

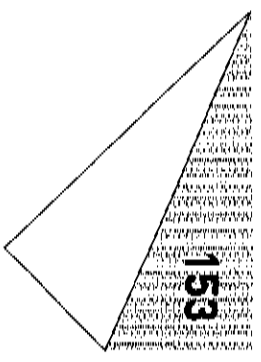


**ARAB NEW MEDIA  
FOR PEACE  
AND DIALOGUE**

**MATERIALS / 4**



**CENTRE UNESCO OF CATALUNYA  
UNESCOCAT**



## INTERNET & GOVERNANCE IN EGYPT: A STORY OF SAVAGE GRACE

Ibrahim Saleh

“The job of a citizen in a democracy is to participate..... to do job well, (there is a) need (to ask for) the help of journalists who are superbly trained, intellectually rigorous, steeped in knowledge about the subjects they report on, steadfast about their ethical standards and courageous in their pursuit of truth.”

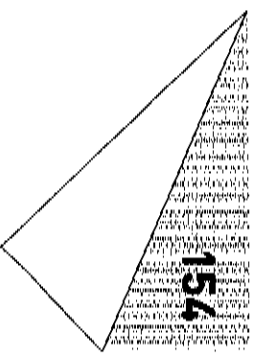
Vartan Gregorian, President of Carnegie  
Corporation of New York

The classical tragedy that surrounds media in Egypt is related to the lack of proper boundaries between journalism practice, and education through the prism of civil society. Indeed, there is a dysfunctional relationship between the public and the state, which created a situation of dissonance and continuous fighting against each other, on one hand, and a vulnerable structure of civil society, all working together to make it a story of savage grace.

It is thus rational to note that good governance, and a vigorous civil society are the only path to creating democracy that is missing. For successful democracies, the media usually carries out the four dimensions of governance: *authority* of institutions and actors, *transparency* of the decision-making process, *accountability* of the government, and the *capacity and effectiveness* of institutions in exercising their authority.

In Egypt, this is not the case due to the lack of free media monitoring government performance and publicising abuse, as well as the lack of will in the basic socio-political and economic climate, especially considering that governments since 1952 have depended on coercion as the means to repress those who are vulnerable and scared of change.

There is a general phenomenon of ‘governance crisis’ that has resulted from the long years of adopting the ‘statist’ approach and the weak indigenous business class, and the professed commitment to social equality. Indeed, the patriotism and the acute external threats have substituted the supposedly self-discipline of a rationalist elite for the extreme discipline of a strong vigilant civil society. For example, journalism is strictly manipulated by state intervention, censorship, legal and regulatory issues.



This dim picture has projected a very thin citizenship that is good for no one because the uninformed public fell for pseudo-slogans and were swayed by lofty rhetoric with little regard for policy differences and voting records.

There is a recurrent perplexity among the Egyptian public in which society just never knows when it will run afoul of some unknown rules, expectations, and even suffering, more than when they do. Such rhetoric resonates with how the fabric of media, politics and public are often subject to bewildering mood shifts and unpredictable behaviours to displace their endless internal problems, and the worries about the 'other' in addition to the tripled-edged syndromes of illness, poverty and illiteracy. However, this thinking citizenship has drawn political life to an unprecedented degree as activists stirred waves of rage (Belin, 1994), while complacent elites reeled from social unrest, amplified by sluggish economic growth and draining fiscal endowments (Henry and Springborg, 2001).

The 'street', a term usually used as a synonym for public opinion, in Egypt seldom empowers the expression of public views and collective sentiments of Egyptians fed up with their lives, as a result of the continuous brute force expressed in riots and mob violence. Such a political environment represents a complex entity wherein sentiments and outlooks are formed, spread and expressed in a unique fashion. Of course, the authorities keep trying to exert a pervasive power over public spaces through police patrols and similar authorities.

It has become well-recognised now that long-prevailing media hegemony has failed to appeal to the Egyptian public due to the influence of a powerful political and economic elite, who persistently imposed heavy amounts of censorship and opinionated reporting to justify their corrupt practices. The weak representation of the public voice has resulted from both self-censorship, which is the outcome of long years of oppression and the uncertainty of likely repercussions from the side of the government.

In the meantime, there is disconnection between media literacy, and governance that could instead have offered a valid local model, by linking the public agenda with all its aspirations, and disparities of grassroots in the troubled societies with the state, which could have improved the current poor local governance in Egypt.

In Egypt, as other autocracies prior to democratisation, media and politics have become hype-making tools that dope the public. As a result, both have failed to meet popular economic and political demands, as well as social equality, blocked any possible chances of carving public spaces that could develop a sound bureaucratic form, and stipulate policy alternatives (Entelis, 1999).

Making this connection between governance and sound media is crucial. As Roseanu explains, it offers a system of rule without, necessarily, authoritative institutions, which function because of the acceptance by a majority or, at least, by the most powerful by those affected (Roseanu, 1992).

Among the many challenges facing political mediation in Egypt is the sad reality that almost only the elite have access to international news, thinking about civil liberties, while the deprived Egyptian society at large can only think about trying to get their basic needs to finish the day with some food; almost 40% of the Egyptians are on or below the poverty line. There is a dilemma of inequality within the same society that I consider to be due to international colonisation.

There are many challenges, and even impediments blocking socioeconomic development, emancipating cultural change and democratisation that constitute a coherent syndrome of social progress. Hence, the complexity of the situation and the many unwritten aspects must be addressed appropriately. The main objective of this article is to broaden human choices in Egypt, increase individual resources, raise emancipating values and strengthen people's subjective orientation towards choice, as well as guaranteeing institutionalised freedom of rights.

Researching this topic can be misleading, however, while dealing with the operational variables involved. For example, looking at the notion of "literacy" is not only related to reading and writing, though "media literacy" will seem even more ambiguous. In this context, language use is a problem in itself, because there is a popular overlap of the notions of "media literacy" and "media education."

Kirsten Drotner stated that increasing mass media only means that more people became literate but not literary because the focus is on the consequences of access without discernment (the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure; the skill in discerning) (Drotner 1992). Therefore, literacy in general, and media literacy specifically is a cause and effect of what is happening in Egypt.

It is, therefore, understandable that there is a collective sense of being "fed up" with everything, and a growing sense of alienation, especially when the 'Patron State' punishes and fights any serious attempt of liberating the media. This situation gave way to displacement of the discontented public into unregulated informal underground sectors, and illegal activities such as different kinds of extremism including religious and social extremism and human trafficking.

The absence of a well-oriented state and the presence of effective media will always mean there is a weak civil society, and generally a vulnerable societal fabric that is either demolished completely, or at least suffers from exacerbating inequality. In this context, there is an obvious clash between empowering civil society and sound media structure on one hand, and the socio-political and economic context throughout the contemporary history of Egypt on the other (Saleh, 2008).

'False Starts' could be one of the reasons for what we are currently witnessing because the political culture in the region including Egypt was imposed by colonial and semi-colonial rule towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and have transplanted

institutional models from the metropolis of the host cities with the political traditions, cultural linguistic diversity and a lack of organic connections (Enterline & Greig, 2008).

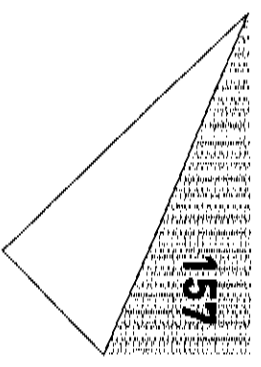
Civil rights in Egypt are jeopardised by a number of laws that have a bearing on their application such as the Riotous Assembly Law 15 (1914), the Meetings and Demonstrations Law 14 (1923), the Emergency Law (1958) and the Police Organisation Law 109 (1971). Hence, Egyptian journalists are still used to being on the front line, fighting for basic Human Rights, while confronted with oppressive laws and regulations, and would most certainly never think of having a future, unless they automatically entered into an alliance with the 'Patron State' (Saleh, 2009a).

In May 1999, the Egyptian Parliament passed Law No. 153 of 1993 encroaching upon NGOs' freedom to organise and act. The new law banned private groups from working to influence government policy or union activity. It gave the Ministry of Social Affairs power to disband boards of directors (Arab Republic of Egypt: Constitution). NGOs must seek permission from the government before accepting foreign donations. Following a wave of protest by both Egyptian and international NGOs, the law was found unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court on procedural grounds, and it was suspended. However, the country's older law on NGOs (Law 32 of 1964), which is seen as equally repressive, remains in force (Saleh, 2009a).

Almost all the time, speaking the truth is regarded as very dangerous by the 'Patron State' as politicians contradict their acclaimed care for authenticity. Much of the media and communications in the region suffer setbacks in many aspects that vary from finance, resources, and technology, but most importantly the absence of real functionality of media that make the process a tamed journalism or even just protocol news.

Such a contrasting role of the media has only promoted state victories, especially in their current overwhelming control through media monopoly (Wilcox, 1982, 200-232), and practising all their tactics of work hostility environment through licensing, subsidies. The Egyptian media has generally followed the 'patrimonial mechanisms' which is a kind of governance that relies on a *coterie* of regional and organisational notables (Sandbook & Barker, 1985).

Most institutions are predominately characterised by factional manoeuvring, client focused relations, and the exclusion of the middle class, which means an existing chain of personal loyalties and coercion. As mentioned in the latest report of "Human Development: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries," the average institutional change for the Arab countries is -0.02, and there is no evidence of any overall improvements in governance. Hence, the period 1996-2007 marks deterioration in institutional reform in Egypt, especially in the government's effectiveness, political stability and control of corruption.



This might explain how the weak civil society in Egypt has always hindered, or even obstructed any democratic consolidation that urges the creation of a healthy environment for change to inspire or revisit the social contract between the government and the public, and the constitutional enhancement of human rights, and democratisation (Saleh, 2008). Moreover, the erosion of the middle class has intensified the situation. In this way, it is very difficult to attain these basic goals, and the current autocracy is always fighting and punishing any serious attempt to liberate media and politics.

The elite in Egypt, whether we refer to the traditional military or new business, often obstructs state-directed reformism with the pretext of defending liberty, and the efficiency of market forces. Besides, the absence of a well-oriented state, the bourgeoisie, and the civil society have been demolished completely, and in the best scenarios suffer from exacerbating inequality. In such a context, policies are often made on the hoof, yet civil society is still blamed for their acceptance of marginalisation instead of offering society through its key players a “guesstimate” about what they know. It is therefore crucial to give way to a leading group of public intellectuals, who have experience and knowledge, yet command the authority to challenge the current corrupted environment (Uwazurike, 1990, 55-77).

In Egypt, almost all the media players follow the ‘patrimonial mechanisms’ of governance that are predominately characterised by factional manoeuvring, client focused relations, and the exclusion of the middle class, which means a chain of personal loyalties, and coercion. In this context, ‘prebendalism’ is very common and makes journalists and media professionals, as well as politicians compete for public office to use them for personal benefit. Obtaining and maintaining clients requires “prebendal” offices to ensure the distribution of power and share interest among their circles. In this regard, unsecured rulers increase the capacity to reward followers and punish actual and potential opponents.

It is only possible to experience the emergence of popular democratic movement in Egypt if it is growing within the marginal grassroots to sustain a people-oriented progress. Nevertheless, the current cosmetic progress as a top-down imposed movement is beleaguered by domestic discontent and external pressure, and buffered by economic crisis, deep fissures, meaning short evidence. Accordingly, as Kortten & Clark said, the development of a human, or people centred paradigm could certainly emphasise the progress role of civil society (Kortten 1990; Clark 1991).

There is a growing phenomenon of either not reading carefully the statistics, or trying to project a positive context about the country, motivated by pride, lack of knowledge, or even a clash of interests, to presume that every young person in the region wanders the streets with their laptop. However, the paradox here lies in these delusions that are reflected in government statements about plans, distance

education without considering the millions of students who simply cannot afford to be internet literate.

A starting point is to clearly define the operational variables, by differentiating between fact and fiction. However, a main question is raised by Sahar Talaat that relates to the unresolved profound query between access and framing of many issues; for example, the real number of computers connected to the Internet and the social preference of the public in using and consuming Internet or any other mass media, as well as their assessment of their levels of satisfaction (Sahar Talaat, 2009).

In a qualitative study conducted with media professionals at their workplace and with media university students at their public or private universities or at their homes from study, by the British Council in Cairo (Saleh, 2009b), more than 90% of the sample of journalists and media professionals blame the state for the current fixation and for the lack of civil liberties, and 74% of the respondents strongly blame the government, while 16% relate the problem to the absence of social enterprise structures in society (Saleh, 2009b).

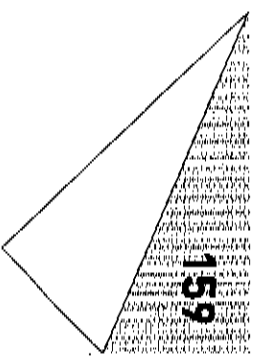
The problem may sometimes be the issue of resources, but it is often due to the lack of vision, and serious steps to attain it. Hence, the cornerstone here is the urgency to have a progressive developmental plan boosting a sound civil service that is able to design and implement programmes without political interference.

Fighting the widely spread corruption and nepotism, enhancing the freedom of expression, citizen journalism, and democratisation, as well as empowering street politics of the grassroots (the third sector or the marginal groups that are completely disregarded by the state) rather than prioritising the interests of the elite and the military are the foundations for a civil society.

The *Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics* census has also revealed that the number of computers is approximately 1,376,343, while the number of these computers with internet access is approximately 428,451, which is equivalent to only 32.1% of the total family-owned households in Egypt (Abd El-Wahab, 2009).

Having said this, the home-internet users may represent less than a quarter of this number, although there are obvious conflicting figures between Egypt's *Central Agency for Mobilisation and Statistics* and the *Ministry of Communications*. The fact remains in the analysis of these figures, that because the majority of the Egyptians are deprived the right to student education, this might be a real threat to a government adrift in cyberspace (Abd El-Wahab, 2009).

In this context, the Egyptian public express four main criticisms. The first is that the Egyptian media only endorses freedom of expression and the press half-heartedly, while ignoring other basic human needs. The second is that the media takes a superficial approach to freedom and democracy, which results in the marginalisation of the interests of the majority to preserve the ruling minority's interests. The



third problem is the media overemphasis on major regional issues such as the invasion of Iraq, Islamophobia, and the “resentment and tyranny” motivated by hatred towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict, while ignoring the vital local and national issues that affect the lives of the public directly and indirectly. The fourth problem deals with the simplistic official analysis of the multifaceted complexities that produce a perception of fear of the ‘other’, and the excessive use of force against opposition.

Distrust and doubt are a typical response to any mainstream discourse as a result of the lack of transparency and accountability, and negligence of public aspirations. Hence, the different mass media, especially with the possible effects of new media, could have a more effective role for civil society organisations, helping them recover missing freedom.

However, it is trivial to think that media could be a communication tool without empowering it with the capacity to stipulate good governance through governments’ effective assistance. The Egyptian public is very frustrated with the results of poor governance. Economic growth and poverty reduction remain major challenges, but beyond remuneration, there are problems with management structure, human resources, staffing and career paths. The recruitment, capacity building and incentives of employees all need attention.

In conclusion, there is obviously a robust environment developing in Egypt that is full of vigorous competition of ideas that are attempting to cater to the needs of the public. However, this context does not provide for a multiplicity of views, nor space to observe government performance, as well as checking the level of corruption and abusive behaviour of different parts of society.

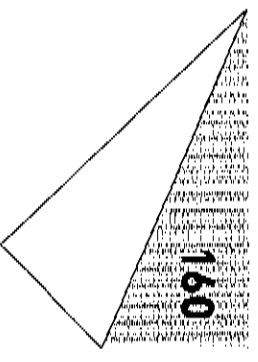
We suggest that media is used as a localised participatory democracy with maximum self-sufficiency. In the meantime, the media should aim to focus on the what is participatory, and the deliberative side of public spheres (Anderson & Geoff, 2007).

Media literacy could possibly be a powerful channel to attain what Ghandi described as “Charka”, or the spinning wheel, by advocating policies, laws and actions, however this is only possible within the existence of a competitive environment in which alternative viewpoints are freely available and new organisations of scale are also present.

The first focus should be directed towards the level of citizens’ participation in public life within political parties and outside them too, where journalism solves problems, while the second focus should be on engaging the public in timely issues to foster rational public discussions. In this context, breaking down the artificial academic barriers separating various fields is a mandatory action to deal with the “contentious politics,” social movements, revolutions, ethnic conflict, by going beyond the structurally oriented work (Saleh, 2008).

To that end, there is an urgent need for supporting the process that promotes change and aids education and critical thinking as well as the other projects that





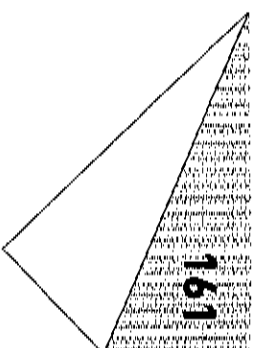
explicitly help people learn to coordinate and organise opposition to vested interests. Empowering civil liberties can gradually help reduce or end government control of the public media and of information flow.

The emergence of a strong and sound civil society is therefore a pre-condition for realising political parties, having a free, competitive environment, and enforcing the rules of law. However, civil society needs a dense network of autonomous associations, and building social consensus on democratic values. A priority is to deal with the endless domestic problems ranging from fractions in some countries such as Lebanon, or religious agitations as in Egypt, and ethnic and tribal issues as in Morocco and Iraq. The threat is that such fissures may be misconceived inside and across societies.

Strengthening civil society through collective self-empowerment can address such pressing needs and problems on their own, and mobilise democratised government bureaucracies. Among the many profound challenges facing good governance in Egypt is the threat to power structures because regional governments want to maintain their manipulation and dominance, and never allow any expansion of civil liberties to ensure they are being followed. The reason is obviously that well informed people are automatically empowered, and become agents of change in societies (W. Maathain quoted in Topariz, 1990, 31).

This process of reform must be supported by experts with skills and vision to provide a new niche in the public sphere that can aggregate views about standards and the creation of an enlightened citizenry that reflects social mixes within individual societies. Without doubt, such political reform toward classical liberal values is a step towards engaging adequate media literacy and good governance.

Despite our present socio-political and economic difficulties, we live in a hopeful time, in which young generations seek out political news when they know that their elders and their peers care about politics. With the blossoming of this youthful interest, now is the perfect time for those who see a need to strengthen the connection between journalism and citizenship to act.



## REFERENCES

- Abdel-Malek, A. (1968). *Egypt: Military society*. New York: Random House. Arab Republic of Egypt: Constitution, *Law Library of Congress*, (29 December 2006). Jcited 23 June 2006]. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.loc.gov/law/guide/egypt.html>
- Abd ElWahab, S. (2009), "Human Development Reports: 14 million households do not have computers and only 430 thousand families common to the Internet . And more than 750 thousand families do not own TV sets from the ground up," *Newsroom*, Issue 225, 26/10/2009, <http://www.eltagr.org/index.aspx>
- Anderson, P.J., & Ward, G. (2007). *The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- "Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries," *Arab Human Development Reports (AHDRs)*, UNDP/AHDR calculations based on World Bank Governance Indicators, 2008, <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>
- Bayat, A. (2003). "The 'Street' and the Politics of Dissent in the Arab World," *Middle East Report*, No. 226, p. 10-17.
- Bellin, E. (1994). "Civil Society: Effective Tool of Analysis for Middle East Politics?" *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1994), p. 510.
- Dunont, R. (1966). *False Starts in Africa*. London: Sphere Books.
- Enterline, A. J., & Greig, J.M. (2008). "Against all Odds? The history of imposed democracy and the future of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 4, 321- 347.
- Joseph, R. (1987). *Democracy & Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge Press.
- Kubba, I. (2000). "The Awakening of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2000), pp. 84-90.
- Nasr, S. (2005). "Good Governance for Development in the Arab Countries: Arab Civil Societies and Public Governance Reform," *Working Paper of the UNDP Dead Sea Conference*, UNDP Programme on Governance in the Arab Region, Jordan, February 2005, p. 8
- Norton, R. (1993). "The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2

Saleh, I. (2009).

a. Saleh, I. (2009). "Living in a Lie and Dying in Silence: The Trauma of Civil Society in the Middle East and North Africa," Volume 11, Number 4, August 2009, *A Quarterly Publication of The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law*, Washington, DC, US, (30-38).

b. "Media Literacy in MENA: Moving Beyond the Vicious Cycle of Oxy-mora," *Mapping World Media Education Policies, Latin American Scientific Journal of Media Education, Communicar*, 32, 1, (Feb.).  
Saleh, I. (2008). "Sitting in the Shadows of Subsidisation in Egypt: Revisiting the Notion of Street Politics," *Journal of Democracy and Security*, Philadelphia: Routledge, Vol. 4:1-24.

Saleh, I. (2006). *Prior to the eruption of the grapes of wrath in the Middle East: The necessity of communication instead of clashing*. Cairo: Teeba Publications Press.

Saleh, I. (2003). *Unveiling the truth about the Middle Eastern media. Privatisation in Egypt: Hope or dope?* Cairo: CMC Press.

Talaat, Sahar M. (2010). *El impacto de las tecnologías digitales y sus efectos sobre el proceso de democratización de los medios de comunicación árabes: Al Arabia, Al Jazeera y BBC Árabe* (in progress), Universidad de Complutense - Madrid, Facultad de Ciencias de la Información, dept. de Periodismo II.

"United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Division for Sustainable Development," *Documents: Sustainable Development Topics*. 2009 Retrieved 12 May 2009 from the World Wide  
[http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/resources/res\\_docs/dt.shtm](http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/resources/res_docs/dt.shtm).