

# Press freedom deteriorates in pre-election Egypt

NEW YORK: The Committee to Protect Journalists has expressed its alarm at the deterioration of press freedoms in Egypt ahead of November's parliamentary elections and next year's presidential vote. In particular, it is concerned over the firing on Tuesday, 5 October 2010 of Ibrahim Eissa, the editor-in-chief and founder of the independent daily *Al-Dustour*.



Eissa has long been one of the government's biggest critics in the press. His dismissal came only 24 hours after *Al-Dustour's* transfer of ownership was finalised, Eissa told Foreign Policy. The new owners, including media mogul and leader of the opposition Al-Wafd party al-Sayyid al-Badawi, had made public assurances that the newspaper's editorial line would not be affected by the sale. "They bought the newspaper for US\$4 million, just to stop me from writing," Eissa told Foreign Policy.

Al-Badawi, in a press conference on Tuesday and again during a televised interview, disputed Eissa's version of the story and described the situation as a labor dispute revolving around staff salaries and the deduction of taxes.

In an interview with Al-Jazeera, Eissa said that the paper's new owners had asked him not to publish an article written by Mohamed ElBaradei, former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency and leader of a political reform movement in Egypt. According to Eissa, within a few hours of his refusal to remove ElBaradei's piece, he was relieved of his duties as the editor-in-chief of *Al-Dustour*.

Gamal Eid, executive director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, told CPJ that ElBaradei's article was "an excuse" to terminate Eissa. He said the editor's dismissal came only two days after *Baladna Belmasry*, a television program hosted by Eissa, was taken off the air.

Eid described these acts as "a harsh and swift step to intimidate the press ahead of parliamentary elections in November." Eid also pointed to unconfirmed news reports circulating in Egypt, claiming a deal had been brokered between Al-Wafd party and the government, whereby Eissa's sacking would result in political gains for Al-Wafd. CPJ could not confirm the accuracy of these reports.

In his career, 65 cases have been filed against Eissa for allegedly violating Egypt's press law and 30 are still pending, according to CPJ research. In 2006, Eissa was sentenced to one year in prison for publishing a story on the misuse of public money in Egypt. The sentence was later reduced to a fine. In 2008, Eissa was sentenced to two months in prison for "publishing false information and rumors" on President Hosni Mubarak's health. He was later pardoned by the president.

Eissa isn't the only journalist facing recent suppression. Eid told CPJ that Alaa al-Aswani and Hamdi Qandil, two of the most popular columnists at the independent daily *Al-Shuruq*, stopped writing their columns last month after the newspaper's administration warned them about "external" pressure to tone down their content.

And another popular television program, *Al-Qahira Al-Yawm*, presented by journalist Amr Adeeb on the Orbit satellite network, was suspended on September 25. Adeeb told CNN Arabic that "political reasons" were behind the suspension.

"It is no coincidence that the two shows have stopped," Mohamed Abdel Qudous, head of the freedoms committee at the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate, told Foreign Policy. "As for the rest of the programs and talk shows, the owners were given orders to tone things down."

It's part of a disturbing trend, noted Mohamed Abdel Dayem, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator.

"*Al-Dustour's* ordeal can best be understood in the context of the other negative developments that have afflicted Egypt's press in recent weeks," Abdel Dayem explained. "Oblique threats and backroom deals that are not visibly linked to the government have started silencing some of Egypt's most critical independent voices. With elections on the horizon, it is vital that Egyptians are not deprived of these news sources."

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