

RESTRICTIONS ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN EGYPT

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Deborah Amos (DA): Since early October, the Egyptian government has stepped up restrictions on independent media including a shutdown of controversial programs on satellite TV. All live broadcasts are now under government control. There are new restrictions on text messaging – a tool for organizing protest. Reporting on court trials is now prohibited and an outspoken government critic, newspaper editor Ibrahim Isa, has been sacked apparently after government pressure. Why now? Why all these measures now?

Michael Hanna (MH): I think it's fairly obvious that this is connected to the upcoming parliamentary elections in November. It's completely transparent in terms of motivations. These elections are important for several reasons primarily because there will be Presidential elections the following year. This is something of a dry run. In the past five to six years, Egypt has seen a boom in independent media and they played a key role in uncovering some of the fraud that took place in the previous parliamentary elections in 2005. I think it's pretty intimately connected.

DA: What the social media crowd has been able to do is focus on an event and eventually it gets picked up by the popular satellite media channels, then in print, and it reaches a wider audience. I wonder if you thought what the government was trying to do here is break that connection?

MH: Absolutely. You could also see this and the crackdown against traditional media in the form of Ibrahim Issa. Social media was important in terms of relaying the ongoing fraud of the parliamentary elections. There is obviously a danger of overselling the effects of independent media and social media. They have had dramatic repercussions for the agenda and the nature of public discussion. What were once taboo subjects are now raised. In the mid '90s, in Egypt, no one would have talked publicly about succession or the issue of the President's family. These sorts of things were taboo and yet, now these are things that get discussed.

DA: This year we saw a victory for the Facebook groups, the social media movement and the case of Khaled Said, a young man who is beaten to death in an Internet café in Alexandria allegedly by the police. Do you think that the government of Egypt has now put in place enough rules and enough restrictions that a case like Khaled Said, who was given prominence because it was such a big movement on the web, that that couldn't happen again?

MH: It's an interesting case and one that raises questions about the Egyptian regime's ability to repress without causing serious waves. Limiting the ability to organize spontaneously is one thing. You can put in a lot of hurdles. In terms of completely muzzling the message, I think that's probably impossible at this point. No matter what the Egyptian regime attempts to do I think it will be nearly impossible to squelch all manner of reporting on these types of incidents.