The Temple's Secret: The Hidden Secrets of the Muslim Brotherhood' (published in 2012) got heavy airplay by the private media in 2013, especially around the military coup period. Unsurprisingly, in addition to his excessively frequent appearances on private and state TV channels, he became one of Al-Watan's regular opinion writers with a fixed column. His job, I argue, was to give a solid foundation to the portrayal of the Brotherhood as a dangerous cult more than a conservative religious political group.

On the night of the military coup Islamist TV channels like Egypt 25, al-Hafez, al-Nas, al-Rahma, and later other lower profile channels, were all shut down. It happened exactly during the televised military coup's statement read by al-Sisi from a written document. It was a move by the military that showed what kind of a repressive regime they were going to introduce following the Brotherhood's fall. Almost three months after, on 25 September 2013, the Brotherhood's newspaper al-Horreyawal-Adala (Freedom and Justice, the same name as their political party) was shut down, had its office raided and all equipment confiscated.²²

Having all the above said does not mean that the pro-Muslim-Brotherhood or Islamist media in general were 'innocent'. In the end, it's almost all about hegemony and how much of a media voice a power-seeking group would use to maximise control a society for the sake of gaining or maintaining power. Spending on media and communication by the Muslim Brotherhood was estimated at EUR 417 million (exchange rate for 2013: 1 EUR = 9.6 EGP) in that year alone.²³ In the same period, pro-Brotherhood voices from the Islamist camp have indeed incited for violence against secular figures; such attempts, however, were mostly very quickly condemned by both the Brotherhood and most other Islamist voices.²⁴ Noha Mellor in her book 'Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: Da'wa, Discourse, and Political Communication' lists the group's attempts to control the media, as on 9 December 2012, more than two hundred journalists and presenters protested in Tahrir Square against what they called an Islamist attempt to control the Egyptian media. I attended this protest in person and noticed that many of the participants were Mubarak loyalists and army supporters from the state media. However, this doesn't deny the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to control, or at least influence, the state media and their significant expenditure on private media back then.

I think the Muslim Brotherhood's media and the support of other Islamist media for Morsi and those who were in his camp, all may have induced the counter-revolution camp (mostly business and political elites) to maximise their own efforts to counter a pro-Morsi media discourse that they had overestimated. For at the end, the millions who marched in the streets against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood on 30 June, were overwhelming evidence that all the pro-Morsi Islamist media combined did not succeed in stopping the Tamarod Campaign (a movement launched on 26 April 2013 to 'withdraw confidence' from Morsi). I argue that the massive success of Tamarod and the colossal failure of Islamist media on that particular day gave a strong signal

to the military that they can go for a full military coup three days later, on the 3rd of July, not only a Mubarak-style ouster.

And here, as I was examining my assumption regarding the issue of anti-Brotherhood media practices during the period around the coup, I asked my interviewees this question in order to get a direct response, whether by agreeing and disagreeing: 'Freedom of expression has, for the most part, become a practice only allowed against the Muslim Brotherhood, not the ruling elites. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this notion?' I was trying to determine whether they could or could not directly acknowledge the bias against the Muslim Brotherhood. Shams Zakareya, Ihsan Sameer and Wesam Shawkat all very briefly and directly expressed their strong agreement. Nour Magdy, who also agreed with the notion, added 'I totally agree with it, all media outlets now can criticise the Muslim Brotherhood, even accusing them of false charges. While when it comes to the ruling elites, newspapers could be prosecuted under the accusation of publishing false news.' Sameer went along Magdy's view and said '[I] totally agree. Moreover, it's hard now to find a big difference between private and state-owned press when it comes to the president's coverage [for] example. I [would] say that we are living in a mono-tone era.'

Following the military coup, Fatima el-Issawi managed to interview the almost unapproachable al-Watan editor Magdy al-Gallad for her research project 'Egyptian Media Under Transition', as she wrote:

For Magdy al-Gallad, the editor-in-chief of al-Watan newspaper, presumably close to the military institution, it was not possible for liberal media to adopt neutrality. He said: 'This is a battle we did not choose. We were portrayed as evils: The spiritual leader of the Brotherhood called us the media of shame, the newspaper's offices were burned ...' [...] Beyond lobbying for views, the publication of 'confidential' documents is a powerful tool frequently used by national media in smear campaigns. Al-Watan, known for mastering this game, had published various allegedly leaked documents, such as suspicious bank accounts for senior figures in the Brotherhood leadership or tax evasion for business projects owned by them. [...] If the publication of leaked documents is not specific to the Egyptian media, the frequent use of these documents, with no independent channels to verify their content, exacerbated the political manipulation of media platforms. The fact that these documents are amplified, being re-published by news websites, the press and social media pages as well as being debated on talk show platforms, makes them a powerful political tool.²⁵

In contrast to al-Gallad's position concerning his editorial agenda for al-Watan, which is very similar to al-Masry al-Youm's, in relation to voices critical on the military, the following headline by The Telegraph was published on 9 July 2013:

The Telegraph: Ahmed Assem: the Egyptian photographer who chronicled his own death

The article conveys how these critical voices were violently dealt with. The story, also published by several other local and international news outlets, gives details about Ahmed Assem, the Freedom and Justice journalist who filmed his own assassination by a military sniper during what is known as ‘The Republican Guards Events’, where tens of pro-Brotherhood sit-inners were killed on 8 July. It was obvious from the video, which managed to reach YouTube, that it was a violent attack by the military. The video is disturbing graphic evidence that anti-Brotherhood voices are encouraged and supported, while criticism against the military and their allies is not allowed. Or even worse, silenced forever. And as discussed in the next section, Egypt has become one of the world’s most hostile environments for journalists and one of their biggest jailors.

Violence Against Journalists: Police and the Honourable Citizens

In addition to state violence against journalists, there has always been control over journalists and content they produce, as explained earlier. A tremendous degree of state and military control continued to be asserted over the media through an oppressive regulatory framework which imposes restrictions on critical news reporting. For instance, putting journalists on trial was not only a frequent practice under the Mubarak regime but it was also prevalent under Muslim Brotherhood rule, as well as under the current military-backed government.²⁶ This led to highly controlled news content that mostly corresponds with the army’s narratives of events. Ahmed Assem’s murder by an army sniper is symbolic rather than the norm, though. Violence against journalists more often takes other forms: being assaulted or sometimes killed in less sophisticated ways in the middle of a protest that might turn into a clash; being arrested and tortured; being detained with or without a legal warrant. However, a more confusing form of violence against journalists is the one practiced by the so-called ‘Honourable Citizens’, which will be discussed later in this section.

In 2014, in its report about the coup, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which I will refer to in this section as a known-to-be trusted source, ranked Egypt as number six in the list of worst jailors of journalists worldwide, with at least twelve journalists behind bars.²⁷ I would say that the real number could have been much higher, but it is very difficult to track, as many were unofficially detained for short periods, even only for a few hours, and then released. Other arrests simply do not get reported at all, especially those of freelance journalists, as they have no proper protection, either by the publications they contribute to or by the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate. However, for research purposes and due to the difficulty of accurately tracking down information on detained, assaulted or killed journalists, I will stick to CPJ’s data on that period as a highly trusted source and ignore my assumptions regarding the possible higher numbers.

I will start with this interesting quote from the same CPJ report, which says ‘Egypt’s Minister of Interior Mohamed Ibrahim said in a press conference on Monday that he was monitoring media reactions to the killing of demonstrators and said some journalists had insulted him with their reporting. When asked about the detentions and harassment of the press, the minister joked that he

would have arrested all journalists, not just those covering the protests this weekend, according to news reports'.²⁸

I asked Nour Magdy about the police violence against journalists in Egypt: 'Do you agree or disagree that there is organised violence against journalists?' Magdy strongly accepted the question's assumption and said, 'I totally agree, I see that they're [journalists] targeted all the time, especially photojournalists as they can be easily distinguished.' Interestingly enough, the police violence did not discriminate between any types of journalist, whether working for critical news outlets like Ona or the pro-military DotMasr. The police did not want any form of press presence in the streets while dealing with protests, which is evident in the following quote by CPJ:

Among the other journalists detained were DotMasr reporters Mohamed Wesam, Mohamed Amin, and photographer Ahmed Adel; Veto editor Mohamed Mahrous and photographer Moamen Samir; Ona News Agency correspondent Shams Eddin Murtada; Masrawy news website photographer Alaa Al-Qassas; and Albawaba News website correspondent Iman Ahmed, according to JATO [Journalists Against Torture Observatory, an Egyptian NGO] and the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate. The groups said that all of those detained were later released. It is not clear if charges will be brought against any of them.²⁹

Shams Zakareya tended to generalise such police practices over a longer history, saying, 'The police are clear: Don't cross your limits [as a journalist] or you'll be made an example of. The Brotherhood practiced the same actions, Mubarak did so before, and the current regime is on their footsteps. I don't see it as a new phenomenon. We [journalists] were and will remain targeted, as we're considered the eye that might see what shouldn't be seen.' During Mubarak's rule and until the military coup, Western journalists were almost immune from police targeting. However, since the return of the police forces to the streets following the coup, this rule stopped applying, as the CPJ documented then: 'In a Twitter post, Orla Guerin, the BBC's Cairo correspondent, said her team was warned by a plainclothes police officer that they would be shot if they continued to film in the Ain Shams neighbourhood of Cairo, where police were looking for Muslim Brotherhood demonstrators'.³⁰ Reda Abbas admitted that the environment is hostile against journalists, but dismissed my assumption that such violence is organised: 'No! Not organized, but [there is] a hostile environment for the press.' Ihsan Sameer almost leaned towards Abbas's opinion by saying 'Most [cases] are individual incidents. And I think that the state in the past, prior to Mubarak's fall, was harassing journalists more than now, however, in different ways other than imprisonment.' Wesam Shawkat briefly denied the assumption and said 'No! But some restrictions exist.' As we can see, the responses of Sameer and Shawkat contradict CPJ's reports and other interviewees.

While looking from a different angle at the phenomenon of violence against journalists in Egypt, it is very much worth observing the rise in a type of violence by civilians, whom are commonly labelled as al-Mowatenoon al-Shorafaa (The Honourable Citizens). The early use of

this label was in the statements of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) right after the fall of Mubarak in 2011, whenever they were announcing some political decision or addressing the public in an emotional explanation of some military move, as they were the direct rulers of the country back then. However, the first use of the term in a negative context was during the bloody Maspero events on 9 October 2011, where the army clashed with (mostly Christian) protesters and killed several of them. Peculiarly, state television at the time called for the ‘Honourable Citizens’ and called on them to ‘defend the army’ from protesters, when in fact it was the army attacking the protesters. Human rights defender Hossam Bahgat described the events, saying that ‘What started out as a peaceful protest in Cairo turned into one of the worst massacres of Christians in modern Egypt’.³¹ Nour Magdy went for the assumption that the Honourable Citizen’s term was first used by the military and confirmed the link between them and violence against journalists: ‘The first time this term was used was by one of the SCAF’s members. Since then each one used it on his own way. And yes, there’s a link, either they [the Honourable Citizens] are volunteering their efforts, thinking that they’re helping in assuring the country’s stability, or they’re pushed by security forces to keep them [journalists] away from the scene.’

Moheet, a news website, which published an investigation on the phenomenon of the Honourable Citizens, related the emergence of the term a few weeks earlier, prior to the SCAF statements, contradicting what most observers think:

The Tahrir sit-in in 2011 was a space for the conflict between the street vendors and the revolutionary youth protecting the squares from one side, against the Baltageya (thugs) and the ousted president’s [Mubarak] lovers, who were attacking Tahrir from time to time in order to have the squares evacuated at any cost. During that period, a new term appeared, used to refer to the thugs and others defending Mubarak and attacking the revolution, which is al-Mowatenoon al-Shorafaa, as pro-regime media outlets back then started to dictate the term to viewers.³²

Regardless of when exactly the term appeared, association with security forces and unexpectedness are always there in relation to these attackers, which is expressed by Reda Abbas: ‘This term is mostly used to describe people who work with the interior ministry for most cases, [and] they are ready to move when orders are received. These days, it is dangerous to do journalism in the street, you never know what is coming [your way].’ What Abbas said can be inferred from the CPJ’s reports on violations against journalists in Egypt, not only by the police, but by the volunteering Honourable Citizens as well:

Sara Hashem, a reporter for the independent daily al-Fagr, said in a YouTube broadcast that she was arrested near Tahrir Square while covering demonstrations. She said that police handed her to pro-government demonstrators after telling them she was an anti-government protester. One of them dragged her to the ground while others punched and slapped her, she said. In a statement broadcast on the al-

Fagr YouTube channel, Hashem said she fainted during the attack and was briefly hospitalized. A video on the Cairo News website showed Hashem being taken away by what she later said were pro-government protesters, while screaming for mercy and saying she is a journalist.³³

Interestingly, Ihsan Sameer and Wesam Shawkat refused to comment on this issue. Sameer laughed in reaction to the question and only said ‘Usually, this is only the beginning’, referring to this type of violence. Shawkat simply gave no answer at all. I think that is likely both Sameer and Shawkat refrained from answering my question out of fear of persecution.

From Targeted to Chaotic Violence

Understanding the intense discourse demonising critical news outlets starts by understanding the relationship between Egypt and the Qatari al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera has always been a concern for all Egyptian governments under Mubarak, and it continued to be under the military after the 2011 revolution, which the network supported and heavily covered in a biased manner. When Mubarak once toured al-Jazeera’s headquarters in Doha, he jokingly asked ‘All this trouble from a matchbox like this?’³⁴ For Mubarak, who preferred his news media to be compliant, al-Jazeera had caused plenty of trouble by fostering debate about topics that many in the region did not favour.³⁵ This view by Philip Seibin 2005 is still valid today, and even more valid given how al-Jazeera has grown much bigger and much more internationally influential. The growth of influence by this network, or news empire, led to a significant growth of hostility between Egypt and Qatar since Mubarak’s era, now an embargo against them in coordination with other Gulf states. The network was clearly in support of the 2011 revolution, and the Qatari rulers (Hamad bin-Khalifa al-Thani then, and now his son Tamim) chose to support the Muslim Brotherhood, who they already had a good relationship with years before the revolution. This complex and old conflict had violent consequences for the network’s journalists (among other foreign and local journalists) during the period of the 2013 coup.

In the end, al-Jazeera is a politically charged project representing the interests and ambitions of Qatar with its own regional agendas and international power relations, including the US government as Wikileaks’ classified documents have shown, when former CEO Waddah Khanfar was holding secret meetings with the US ambassador in Doha negotiating changing editorial agenda and news content, to which he was surprisingly positively responsive.³⁶ Khanfar had to resign a few days after the leak of these documents. However, the critical voice of al-Jazeera that always angers Egypt’s ruling elites continued the way it was.

One of the reasons for civilian violence against journalists is the demonisation of any form of media with a critical voice against the coup. Although critical media was trying to cover the other side of the story - state violence targeting the Muslim Brotherhood - it was understood by readers or TV viewers, especially back in that period, as sympathy toward the Brotherhood. Both state and private media accused critical media, whether local, regional or international, of being

pro-Brotherhood, thereby stoking anger among the public against it. Therefore, when a clash or a protest took place, the Honourable Citizens and other enraged civilians incited by state and private media would attack journalists at random. These angry civilians, however, were unable to distinguish between their targets, putting at risk journalists representing all forms of media, whether for or against the military coup. In some cases, journalists from the pro-military media, like the case discussed in the previous section of Sara Hashem from the pro-military al-Fagr (CPJ mistakenly labelled as ‘independent’ in their report on 26 January 2015), would fall victim to random civilian violence against journalists.

I argue that the phenomenon of extreme violence against journalists started with the rise in demonising the Doha-based al-Jazeera Channel and its Cairo-based channel al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr. Al-Jazeera was showing another side of Tamarod, the military and the Brotherhood that did not match with the image the military propagated. Images of graphic violence against pro-Brotherhood protesters were shown and anti-coup figures were hosted on their programs.

Al-Masry al-Youm: Al-Jazeera, Channel of ‘The Coup Against Professionalism’

Al-Watan: Yousef al-Houseiny: The Qatari al-Jazeera Zionist by Excellence

As we see in the above two headlines by al-Masry al-Youm on 14 August 2013 and earlier by al-Watan on 21 July, the private press had spread a sentiment of demonisation, especially our two newspapers in focus. In the beginning, the anti-al-Jazeera campaign worked well, as anti-Brotherhood protesters responded angrily in line with the discourse of the private press (and the state-run as well). Protesters started chanting against al-Jazeera in their protests, and this soon escalated into physical attacks on the channel’s crews. Following the success in demonising al-Jazeera, which made it impossible for their crews to work on the ground, I argue that the authorities and the private press began following the same pattern against any other media with a critical voice.

I asked the interviewees the question: ‘Do you think that local private press is engaging in the demonisation of Western media and local “independent” media with critical voices? Yes or no and why?’ Nour Magdy responded, ‘Yes, [...] there are relations between private newspapers and security bodies, which affect their editorial policies in this regard. So, they either publish what they’re told by those security services or try to defend the regime by attacking Western media in order to convince the readers that everything is OK.’ Later, on the 2nd of September 2013, and after it had become already clear for media observers how a press-hostile environment was growing more dangerous and chaotic by the day, a world’s top media freedom watchdog Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) issued a report titled ‘Heavy toll on journalists in two months since army takeover’. The report documented different forms of violations against journalists by the military, the police, pro-military protesters and pro-Brotherhood protesters as well. The report also documented the incitement against critical press outlets that were attempting to provide any picture of the situation on the ground that differed from the military’s narrative of events. The report mentioned that a total of five journalists had been killed, eighty journalists arbitrarily detained,

and at least forty news providers physically attacked by the police or by pro-Brotherhood or pro-military protesters. ‘Several journalists sustained gunshot injuries, while the security forces were dispersing pro-Morsi sit-ins on 14 August. They included Asma Waguih of Reuters, Tarek Abbas of al-Watan, Najjar Ahmad of al-Masry al-Youm, Mohamed al-Zaki of al-Jazeera and an Associated Press journalist’.³⁷ As we can notice from the names of these news outlets, protesters did not distinguish between types of journalist, attacking pro-military and other news reporters alike.

Within a context of chaos in the streets - with attacks and retreats between pro-Brotherhood protesters from one side and the military, the police and pro-military protesters from the other - it came as no surprise that civilians reacted violently against demonised journalists and their media. Reda Abbas said, ‘Most of the press now is engaged in propaganda in best cases. So, many [of the private press] volunteered to do such thing [demonisation of Western media], even without [being] asked to do so.’ However, the masses could not differentiate between journalists, according to the Egyptian media’s classification as pro-Brotherhood and pro-military. Obviously, it was impossible, and any journalist could fall victim regardless of affiliation, as the reports have documented.

The other aspect of understanding violence against journalists as a result of state-demonisation of critical media – and mainly any media that did not follow the military’s narrative of events – can be garnered from how the Egyptian state officially and openly dealt with critical media, as stated then by the State Information Service:

Egypt is feeling severe bitterness towards some Western media coverage that is biased to the Muslim Brotherhood and ignores shedding light on violent and terror acts that are perpetrated by this group in the form of intimidation operations and terrorizing citizens.³⁸

In a country like Egypt, which is in almost full control of major media outlets, when a statement like the above is issued against media in the context of violence and chaos against one side, the other side might violently react, which actually is what then happened. This was because the pro-military masses were already exaggeratedly fearing the Muslim Brotherhood, thanks to the controlled media. All this happened during the same time that many journalists found themselves subject to attacks on the streets as they were simply attempting to do their jobs.³⁹

Yet after a while, the chaotic wave of street violence against journalists softened. Shams Zakareya tended to believe that the demonisation of critical media mostly occurred after the military coup, and it doesn’t happen anymore. Zakareya explained the process of demonisation after the coup, saying that ‘Newspapers deal with them [critical media] by piece. Those who positively write about us are made a good example of, and whoever takes us as an enemy, we make a bad example of.’

Conclusion

Control over the Egyptian press has been the reality since Nasser's era (1952 – 1970), throughout the eras of Sadat (1970 – 1981) and Mubarak (1981 – 2011), and until the present time. There have always been changes, depending on the political situation the country was going through. Freedoms were sometimes slightly –but temporarily - restored. As a continuation of the business elites' enforcement of hegemony through their private newspapers in favour of the 2013 military coup, this article found that freedom of expression was a practice allowed only when it came to the Muslim Brotherhood. Before the coup, free expression of opinion - mostly against the Brotherhood - was encouraged. During and after the coup, free expression of opinion against the Brotherhood, or in favour of their demonisation, was the only form of free expression acceptable. Entities like Tamarod and the military were mostly above criticism, at least during the concerned period in this research.

The efforts by the military and its affiliates to silence dissent and shutter outlets associated with the Muslim Brotherhood have produced a media environment in which most public and private outlets are firmly supportive of the coup. Dozens of journalists were physically assaulted during that year by both security agents and civilians.⁴⁰ The rise of violence by civilians against journalists in the public domain was at its peak in 2013, as documented by media freedom watchdogs and other media outlets. The role of the so-called Honourable Citizens was the label loosely given to acts of violence committed by civilians who do not belong to any form of official authority. Demonising critical news outlets was an organised practice by the authorities and the business elite's press, which in turn fuelled the violence by civilians against journalists working for critical news producers whether local, regional or international. The study also finds that especially during and after the coup, civilian violence against journalists spiralled out of control - given the randomness of the attacks and the fluid violent atmosphere- so much so that even pro-military journalists accidentally fell victim, in addition to the critical journalists incited against by the private (and state) press.

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