Disapproval by Higher Authority on Income and Expenditure Survey Results

Credibility is at Stake
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Disapproval by Higher Authority on Income and Expenditure Survey Results

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During a press conference on Monday, July 29, 2019, The Central Agency of Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMS) has released the results on Income and Expenditure surveys of 2017 and 2018. This came after several months’ delay of the release, as it was supposed to be published last February.

On May 9 issue, unnamed sources stated to *Al-Borsa* newspaper, the reason behind the delay is an objection from superior authorities on the surveys’ results because they do not reflect the State achievements during the last two years. The newspaper stated that “CAPMS’s researchers had been directed to review the results in order to make them consistent with the state achievements to get the release approval. After review, the results were still disapproved”.

According to CAPMS, the results show an increase in poverty rates in Egypt to reach 32.5% while it was 27.8% in 2015. Also, the national poverty line has been updated to stand on 8827 EGP/year (735 EGP/Month) after it was on 428 EGP/Month according to 2015’s survey. It is worth mentioning that the World Bank determines the global extreme poverty line of $1.9 per day, 31.5 EGP per day which equals 945 EGP/Month.

Despite the upper hand authorities’ interference in CAPMS’s work is a serious act, it has been passed in silence by the media and the government didn't bother to deny such an act. This clearly indicates its authenticity which in turn undermines the credibility of the published surveys’ results.

Therefore, in light of AFTE’s interest in advocating for the freedom of information which means accessible data to the public in a credible and transparent manner, it introduces this paper to reaffirm the importance of data and statistics, and the necessity to break the government monopoly of producing and disseminating the information. So the public can participate in planning, evaluating, accounting and adjusting the policies course.

**What Do We Know About CAPMS and Data in Egypt?**

The Egyptian Constitution obliges the government to disclose, provide, and protect the information, data, statistics and official documents from damage by all means. As they are public property and a guaranteed right for every citizen. And in order to prevent any interference, the constitution authorizes the law to determine the penalty for withholding or deliberately giving false information. As the constitution in its Article 68 articulates as following;
“Information, data, statistics and official documents are owned by the people. Disclosure thereof from various sources is a right guaranteed by the state to all citizens. The state shall provide and make them available to citizens with transparency. The law shall organize rules for obtaining such, rules of availability and confidentiality, rules for depositing and preserving such, and lodging complaints against refusals to grant access thereto. The law shall specify penalties for withholding information or deliberately providing false information. State institutions shall deposit official documents with the National Library and Archives once they are no longer in use. They shall also protect them, secure them from loss or damage, and restore and digitize them using all modern means and instruments, as per the law.”

Undoubtedly, the Income and Expenditure Survey is public information that applies according to the aforementioned Article. Such a survey is one of the most important research work that indicates the consumption patterns in Egypt. As it provides the necessary data for measuring the standard of living, consumption patterns and inflation rates. Accordingly, it helps to identify the ongoing social changes that have resulted from socio-economic conditions to help decision-makers implement effective policies and responsively develop social protection programs.

The periodic release of such surveys’ results has been reset to be every two years instead of five years since 2007/2008, in order to provide more updated information on the citizens’ life developments.

The CAPMS is the supreme body which is responsible for producing and publishing population, social and economic statistics. It has been established according to decree N. 2915/1964 as an independent agency affiliated directly to the Presidential Office. This decree identifies the CAPMS as the sole authorized body to conduct and disseminate the statistics that only required by the government. Moreover, the law shall impose penalties on any party that publishes any data or statistics by any means of publishing except for the data and information produced by CAPMS.
Where Does the Problem Lie?

The problem lies in two main aspects; the first is the absence of the checks and balances that ensure the CAPMS’ independence and immunity from the security authorities’ interference. The second is the CAPMS monopoly of producing and disseminating the data and information. These two aspects negatively affect the credibility and reliability of the reports issued by CAPMS.

• The CAPMS’s Lack of independence and persistent interference in its work:

According to Article (1) of the Decree n. 2915/1964, the CAPMS is an independent agency affiliated to the Presidential Office. And Article (5) identifies its administrative structure into several departments such as the Central Administration of Public Mobilization, the Central Administration of Statistics and the Central Administration of Population Census... etc. And Articles (11,12,13) articulates that every ministry, governorate and public institution shall have a Central Department of Statistics affiliated to CAPMS.

Additionally, the aforementioned decree stipulates the CAPMS affiliation to the Presidential Office without any guarantees that ensure its credibility and transparency and provide actual immunity from security interferences regarding producing and disclosing the data and information. This makes the CAPMS’s independency questionable. More clear stated guarantees are needed to restrict the government’s role to be just about providing the proper funds and the required raw data that enable CAPMS to perform its tasks.

The above mentioned interference in CAPMS’s work, indicates that it is actually controlled by the security authorities. Which makes the release of any information or data subjected to the approval of other government authorities after imposing amending or deletion directives. This issue is considered as a violation of the constitutional right to transparent and impartial information. It is also undermining “Information is Public Property” principle that, theoretically, makes the government obliged to disclose information.

• The Monopolization of Data Collection and Production

Since Nasser’s era, the government has expanded in collecting and producing data and gave particular attention to economy-related data. A former research by AFTE has indicated that such expansion in data production has been directly proportional to the restrictive attitude against
the right of the parties concerned to access and publish this information (Citizens, Civil Society, Media, Experts). This has been shown in several ways, for instance, the Law on the Statistical Work Regulation in Egypt, issued in 1960, relied on broad and vague definitions of terms such as “Information Classification” and “Industrial Secrets”. Axiomatically, the use of such flexible terms without clear controls allows the government officials to impose restrictions on information access which suits the authorities, not the public interests.

Besides the expansion in data collection, Article 10 of the Decree N. 2915/1964 allows CAPMS to monopolize the authority of collecting, processing, producing and publishing any data or information. As the Law shall punish any party that publishes by any means any data or statistical information other than what is produced by CAPMS. This deprives independent researchers and civil society of conducting their own statistical research activities including data collection from primary sources. Moreover, the same article also stipulates that statistics which are not planned in advance in the CAPMS's agenda, may not be published without its approval.

The main dilemma concerning the collection, production, and access to information in Egypt lies in the aforementioned two aspects.

On the one hand, CAPMS does not have the actual independence to produce credible data. Adding to its questionable independence, it monopolizes the authority of data collecting and production not allowing civil society to participate in such work, on the other hand. These two aspects, along with persistent interference by the security services make CAPMS's data mere political propaganda.
Conclusion and recommendations

AFTE condemns the blatant interference in the work of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics and, particularly, in its results of the latest surveys on Income and Expenditure. Such interference reflects the CAPMS’s lack of independence and questioning the credibility and reliability of all its released data.

AFTE believes that statistics, data, and information are crucial in the decision-making process. Accordingly, AFTE affirms the necessity to break CAPMS’s monopoly of Information, which in turn helps to break the government monopoly of information. And it would lead to the enrichment of the Data Production industry and allows the parties concerned to participate and evaluate policies and decisions made by the government.

Building on that AFTE urges the Egyptian government to;

- Prompt promulgation of FOI Law;
- Promoting the production of simplified versions of the statistical research results to facilitate its accessibility by wider audience;
- Provide guarantees and controls that protect CAPMS as an independent State agency which has intact authority in determining and implementing its work plans and policies;
- Decriminalize conducting any statistical research projects or initiatives by research institutions, researchers or academics without CAPMS’s approval.

(Endnotes)

