

Sugar and oil, but no ideas in Egypt

It is probably sad to say, but NGOs do not have real power and influence in Egypt. They have only few members and are not able to influence public debate or organise events. NGOs therefore did not have a specific influence on the revolution, though their members joined the masses. The Muslim Brotherhood by contrast was very effective in securing the Tahrir square, protecting the demonstrators from the armed militias and fighters on camels. Nowadays there are a couple of active civil society organisations. They fight for human rights, and organise political education and election campaign courses. These courses are not always helpful, however. They focus on persons and on campaign tools such as handing out oil or sugar, instead of focusing on ideas.

Ahmad Ibrahim, Youth branch *Democratic Front Party Egypt*



women's rights 'as long as they do not contradict with sharia'. In Tunisia, the cradle of these dignity revolutions, the political party Enahda has claimed to retain a secular constitution. However, its ambiguity towards women's rights, the collusion of Enahda with liberal oriented men and women and the brutal attacks of Salafists against these people constitute real dangers for equal freedoms and rights of all sections in Tunisian society.

Therefore the new paradigm of active women's participation is under pressure in all of these countries, and the momentum to really effectuate change seems to have disappeared. It is now or never. The changes that did happen in revolutionary times shows the strength of human agency, against all odds. Individuals can not do this on their own, however. An active role of Western actors is required to support Syrian voices that call for gender equality and to translate this new precarious paradigm into clear policies. Western actors can provide funding for projects that aim at embedding women's rights in the constitution. This will ensure gender equality, and the protection and promotion of universal human rights. In addition, they can support projects that aim at strengthening the capacities of women and other new actors in civil society.

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Can revolutions happen without press coverage? Though a simple 'no' might be exaggerated, journalists and reporters usually play an important role in bringing about political change. Hanan Fahmy dives into Egyptian history and explores the position and role of journalists during revolutionary times.

By Hanan Fahmy

Power of Words

Journalists in a revolutionary Egypt

Please visualise the following situation. Just a weekday afternoon in Cairo. The editor-in-chief of the biggest opposition newspaper in Egypt is on his way home. Lost in his own thoughts, he slightly notices the unusually quiet traffic. Suddenly, his car is being hit from behind, and comes to a halt against the sidewalk. Stepping outside to inspect the damage he is immediately surrounded by four men. He is hit hard in his face and stomach, on his neck and legs. He cannot breathe, stand up, shout or defend himself. Cars pass him by, but no one stops to help. One of his attackers snarls at him: 'This is a warning... You stay away from our Master the President.

Next time it will be your head'. The men disappear, leaving the journalist in a state of total confusion.

In Egypt, one often hears stories like this. Journalists pay a heavy price for their work. Nevertheless, their role in bringing about political change is crucial. With words, journalists teach, inspire and help citizens in their fight for rights, justice and independence. In this article I will show what the role of journalists was in Egyptian revolutionary history in general and the Arab Spring in particular.

Egyptian revolutionary history

The importance of journalists during oppressive times is of course by no means a recent affair.

“Alternative media such as Facebook groups and other internet pages started to play a larger role in the fight for freedom. Bloggers published what the newspapers could not or would not publish”

During the occupation of Egypt by Great Britain, which lasted from 1882 till 1952 for example, journalists played an important role in bringing about revolution. Though many Egyptians were illiterate, the words of journalists – like Abdallah Elnadeem with his magazine ‘Joking and Mocking’ – spread from mouth to mouth. His magazine, and other publications of journalists largely initiated and inspired the Egyptian Revolution in March 1919. That is the moment when newspapers reported that the occupying British authorities had exiled statesmen Saad Pasha Zaghoul and people went out into the streets. Zaghoul had led the official delegation that went to the British consul-general to demand complete independence. The Revolution continued until 1923, when Egypt officially became a parliamentary monarchy.

The way journalists and their publications affect the people was very well understood by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who played an important role after the revolution of 1952. To give an example, he nationalised the press in 1960. Without much effect. Journalists still wrote their messages, now however using words with double meanings to bypass censorship. Apart from words with double meanings, journalists also wrote literary stories or rewrote historical ones using real incidents and real historical names to express their opinion about dictatorship, demanding for democracy. A famous story of this kind is ‘Some fear’ by Tharwat Abaza.

Forced relocation

As compared to the Nasser period, the newspapers enjoyed more freedom under the Sadat

regime in the 1970s. Though he ended the formal censorship of the press, however, President Anwar Sadat tried new techniques to paralyze journalists in their fight against dictatorship. And nevertheless, he founded a council that supervised journalism. Journalists were sometimes forced to take on other jobs, such as at the Ministry of Electricity or in Bata Shoe shops. The government considered journalists to be employees that could be simply relocated. Many journalists refused the arbitrary relocation, e.g. by suing the government or choosing for exile. Others tried strengthening the role of the Press Syndicate, enabling the labour unions of journalists to more adequately defend its members’ rights, like the right to work as a free journalist.

In 1977 the Egyptians revolted against the Sadat government, prompted by the rapidly rising prices of food etc. There were riots all over Cairo, as well as in other cities. Many journalists were arrested and accused of fuelling the discontent amongst the population and inciting strife against the state’s economic reforms. Most were found guilty and immediately imprisoned without any form of legal process. Consequently, the regime lost a great deal of democratic legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the Egyptian people as well as western countries. President Sadat then tried to monitor the press in a more subtle way, namely by trying to regain control over the Press Syndicate.

At that time, the syndicate’s board consisted mostly of people from opposition parties and movements. This syndicate and newspapers in general heavily criticised the government and its politics. And they knew they were effective.

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The chairman of the Press Syndicate, Kamel Zoharey, is known to have said that ‘the Power of word is greater than the Power of President’. In an attempt to smother the resistance against his policies president Sadat had more than 3000 public figures arrested, among them well-known journalists. Just one month after these events, president Sadat was assassinated and president Mubarak took power. He released the detainees, allowed the press more freedom and granted people more freedom of expression.

Mubarak regime

The changes were however not all the way through. Opposition parties and newspapers affiliated with them, were obliged to respect one unwritten rule: they could criticise any official in the country, except the president, his family and the army. But repression mostly took place in an indirect way. Alwafd newspaper for example – owned by the biggest liberal-democratic opposition party in Egypt and critical about economic policies – came into financial difficulties because the regime imposed heavy charges on them and prohibited the publication of advertisements by governmental organizations in this newspaper. Also, the government manipulated the elections more than once, making it impossible for liberal-democratic or other opposition parties’ candidates to be elected.

In 1996, journalists revolted against a new law which suppressed their relative freedom. And this time not only journalists from opposition newspapers, but also those that worked at governmental papers refused to accept this new law. At that time, the chairman of the Press Syndicate

was editor-in-chief of the biggest newspaper in Egypt, which was owned by the government. He tried to convince the Prime Minister that this law damaged the character of Egypt as a democratic country. Journalists began a large-scale strike. Opposition parties and public figures showed solidarity with the journalists in their struggle for more freedom of expression. The population also showed their support and boycotted newspapers owned by the government. Eventually, journalists gained the upper hand and the law was not issued. The Press Syndicate became a symbol for freedom, and from that time on people have frequently demonstrated at the doorsteps of its headquarters.

Losing faith

In the 1990s, independent newspapers were founded, owned by actors in the private sector. These newspapers published articles about newly emerging revolutionary movements such as ‘Kafaiah’, which means ‘enough’. Moreover, they broke the ‘unwritten law’ of Mubarak, and criticised the President. They again paid a heavy price. The weekly newspaper Aldostour was banned by a court rule. The weekly newspaper Alshaab was banned by the Committee of Party Affairs. Much Egyptians lost faith in political parties adequately representing them. Inspired by activists as George Isak, Wael Abbas or Mohamed Abdel Quodous, young people joined opposition movements and became political active. Quodous was a member of the board of Press Syndicate and a public figure well-known for his fierce fight for democracy. Because of his political criticism of president Sadat as well as president Mubarak,

NGOs as mediators in Tunisia

During the revolution young people and independents – people not affiliated to a political party of organisation - rallied in the streets for a common cause. Civil society organisations did not really play an organisational role. In contrast, civil society does play a very important role after the protests. When there are conflicts between political parties, NGOs mediate and play a decisive role in steering the debate. There are lots of people who want to contribute to the revolution but not as a member of, or affiliated to, a political party. These people join a NGO. There is an umbrella network association *Les couleurs de la Tunisie* with members from humanitarian, cultural and economic civil society organisations.

Wijdan Kaabi, Youth branch of the *Parti al Joumhour* (Republican Party), Tunisia

he was arrested many times.

The dissatisfaction of the people really took shape during the Presidential elections in 2006. In newspapers, people were encouraged to demonstrate against Mubarak's re-election. Newspapers also published stories about revolutions and opposition in foreign developing countries, especially countries in South America and South Asia. Consequently, and again, many reporters were sentenced to prison, like editor-in-chief of the *Aldostour* newspaper Ibraheem Essa, who in total received nearly a dozen prison sentences.

Social media

In order to avoid governmental scrutiny, journalists increasingly tried to inform the public in more creative ways. Alternative media such as Facebook groups and other internet pages started to play a larger role in the fight for freedom. Bloggers published what the newspapers could not or would not publish. A few prominent examples are Asma Mahfouz, Asraa Abedel Fattah and Ahmed Maher. Inspired by people like these, the Egyptian youth put in motion the revolution against dictatorship on 25th of January 2011, demanding a decent life for all, freedom and justice. After 18 days Mubarak's regime fell and a new era began in Egypt. Journalists have played an important role in these changes by covering these events and inspiring people. What their role will be in building a new Egypt, is a question that now needs to be answered.

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The uprisings in the Middle East are most fundamentally about establishing a new rule of law. Independent lawyers and judges are crucial in this respect. Mauritius Wijffels analyses what the role of lawyers was, and will be, in bringing about changes. His suggestion: focus on informal circuits and contacts between lawyers and ordinary people. It is there that the magic happens.

By Mauritius Wijffels



The rule of law

Lawyers and democratic change