

NEITHER WAVING NOR DROWNING: LIMITS OF PRESS FREEDOM IN EGYPT

JOHN MUNRO

The Egyptian press can be divided into four categories: a) state-owned; b) political party owned; c) independent, licensed in Egypt; d) independent, licensed abroad. The government is able to exercise considerable control over the first three but less over the fourth, even though it employs a variety of strategies in a bid to do so. The government has little faith in the idea of a free press, regarding the concept as an obstacle to its top-down rule. The standard of journalism is generally low, compared to international norms and this coupled with the eternally watchful eye of the censor, means that the Egyptian press is unable to play a constructive role in social, economic and political development. However, the Egyptian press is more free than it was ten years ago and some journalists do play a positive civic role, in spite of the obstacles that are placed in their way.

There is a story – no doubt apocryphal – that when Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak was told that advocates for press freedom were pressing him to relax the government's control over the media, he responded: "What's the matter with them? They have the official press and they have opposition party newspapers. What do they want with an independent press?"

True or not, the story neatly encapsulates the government's attitude to the media. A highly authoritarian regime, President Mubarak's government seeks to get its message across through the state-owned media. At the same time, it is willing to tolerate a certain degree of dissent of a predictable kind, which also allows people to let off steam. What it does not like, however, are surprises. Hence, the suspicious attitude of the government towards the independent press, the only source of objective investigative reporting and editorial opinion that reflects a non-partisan point of view. In short, by western standards, the Egyptian press is hardly free, even though government ministers keep assuring us that it is. At the same time, it is perhaps not as restricted as some outsiders would have us believe. What

follows is an overview of the Egyptian press, in which an attempt is made to define the limits of press freedom in Egypt today.

First, a brief look at the range of newspapers and magazines available.¹ The Egyptian press may be divided into four categories:

1. State-owned
2. Political party
3. Domestic licensed, independent
4. Foreign licensed, independent

The state-owned press, that is in which the government owns controlling stock, publishes newspapers in Arabic, French and English. Foremost among them is the venerable daily, *Al Ahram*, founded in 1876 and widely regarded as the most influential newspaper published in the Arab world. This is not to say it is the most influential newspaper published in Arabic, however. As a consequence of region-wide constraints on the media of varying degrees of intensity, the only significant, reasonably independent Arabic newspapers are published in Europe, foremost among them being the privately-owned *Al Hayat* and *Al Sharq Al Awsat*. That said, *Al Ahram* does carry considerable weight among Arabic readers everywhere. It has two companion Arabic-language dailies, *Al Gomhouriya* and *Al Akhbar*, both of which have smaller readerships. All three papers rely heavily on reports by the government's own Middle East News Agency (MENA); independent reporting with regard to serious news is virtually non-existent. *Al Ahram* also

¹ The most comprehensive, up-to-date, book-length study of the Arab press is by Amin Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History*, London: Oxford University Press, 1995. For press freedom issues, the US State Department, "Egypt Country Report on Human Right Practices," Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour" (US State Department) is also useful. However, given the constantly changing situation with regard to press freedom in Egypt, the internet is the most valuable source. At the time of writing (December 2001), no less than 6,570 websites relating to "press censorship in Egypt" were found, which provides some indication of the scope of the problem. Perhaps most useful, however, are the websites of two weeklies in English, which are widely distributed in Egypt, the *Cairo Times* and the *Middle East Times*. Both have websites, which are sometimes used to publicise material that has been banned by the censor. See "The Cairo Times media archives" at <http://www.cariotimes.com/content/issues/media/media.jpg> and *Middle East Times* <http://www.metimes.com>.

publishes a weekly in English, whose aim is “to present the news from an Egyptian perspective”, in other words from the government’s point of view. However, it may sometimes criticise certain aspects of government policy, albeit guardedly, and it is generally regarded as essential reading for those who need to be informed about what is going on in Egypt. One should also mention the English language *Egyptian Gazette*, which faithfully parrots the government line, as does the French language *Le Progres Egyptienne*. There is also *Al Ahrām Hebdo*, a French language weekly, whose content is somewhat similar to that of *Al Ahrām Weekly*, though less comprehensive. And among the government-owned Arabic weeklies, *October* magazine is pre-eminent.

The government does not censor the state press and editors-in-chief are allowed considerable latitude, especially with regard to editorial comment, as long as they do not cross certain “red lines”. These are, essentially: criticism of President Mubarak and his family; investigation into Egypt’s military capability and its vast (off national budget) military complex; anything that might be considered as provoking inter-sectarian strife or promoting ideas deemed contrary to the teachings of Islam. These taboos are not formally announced. Journalists learn about them in the practice of their profession. Moreover, what the government is prepared to tolerate may change from one day to the next. In practice, the editors of the state-owned newspapers rarely stray from the official line and even seek to outdo one another in praising President Mubarak, whose photograph almost always graces their front pages. These editors are also quite well paid by Egyptian standards and they are often able to supplement their income by taking money from certain individuals, both inside government and out, to promote various personalities or causes.

Newspapers owned by the opposition political parties, while more lively than their state-owned counterparts, have a much smaller circulation.² This is partly because the ruling National Democratic

² At the most recent parliamentary elections (2000), which were remarkable for the relatively strong showing of opposition candidates, mainly those sympathetic to the Islamic tendency, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) nonetheless managed to win 388 of the 444 seats that were contested. For an analysis of the elections, see Jihad Ouda, Negad El Borai, Hafez Abu Se’ada, A Door on to the

Party (NDP) claims the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population but also because the opposition press tends to be less reliable and comprehensive in its coverage. However, the government also keeps them on a tight rein, obliging them to buy their newsprint from state-owned suppliers and controlling their circulation by forcing them to use the state-owned distribution agencies. The editors of the opposition party press are, in theory, free to print whatever they wish, which means that such papers will occasionally stray into areas that the state-owned press would leave alone, often voicing strident criticism of government policy. This is not to say that opposition party newspapers may not be shut down by the government if they transgress certain bounds, but they do enjoy sufficient freedom to allow the government some justification in announcing that it supports a free press.³

All of Egypt's 14 officially-licensed political parties are entitled to publish newspapers and the government even offers a small subsidy to enable them to do so. However, in practice only four parties have genuine newspapers: the Wafd, which publishes *Al Wafd*; the Tagammu (Socialist), which publishes *Al Ahrar*; the Islamic-oriented Socialist labour party *Al Shaab*, which the government shut down in May 2000 (4). There is also *Al Arabi*, which is published by the Nasserist Socialist Party. *Al Wafd* and *Al Ahrar* appear daily, while *Al Shaab*, until its recent demise appeared twice a week. Among domestic, licensed publications, the weekly *Al Osboa* is supreme.

Ironically, perhaps in terms of the number of publications (though not in terms of circulation), the above constitute only approximately 30 or so of Egypt's estimated 260 publications. The vast majority of the remainder are licensed abroad. Because it is both difficult and expensive to acquire local licences, many publishers have resorted to this somewhat unsatisfactory alternative. To qualify for a local

Desert: the Egyptian Parliamentary Elections of 2000, Cairo, United Group – Lawyers, Legal and Economic Advisors Research and Training Unit and Friedrich Neumann Foundation, 2001.

³ There are numerous public statements to this effect, one of the most accessible in English offered by Sherif Fuad Neguib, First Secretary (for Press Affairs) of the Embassy of Egypt in the Republic of Armenia, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://www.undpi.am/books/article/19/8.html>.

licence, one must receive clearance from all the main state security and intelligence agencies. In addition, there are a number of constitutional obstacles that need to be overcome. For example, licences may only be given to legal entities, corporate bodies or political parties. It should also be noted that some foreign licensed publications are printed abroad; or they may be licensed to be printed in Egypt at one of the seven government-owned printing houses. In both cases, they are subject to censorship and, if printed overseas or in the official Free Zone, customs duties.⁴

These foreign licensed publications are a mixed bag. They cater to those interested in sports and fitness; beauty care; religion; literature and the arts; politics and economics; business; computer technology and many other topics besides. Most of them are published in Arabic, as was the exceedingly popular *Al Destour*, whose permission to print in Egypt was rescinded by the government after it published several articles about Egypt's Coptic Christian community, which the authorities deemed inflammatory (2000 World Press Freedom Review (Egypt), <http://www.freemedia.at/wpfr/egypt.htm>). This group of foreign licensed publications also includes the *Cairo Times*, whose relatively restricted circulation belies its influence. Published by the present head of the Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights (EOHR), Hisham Qassem, it frequently publicises issues relating to freedom of the press, police brutality, electoral fraud and various other kinds of infringements of civil liberties. As such, it has been a frequent target of the censor but has so far managed to survive.⁵

⁴ Most foreign licensed Egyptian publications until very recently were registered in Cyprus. However, during the summer of 2001, the Egyptian government persuaded the Cypriot government to rigorously enforce the previously laxly administered law that all publications licensed in Cyprus should also be printed there. Until this time, most of these Cyprus-licensed publications were printed in Egypt's Free Zone, which was more cost effective. Among the publications affected was the *Cairo Times*, which was obliged to seek a new license in Delaware, USA. See "Cyprus Ban Hits Egyptian Publishers" at Arabia Online, <http://www.arabia.com/life/article/english/0,1690,S4554,00.html>

⁵ The survival of the *Cairo Times* is an instructive experience of how an independent, relatively outspoken publication is able to survive in Egypt's hazardous press environment. Its publisher, Hisham Qassen, as head of the Egyptian Organisation of Human Rights (EOHR), finds that his human rights activities frequently bring

Although outside observers constantly attack Egypt for its less than satisfactory record with regard to press freedom, according to official statements, Egypt honours all aspects of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stresses the right of freedom of expression and opinion, regardless of frontiers. Further, Egypt subscribes to principles set out in the Sana'a Declaration of 1996, the only international document on freedom for the Arab media. This Declaration, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 29th session in Paris in 1997, built upon Article 19 of the Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "*everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression*" and that this right includes freedom "*to hold opinions without interference*". Thus, the Sana'a Declaration endorses the declarations made by the participants at the UNESCO seminar in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1991. These include an acknowledgement of "the crucial importance of promoting free, independent and pluralistic print and broadcast media in all regions of the world". The Sana'a Declaration also deplored that "*in the Arab World, journalists, publishers and other practitioners continue to be victims of harassment, physical assault, threats, arrest, detention, torture, abduction, exile and murder*", as well as "*ensorship, curbs on travel as well as passport withdrawals and denials*". Finally, the Sana'a Declaration called upon the region's governments to stop "*harassing journalists, reinforce constitutional and legal guarantees of freedom of expression*" (where they exist), and promote "*sound journalistic practices*" (<http://www.al-bab.com/media/does/sanna.htm>).

Government officials routinely claim that the "*Egyptian press performs its role in full freedom as a public authority and with all immunities, according to the Constitution*", which states further that "*the press carries out its message in freedom and independence at the*

him into contact with government officials, a relationship which he is sometimes able to exploit to good effect. In Egypt, personal contacts count for much. He has also taken his paper's problems to the international media, whose sympathetic coverage has often caused the Mubarak regime some embarrassment. As a consequence, the government has recently been less oppressive in its dealings with the Cairo Times, realising perhaps that as it is printed in English, its impact on the Arab street will be minimal. See also Mary Jo McConahay, "Globalization: Is it Good For Egypt's Press?" NcMonline, <http://www.ncmonline.com/in-depth/1999-12-24/globalization.htm>

service of society through various means of expression, and within the framework of the basic elements of society, maintaining liberties, rights and public duties and respect for the private lives of citizens."⁶

Egypt has also created a Higher Press Council, which is supposedly designed to ensure that journalists live up to their professional and constitutional obligations. Actually, its function is to ensure government control. It is made up of the Speaker of the Shura Council (the upper house of parliament); editors-in-chief of both state-owned and political party newspapers; the Head of the State of Information Service; Chairman of MENA; the Board Chairman of the Radio and Television Syndicate; representatives of the Press Association and distributing and printing companies. On the face of it, this body appears to be relatively independent, but in fact the majority owe their professional positions to the government and are therefore more likely to support state policy than oppose it. The main responsibilities of the Council are:

1. Protecting and preserving the rights of journalists and pressmen and guaranteeing the performance of their duties according to the law, and securing appropriate minimum salaries.
2. Taking suitable decisions regarding matters affecting the freedom and independence of the press, or complaints or infringements on the rights and dignity of individuals.
3. Authorising newspaper licenses and setting the prices for state newspapers and reviewing their administration.
4. Securing the respect and implementation of the code of honour and ethics, which include binding commitments and rights and obligations for all those working in the field of journalism.

(<http://www.auam.es/otroscentros/medina/egypt/egypolcon.htm>).

⁶ For a more detailed review of the Egyptian press viewed within its constitutional context, see "The Press in Egyptian Legislation, Part III, National Newspapers, Freedom of Expression Project (<http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/egpress.htm>). For a summary account (in English) of the constitution see the "Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt". After the Amendment Ratified on 22 May 1980 Referendum – Partial Reproduction) at <http://www.uam.es/otroscentros/medina/egypt/egypolcon.htm>).

However, it should be noted that these "*rights and obligations*" include, besides such matters as "*principles of honesty and professional ethics*", other values such as "loyalty to the state" and "honour". These of course, may be variously interpreted, depending on whether one adopts the government's perspective or that of a responsible journalist.

Another important development was Law 148, passed by parliament in 1980, which stipulates that the press is indeed an "independent public authority" but under Article 2, the function of the press is defined as "the promotion of society through the enlightenment and contribution of the press in trying to reach the best solutions in the interest of the nation and the people." Article 19 also defines the duty of the press "*to express public opinion, contribute to its formation and guidance, provide society with knowledge, and help in reaching the best solutions and to secure the people's right to receive knowledge and communication*". Note, in all these statements greater emphasis is placed on the formative influence of the press than on objective search for truth. Thus, the Egyptian media is regarded essentially as a tool of the state, which it uses to promote certain goals which it would define as being in the public interest rather than the press itself.

With the introduction of Egypt's Emergency Law in 1981, in the wake of former President Anwar Sadat's assassination by members of the Ikhwan Muslimeen (Muslim Brothers), Egypt in effect, acquired a new constitution. This meant, among other things, that it became easier for the government to crack down on the press. Ostensibly, Emergency Law was introduced to facilitate the government's efforts to combat Islamic extremism but what also happened was a hardening of the government's attitude to all forms of dissent. Thus, demonstrations and strikes were declared illegal and licenses for new political parties or independent publications became virtually impossible to obtain.⁷

In 1995, what the opposition media called the "press assassination" law was introduced. This came in response to rising criticism of the Mubarak regime in the opposition party and independent press,

⁷ See "2000 Annual Report Middle East: Egypt" at <http://www.rsf.fr/uk/rap2000/no/egypt.html> and "Egypt: 2000 World Press Freedom Review" at <http://www.freemedia.at/wpfr/egypt.htm>

culminating in attacks on several ministers, who were accused of corruption. The new law sharply increased libel sentences to periods of up to 15 years in cases involving government officials and imposed other penalties for what it called "press crimes". Such was the outcry – street demonstrations and the threat of a strike by journalists – that it became apparent that the new law was producing a backlash that was likely to be more dangerous than the critical voices it was designed to quell. Thus, on 16 June 1995 law, the Egyptian Parliament passed a new law, cancelling the 15-year penalty for libelling a government official. However, it should be noted that the new law, which sets fines of up to \$5,800 for libel, still contrasted sharply with the situation before 1995, when maximum fines for libel were set at \$300. It is also significant that while the financial penalties for libel were reduced, penalties for 22 other press offences were actually increased. These included five-year sentences for "*inciting a coup d'état, hatred of the regime or spreading doctrines aimed at modifying the principles of the constitution*". Moreover, even after the rescinding of the 1995, journalists could still be jailed for periods up to three years for "publishing pictures harmful to the country's reputation", and up to one year for "insulting an official in the course of his duties, or insulting parliament or other official bodies." Finally, in rescinding the 1995 Press Law, President Mubarak warned journalists that they should "*respect society's values*" and not "*attack the private lives of individuals or the prestige of state institutions*". Needless to say, such forcefully presented yet imprecisely worded advice was sufficient to induce all but the bravest-hearted journalists to retreat into self-censorship.

Not Magdi Hussein, Editor-in-Chief of *Al Shaab*, however. He and several of his staff continued to harry government officials, notably former Minister of Interior Hassan Alfy and his sons, and later in a particularly virulent campaign, Agriculture Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Youssef Wali, who was accused (among other things) of importing seeds from Israel which would induce cancer. He was eventually brought to trial with another journalist, Salah Badawi and cartoonist Essam Hanafi. Hussein and Badawi received two-year prison terms, Hanafi received one and all were fined a total of \$5,900. Later, all three went on a hunger strike, while other staff at *Al Shaab* engaged in industrial action in a bid to retain their salaries, even though the paper had by this time been closed by the government. Eventually, the Press Syndicate agreed to pay the

salaries of those who were their members, while non-Syndicate members received their salaries from the Ministry of Manpower. The strike was called off and the three who were imprisoned were released before completing their jail sentences.⁸

Meanwhile, in 1998, the government had also passed a Company Law, which included the provision that only the Prime Minister himself could grant permission to establish a new newspaper and that his decision was not open to appeal. Also in 1998, the government mounted an attack on what it called “yellow journalism”. Within a period of only a few months it banned at least three newspapers, handed down at least four prison sentences against journalists for libel and confiscated an untold number of newspapers (<http://www.freemedia.at/wpfr/egypt.htm>).

As always, the clampdown on the press was justified in terms of security and political stability, which at this time, especially, became obsessive. Thus, the government proceeded to target other institutions that lay outside its formal control, introducing a “*law relating to associations and civil institutions*”, which was clearly aimed at Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). That law, however, has since been found unconstitutional, though for all practical purposes it remains on the books. Meanwhile, human rights NGOs have been harried by the security forces, particularly the EOHR, which in 1998 published several instances of police brutality during investigations in the so-called El Kosheh affair, which pitted Copts against Muslims, and led to the EOHR’s former head, Hafez Abu Saada, being jailed. (<http://www.cairotimes.com/content/issues/media/innoc18.html>)

Strictly speaking, legally the media were not affected by the new NGO law, but they nonetheless found themselves under increasing attack. Indeed, between 1997 and 2000, the World Press Freedom Review (WPFR) was able to cite numerous instances of breaches of press freedom and identified President Mubarak as one of the world’s

⁸ See Amnesty International news release, “Egypt: Freedom of Expression – Now Cartoonist Faces Jail” at <http://www.amnesty-usa.org/news/2001/egypt02122001.html> and IANA Radionet, Daily News, 17 August 1999, “Egyptian Court Convicts Four Prominent Islamist Journalists for Libel” at <http://www.aianaradionet.com/E-newstext/newst-ag17.html> and <http://www.freemedia-at/wpfr/egypt.htm>

ten worst enemies of the press (<http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/Egypt/EgyptReport/html>).

WPFR's list of offences committed by the government against the press is indeed long and it includes a wide range of official interventions. What follows is only a sampling:

- In March 1998, there was an attempt to curtail the activities of foreign-licensed publications in particular, when the head of the General Authority for Investments imposed a ban on all such publications printed in the government's Free Trade Zone.
- Also in March 1998, the Censorship on Foreign Publications Department of the Ministry of Information confiscated the March 19 issue of the *Cairo Times* for publishing a profile of the liberal cleric, Khalil Abdel Karim.
- The September 1999 foreign-licensed *Al Tadamun* was banned because it stated that press freedom in Egypt was a farce.
- In May 1999, Hussein Al Mataani was sentenced to three and a half years' hard labour by a Cairo court for seeking to establish a rival journalists' syndicate to the one approved by the government.
- The religious newspaper, *Sawt El Ummah* had its license cancelled by the Higher Press Council, because it had changed the administrative structure of the paper without approval.
- On 14 February 1999, Galal Arif, a journalist writing for *Al Arabi*, was accused of libelling *Al Ahram* journalist (and regime favourite) Tharwat Abaza.
- On 8 November 1999, several journalists covering Egypt's notoriously corrupt elections were assaulted by plain-clothed security forces.
- In May 2001, 10,000 copies of the Cyprus-licensed *Al Tadamoun* were confiscated because it was carrying an article deemed too pro-Iraq by the censor.
- On 16 April 2001, five journalists from *Al Ahram* convicted of libelling Egypt Air's Chairman, Fahim El Rayan, saying he was involved in various corrupt practices (<http://www.freemedia.at/wpfr/egypt.htm>).

Altogether, the World Press Freedom Review cited no less than 62 serious press freedom violations during the period 1977-2000. This is not to say that in all cases the Egyptian media were blameless. Unfortunately, professional standards for journalism in Egypt leave

much to be desired. Often, journalists themselves are guilty of not observing the most basic responsibilities of their profession. They make use of unattributed sources (a favourite device); they summarise statements rather than print them verbatim; they quote out of context; they are careless with facts; they often make no distinction between editorialising and reportage; and they frequently resort to stereotyping and irresponsible smearing. Such practices, which would be regarded as inexcusable among reputable journalists, are regarded as acceptable if employed in what the Ministry of Information might characterise as the “public interest”. Thus, Egypt’s Press Syndicate had no qualms about conferring its highest honour on Ahmed Ragab, a virulent anti-Zionist, who routinely stereotypes Jews. One example was a column he wrote for the government’s own *Al Akhbar* on Holocaust Remembrance Day, in which he extolled Hitler for exterminating 6 million Jews, adding that, unfortunately, he was unable to kill more.⁹

Another example of what western journalists would regard as unacceptable reporting was the coverage of the so-called Queen Boat affair. This involved the trial of 52 young male defendants on charges of homosexuality. Although same sex relationships are deemed highly offensive to most Egyptians (though frequently practised in private), there is nothing in the Egyptian penal code that refers specifically to homosexuality as a criminal offence. Therefore, when the police raided a gay party held at a floating Nile disco, the charges brought against those who were arrested were necessarily vague. They were accused of “*debauchery with men*” and in two cases “*forming a group which aims to exploit the Islamic religion and propagate extremist ideas*”. As far as the press was concerned, those accused were guilty the moment the police had arrested them, even though Egypt has

⁹ This racist observation, not surprisingly, aroused considerable protest, particularly in the United States, where articles appeared in both the New York Times and the Washington Post condemning this and other racist slurs. Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, for example, drew attention to the fact that not only had Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel and was regarded as a US ally, but it was the recipient of a substantial amount of aid. See “ADL Calls Egyptian Press Syndicate Honouring of Anti-Semitic Columnist ‘Outrageous’”, 31 May 2001, at <http://www.adl.org/presrele/ASInt-13/3848-13.asp>; Issandr Elamrani, “Anti-Semitic Semantics”, Cairo Times, <http://www.cairotimes.com/news/antisemitism.html>; and “Words from Egypt”, 30 October 2001, Washington Post, p.A 20.

signed a wide range of international agreements that should have ensured their protection.

Thus, *Al Osboa*, the nominally independent, Egyptian licensed weekly, assumed to have close links with Egypt's internal security forces (because their co-operation would have been necessary to obtain its license), ran huge, red banner headlines across its 20 August 2001 issue, which read: "THE PERVERTS WAGE WAR AGAINST EGYPT", then inside coverage accused the defendants (on no grounds whatsoever) of being Zionists. Later, the independent, foreign-licensed *Al Ahrām Al Arabī* in its 25 August 2001 issue ran a caption under a photograph of the defendants covering their faces, which read: "*Become a pervert and please Uncle Sam*" while the accompanying story described "*the culture of perversion*" as "*the latest American product*". Meanwhile, the government-owned press did not hesitate to publicise the names of the defendants, even identifying their places of work. One magazine even carried a picture of one of the defendants in Israeli army uniform, the Star of David Flag prominently displayed on the desk at which he was sitting.¹⁰

One might have expected some public criticism of the media for its coverage of the Queen Boat affair but apart from some oblique references to irresponsible journalism in the *Cairo Times*, there was little sign of public outrage. Meanwhile, both the Higher Press Council and the Press Syndicate remained silent. For most people, the Queen Boat affair was something which they found difficult to come to terms with. It was a moral aberration that needed to be addressed for the moral well being of the nation, and the fact that the press had resorted to smear tactics was therefore understandable. A few, more worldly, voices suggested that the government's crackdown on the gay community was to divert attention from the country's economic recession and Egypt's political impotence with regard to the peace process. Still others suggested that the affair reflected the government's desire to demonstrate its moralistic credentials for the benefit of Muslim conservatives, who are uneasy with the heavy-handed way the regime is handling its campaign

¹⁰ This incident aroused intense feelings both in Egypt and abroad. See GayEgypt.com, "Recent Egyptian Newspaper Articles – Late August, 2001 and Hossam Bahgat "Explaining Egypt's Targeting of Gays" at <http://www.merip.org/pins/pinG4.htm>

against Muslim extremists. Others speculated that the government wanted the gay community to know it was monitoring the internet, which was providing a dating service and arranging meetings on the Queen Boat and elsewhere. Then there were those who maintained that the government was heading off a gathering of Al Fatiha, an international gay Muslim organisation, which was rumoured to be planning to hold its third, major international event in Cairo. Probably all these reasons influenced the government's actions. What is significant about the affair, as far as press freedom is concerned, is that only the *Cairo Times* tried to make an independent stand. The rest of the media simply followed the government's line.¹¹

In short, the Egyptian press, if measured by the standards of the developed world, certainly falls far short of what most people would regard as being acceptable. The government, operating through an old soviet-style Ministry of Information, views the press as essentially a tool to be used in shaping public opinion and it does its best to ensure that opposing voices are stilled. Not surprisingly, under such circumstances, most journalists take little pride in their profession, regarding themselves primarily as hacks, wordsmiths paid by the column inch. Compared to the past, when Egyptian journalists were prepared to suffer prison for their views, few today would follow their example.¹² Just as its heavy-handed campaign has virtually eliminated Islamic extremism in Egypt, the government's handling of the press has been equally successful. In general, the press is cowed. Nor is there much support in government circles for the idea that press freedom, along with other freedoms and the rule of law, are essential to economic and political development. This notion

¹¹ The response of the *Cairo Times* to the Queen boat affair was instructive in that it succeeded in drawing attention to the human rights violations involved and at the same time denied it was championing the cause of the gay community. Thus it was able to avoid censorship yet get its message across. As *Cairo Times* publisher, Hisham Qassem, noted: there were plenty of other human rights battles to be fought and it was hardly sensible to champion a cause that would only arouse strong negative feelings. See "Another International Black Eye"; *Cairo Times*, 6 August 2001.

¹² As, for example, Mustafa Amin. See James Napoli's "Death of Mustafa Amin Evokes Nostalgia for Egypt's Brave Journalist", *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, June/July 1997, p. 49.

enunciated by John Wolfensohn, head of the World Bank, an institution whose recommendations with regard to economic policy the Egyptian government feels obliged to follow, would not be taken seriously.¹³ Nor is it likely to be taken seriously until the time comes when the government itself realises that Egypt's lack of a free press is prejudicial to its economic and political interests. For the moment, press freedom is regarded more as a privilege to be meted out in small doses in recognition of good behaviour, or taken away if President Mubarak's Minister of Information, Safwat El Sherif, who has been in his position for almost 25 years, decides the press needs a reprimand. In government circles, there is little sympathy for the idea that a free press is an essential component within a strategy for development. Obsessed with the idea of maintaining order and ensuring political stability, the Mubarak regime (assuming this is all that investors want) has yet to be convinced that openness and transparency are equally important. For the moment, the instinctive impulse is to control, even though the government must realise in the long run, this is impossible.

However, to end on a more positive note, the Egyptian press is certainly more free than it was ten years ago. This, Salama Ahmed Salama, Egypt's most respected columnist, admitted recently, stating publicly that while the situation is far from ideal, there is a "large margin of freedom in Egypt today". Also, Ibrahim Nafie, Editor-in-Chief of *Al Ahram*, a less independent voice to be sure, has said that Egyptian journalists today do not have to write with "*trembling hands*", adding that a good journalist will usually find a way to say what he wants to, one way or another (Nevine Khalil, "Pursuing Press Freedom", *Al Ahram*, 17-23 September, 1998). Thus, the situation is not entirely gloomy. However, it is likely that when Egypt

¹³ See Harold W. Andersen lecture for the World Press Freedom Committee on 8 November 1999. For an eloquent restatement of the idea, see Mia Doornaert, President of UNESCO Advisory Group for Press Freedom. She writes: "Press freedom is a prerequisite for good, just governance and sustainable development." She continues: "the higher the level of press freedom in countries, the higher the control of corruption", adding "the freedom of the press is not a gloss, it is not an extra. It is absolutely at the core of equitable development because if you cannot enfranchise poor people...if there is no searchlight on corruption and inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus to bring about change." (<http://www.magazine-deutschland.de/content/archiv/archiv-eng/00.01/art 3.html>)

does at last experience press freedom it will have come about, elsewhere because, as of the government's inability to control the process, as a consequence of the electronic media explosion, rather than out of a desire to open up it because it believes it is the right thing to do.