Chapter 10

Making Sense of Journalists’ Safety and Media Freedom in Egypt Between Different Types of Threats and the Ruling Legislative Context: Multi-Analytical study

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate different types of threats which affect the journalists’ safety in Egypt and how do they manage their work in the presence of the diverse threats. The study analyzes the Egyptian legislative framework in order to explain whether it protects media freedom and journalists or it needs further reforms. To address the research objective in detail, the study also incorporates the feedback of 45 Egyptian journalists belonging to government’s partisan and private media organizations.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the legislations and press laws is of great important and decisive when it comes to journalists’ protection and having an effective justice system is fundamental to ensure crimes against journalists are fairly prosecuted (Collaku, 2016). Egyptian journalists face many threats and fabricated allegations of criminal behavior and unethical actions by criminals and this occurs mainly to silence them to report on criminal cases. This affects their work. Furthermore, attacks on journalists and media workers can have chilling effect on their right to freedom of expression (FRA – European Union Agency for fundamental rights, 2016). Therefore, journalists need a set of well articulated, accurate, incisive and comprehensive...
press laws to meet their needs, to continue working safely and to ensure the audience’s right to know without any fear and danger.

In a very unstable political environment, there are many types of threats to journalists in Egypt which affect their safety and media freedom (Alazrak, 2010). There are different cases of those journalists, who have been subjected to diverse threats including offline threats (such as killings, imprisonment and arbitrary detention) and online threats (such as social media’s troll, slander, character assassination, e-mail and social media’s accounts hacking). Consequently, it is important to amend the laws in order to protect the journalists and to provide them with appropriate legal shield to avoid the offensive and deadly threats. With an eye to the fact that unsafe working conditions for journalists limit free speech, make transparency as an impossible target and undermine participation and democracy (Krovel, 2017), it becomes important to ask a timely question related to this status quo in Egypt “is the legal framework in Egypt efficient to counter these threats?”

Thus, this study seeks to investigate different types of threats which affect the journalists’ safety in Egypt and how do they carry-out their work in the presence of the diverse threats. The study analyzes the Egyptian legislative framework in order to explain whether it protects media freedom and journalists or it needs further reforms. To address the research objective in detail, the study also incorporates the feedback of 45 Egyptian journalists belonging to the government, partisan and private media organizations.

BACKGROUND

The Egyptian legislative context and all the laws which regulate the press and the journalists’ work needs to be reformed not only to prevent all kinds of media violations, but also to protect journalists from different kinds of threats, and to guarantee a good environment for them to work efficiently and to do their best without being in a danger or at risk. This is a desired balance between journalists’ responsibilities and rights. In many Western developed countries, “journalists’ rights” is one of the main parts of media laws which are supposed to be put carefully to express and to assure that the government and the whole society desire to protect the journalists from any threats. Risks to journalists do not involve physical threat of killing, but also it involves diverse other types of risks as well, resulting in their self-censorship and a chilling effect on their right to freedom of expression. The situation in Egypt is worst because crimes against journalists are not and perpetrators remain unpunished (Torsner, 2017).

Regarding the Egyptian case, Egypt’s constitution - drafted in 2014 - guarantees freedom of artistic and literary creation, freedom of thought and opinion, and freedom of the press. Article 67 forbids the jailing of artists and writers for publishing their work. “Every person shall have the right to express his/her opinion verbally, in writing, through imagery, or by any other means of expression and publication,” the constitution states. The journalistic profession in Egypt is marked by poor job security (Lohner, 2016). According to Reporters Without Borders, Egypt maintained its ranking of 161 out of 180 in Reporters Without Borders in 2018’s World Press Freedom Index.

The Egyptian media environment historically has been dominated by the state. Diversified press laws were promulgated from the beginning of Mohamed Ali’s dynasty era. And restraining press laws still exist in current President’s Abdel Fattah el-Sisi regime in order to organize and regulate the journalism and the journalists’ work in Egypt. Historically, in 1881, the first law to regulate the journalism and the journalists’ work in Egypt, was issued by Kedive Tawfik. After July 1952’s revolution, Egypt witnessed a considerable shift in terms of political system, social structure and the whole legislative