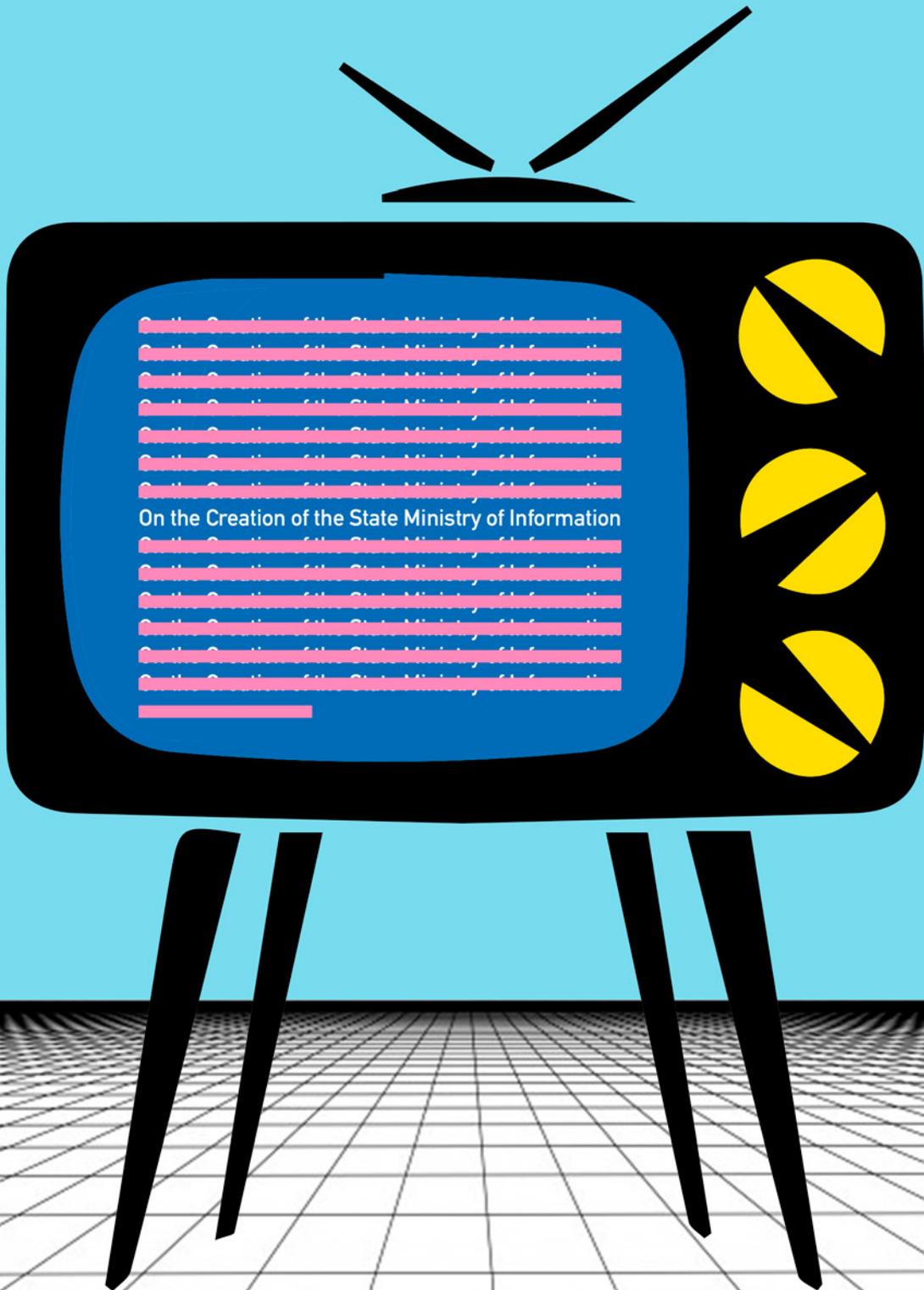


# On the Creation of the State Ministry of Information



# Position Paper: On the Creation of the State Ministry of Information

Prepared by:

Mostafa Shawky, Researcher at the Association for Freedom of Thought and  
Expression (AFTE)

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info@afteegypt.org  
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## Introduction

In its plenary session on December 22, 2019, the Egyptian House of Representatives approved a limited ministerial<sup>1</sup> reshuffle that included merging the Ministry of Tourism with the Ministry of Antiquities. Economic development was taken from the Ministry of Administrative Reform and merged with the Ministry of Planning to become the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development. Meanwhile, administrative reform tasks were assigned to the Ministry of Investment and assumed by Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, in addition to his other duties. The new ministerial reshuffle also included the creation of a State Ministry of Information to be headed by former Minister of Information, Osama Heikal, currently head of Parliament's Culture, Information, and Archeology Committee.

The decision to create a State Ministry of Information was not surprising to observers of the Egyptian press and media scene in recent months, as there have been several demands<sup>2</sup> for the position of the Minister of Information to be restored due to the continuing chaos of press and media landscape. Reasons cited include the inability of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation to assist the National Press Authority and the National Media Authority to control this chaos. According to these demands, the Ministry should connect the parliament and the government with councils and bodies concerned with journalistic and media affairs, and above all play its role as a spokesman for the Egyptian state, representing it as well as its president in media platforms locally and internationally.

At its weekly meeting on Wednesday, January 8, 2020, the Cabinet also approved<sup>3</sup> the media policy presented by Osama Haikal, the State Minister of Information. The Cabinet

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1. Asharq Al-Awsat Online: "Limited cabinet reshuffle, including investment, industry and tourism portfolios," Posted on Sunday 22 December 2019, last arrival March 18, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2Uh5jxl>

2. Hamadeh Khattab, "Demands for the return of the Ministry of Information to control the scene. Alam El-dein supports with the amendment of powers. Morsi: "It will not be a substitute for media organizations".. Laila Abdul Majeed: "its presence is necessary even if temporarily." Sada Elbalad; published on October 15, 2019. Last visit: March 18, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2WkRmB4>

Reda Al-Nusairi, Supporter and Opponent ... Continuous Calls for the Return of the Ministry of Information, Al-Ahali, Posted on November 5, 2019, last visit: March 18, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/3dgmX6L>

3. Mohamed Magdi, "Urgent: The government adopts state 'media policy' presented by Osama Haykal. Al-Watan," Posted on Wednesday 8 January 2020, last visit March 18, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/3977UiR>

also approved the jurisdiction of the State Ministry of Information, and assigned the Legal Adviser of the Cabinet with drafting the terms of the ministry's prerogatives in preparation for the Prime Minister's executive decisions. These prerogatives included policy and coordination functions. However, the decision regarding these prerogatives has not yet been published in the official newspaper, despite the passage of almost three months since its adoption. The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE) has contacted the Emiri Printing Authority, which is responsible for printing the official newspaper that issues the Prime Minister's decisions, but the organization has denied receiving any decisions with No. 210 of 2020 until the twelfth of March 2020.

This paper discusses the decision to create the post of State Minister of Information. It starts with defining the differences between the positions of a "Minister" and a "State Minister." It then discusses the new minister's jurisdiction, approved by the Cabinet, and the extent of its compatibility or incompatibility with the powers and functions of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation; finally, this paper questions how to coordinate the relationship between them and evaluate the objectives the position was created for.

## **Preface**

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In 2014, the late Egyptian constitution approved broad structural and legislative changes aimed at restructuring the entire media and press landscape. This came after many calls- which have been ongoing since January 2011- for the media's independence from the executive authority. Such calls have emphasized the necessary function of the media as a public service funded by taxpayers rather than a bugle for the ruling regime, which has been its function over the past four decades.

Articles no. 212, 211, and 210 of the 2014 constitution approved the abolition of the Ministry of Information, the Supreme Press Council, and the Radio and Television Union, replacing them with independent administrative and financial bodies: the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR), the National Press Authority, and the

National Media Authority, respectively. Also abolished was Press Law No. 96 of 1996, which was replaced with the Law Regulating Press and Media, the Supreme Media Council regulation, and the laws regulating each of the two bodies.

However, the regime that took control after July 3rd, 2013, was well aware of the enormous role media played in mobilizing the public and shaping political trends. This was manifested in calls for demonstrations against the rule of former President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the election of General Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi as president in 2014, the regime has sought to tighten its grip on the press and media landscape. They have managed to do so by nationalizing the most important press and media platforms through extensive monopolization, which favors new media entities associated with sovereign security services<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the authorities launched a massive campaign to block many press and media platforms on the internet, with 124 websites currently blocked<sup>5</sup>. This has enabled the regime to dominate the flow of news and data completely, whether through traditional or digital media, by monopolizing the official version and suppressing and marginalizing opposing opinions.

In light of this hostile climate to the freedom of press, which facilitates the dominance of the one voice, the law regulating the media and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, as well as the two press and media bodies, was passed to establish the dominance of the executive authority over them. This was accomplished through articles that gave the president of the Republic broad powers in controlling the formation of the boards of the three bodies. In fact, the formation of these boards was quasi-governmental, resulting in the degeneration of the functions of these bodies and an inability to find systematic solutions to the crises of the state-owned press and media systems. These bodies were only able to exercise their supervisory and punitive functions and not their regulatory function. Even the organizational regulations governing the work of the SCMR were issued only at the end of last year. This was after four years had passed since the establishment of the SCMR and two years after the last law regulating its work, the Press and Media Regulatory Law and the Supreme Media Council No. 180

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4. Mustafa Shawky, "Under Suspicion: Who is Monitoring the Ownership of the Media in Egypt." Freedom of Thought and Expression Foundation, published on March 22, 2018, last visit April 5, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2Jgme6>

5. A press release, AFTE calls upon the Information Authority to reverse the decision to withdraw the accreditation of The Guardian correspondent. Freedom of Thought and Expression Foundation, published on March 20, 2020, last visit April 5, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/3aFEvh7>

of 2018. This was also after at least a year of working on a statute of penalties that the council had put in place in order to impose its power until the issuance of the executive regulations.

However, neither the SCMR and the two national bodies for press and media, nor their leaders had any real role in drafting state policies on media affairs. This was especially true regarding the re-demarcation of the media market, as the SCMR neglected its legal obligation to control the funding sources for press and media institutions in order to ensure competition and pluralism and prevent monopolistic practices. This left the marketplace vulnerable to large-scale monopolization and nationalization, favoring new media entities owned by security agencies. Meanwhile, these players had no involvement in the processes of elaborating, discussing, and implementing media laws at the market level. This was spearheaded by Parliament's Information, Archeology, and Culture Committee headed by former Information Minister Osama Haikal, who has had the upper-hand in most legislation that Parliament has produced to regulate press, media, and the three bodies.

Therefore, without a clear strategy or division of roles and tasks, chaos and randomness continued to predominate the press and media landscape. The policy of demarcating the market did not succeed in creating a successful competitive model, while the public service media remained out of service. Consequently, Parliament was obliged to amend the organizational laws more than once, resulting in frequent delays in the implementation of these laws. This prompted many to consider reinstating the Ministry of Information.

The need for the Ministry of Information stems from the need to return to the old, safe way of managing affairs, directing them politically and centrally. However, the constitution stands as an obstacle; the restoration of the Ministry of Information and the abolition of the aforementioned bodies require amending the constitution. Thus the compromise was: a State Minister of Information.

## Why do we need a Ministry of Information?

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On October 7, 2019, about two months before he assumed the post of State Minister of Information Affairs, president of the Parliamentary Information, Culture and Archeology Committee Osama Haikal told parliamentary editors, “The constitution did not prevent the existence of a Ministry of Information, and this is the vision of the president of the republic and the head of government. However, in the past a Minister of Information could regulate the media, but at present a Minister of Information comes up with a new concept, especially with the presence of media bodies”<sup>6</sup>. Heikal added: “If the position of the Minister of Information is restored, the Minister must set a media policy with a new vision and advise with a new concept that sets out a state media policy.”

In an article in the Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper entitled “The Minister of Information has become a necessity,” Sami Sharaf, one of the founders of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service and information advisor to former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, wrote on August 23, 2018: “Despite the sensitivity of the historical moment Egypt is going through, and despite the great challenges and threats that the state faces, the media is still unable to express and promote the national project adopted by the state; we have a huge media system, but it lacks logical planning and a compass that defines its directions. That’s why it always fails in the first rounds of media battles directed at us, starting with the battle of Suez Canal expansion, armament and the Rafale purchase, the Israeli gas purchase agreement, the Nahda Dam battles, the border demarcation agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the presidential election battle, ending with the painful repercussions of the process of development and economic reform, with the war on terror and confronting everyone who interferes in Egyptian internal affairs under the pretext of defending freedom and human rights. The political leadership understands the need for a conscious media, which reflects the reality of what is going on in Egypt for the ordinary man on the one hand, and for the entire world on the other hand: a conscious media that defends the Egyptian national project,

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6. Ahmed Ali, “With a New Concept” .. Haykal discusses the importance of the presence of the Minister of Information. Masrawy Website, published on Monday 7 October 2019, last visit 22 March 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2U8G1T9>

mobilizes behind it, uplifts the morale of the citizen, motivates the citizen to work and produce more, and supports the citizen's immunity against various types of negative publicity, engaging the citizen with Egypt in its current existential battle.

In my opinion, the first step towards this kind of media is reinstating the position of an information minister who is aware of the importance of this juncture, who can revive Egypt's soft power, formulate a media strategy, embrace a national message over profits, take on state issues, and is able to correct Egypt's image in the face of anyone who tries to distort it. We need a Ministry of Information that expresses a state project with its sovereignty, a ministry that coordinates with other state institutions to communicate the country's achievements and mission professionally.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the need for the return of the Minister of Information post was more political than regulatory. In other words, it was the search for a central logic that regulates and manages the field, a logic that's capable of creating harmony between the three scattered tracks that are weakly related to each other: the tracks of laws and executive regulations, of re-demarcation of the market, and of organizing the press and media landscape managed by the three bodies. It was the search for a logic that sets a state media policy, and supervises the restoration of balance and vitality to the private media market after the monopolistic practices that damaged it. These monopolistic practices rendered the private market unable to compete with the anti-state media, resulting in a loss of credibility and continuity. This logic would restore the old order of managing media affairs in Egypt centrally, with the ruling political and executive authority defining its philosophy, policies, and orientations.

In a meeting that gathered Egyptian newspaper editors with the State Minister for Information Osama Heikal, on December 27, 2019, Prime Minister Dr. Mostafa Madbouly answered a question regarding the reason for the return of the Minister of Information post, saying: “The reason is that there is a problem in communication, and the government's message was not clearly communicated to the public. Now we need a professional minister who coordinates with all media bodies and boards, presents

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7. Sami Sharaf, “The Minister of Information has become a necessity”. Al-Masry Al-Youm, Posted on August 23, 2018, Last visit 22nd March 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2UaoKZP>

the government's viewpoint, and organizes the ministers' statements towards the most important objective, which is establishing awareness.”<sup>8</sup>

The same message was confirmed by the president in his meeting at the beginning of the year with the Prime Minister and the State Minister of Information. At that meeting, Ambassador Bassam Radi, spokesperson for the presidency, stated that the president stressed the importance of the role the media plays in shaping citizen awareness of the latest national and international developments, in presenting all opinions and attitudes, in considering various perspectives, as well as anchoring societal values and principles. This is in addition to combating and isolating extremist ideologies, directed in this context by the State Ministry of Information. The Ministry works to promote these messages through the formulation of relevant media policies and through the realization of coordination and harmony within the media system, including national bodies and institutions governing press and media in Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, and although the need for a Minister of Information is political in the first place, it requires broad executive powers to restore coordination between the three bodies and to act as a link between them, the government, and the parliament. As a result, extensive debate arose about the extent to which the roles of the State Minister for Information conflicted with the roles assigned to the SCMR in accordance with the Law on the Institutional Regulation of Press and Media and the SCMR No. 180 of 2018. However, the governing constitution regulating the relationship between them is the jurisdiction approved by the cabinet for the new minister.

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8. Mahmoud Mosallam, “The new Minister of Information: The Supreme Council has a regulatory role and the bodies manage state funds.” Al-Watan newspaper website, published on December 27, 2019, last visit March 22, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2UqyZlg>

9. Wissam Abdel-Alim, “Details of President Sisi’s meeting with the Prime Minister and Minister of Information.” Al-Ahram Gate, published on January 5, 2020, last visit March 22, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2JjYFBr>

## The New Minister vs. the Supreme Council for Media Regulation

Before the terms of Osama Haikal's jurisdiction were defined, and immediately after assuming his duties, controversy arose over the extent of overlap and conflict between his roles and prerogatives and the powers and prerogatives of the SCMR.<sup>10</sup> This debate continued even after the cabinet approved Osama Haikal's authority on January 8, 2020.

One might observe that the ongoing debate has a political significance that precedes any formal definition of jurisdiction. Did Osama assume the role of Information Minister, but in different clothes and under the name of "State Minister of Information"? Does this mean marginalizing the role of the SCMR and admitting its failure to carry out its mission? Does it mean casting aside SCMR President Makram Mohamed Ahmed? Will the SCMR be the scapegoat of political change in the state's approach to dealing with media affairs?

In addition to the previous questions comes the extreme delay of the ratification of the formation of the new media bodies (the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, the National Press Authority and the National Media Authority) for about a year and a half without clear justification. The question now is: was the delay pending the arrival of Osama Haikal in a cabinet reshuffle deliberate in order for Haikal to impose his preferences for whom he wished to cooperate with?

By the end of August 2018, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ratified Law No. 180 of 2018, regulating the press, media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation.<sup>11</sup> According to this law, the provisions of Law No. 92 of 2016 regarding the regulation of press and media were canceled, according to which media organizations were founded and formed. Consequently, new formations for the boards of these bodies must be approved in accordance with the new law. In fact, Law no. 180 of 2018 has amended

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10. The Stipulation of the Law on the Institutional Organization of Press, Media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation No. 180 of 2018. The official website of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation. Link: <https://bit.ly/2QCb3AA>

11. Mohsen Semeika, "Al-Sisi issues the Press Regulatory Law and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation" (full text). Al-Masry Al-Youm, September 1, 2018. Last visit March 23, 2020, Link: <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1319365>

the articles relating to the formation of the SCMR and the two bodies. It is expected that the number of members of the media bodies will be reduced to from 12 to 9. The new law also stipulated that the SCMR in its current formation continue to carry out its duties and prerogatives until a decision is issued regarding its new formation in accordance with the provisions of the law.

Articles (73) of the Law on the Institutional Regulation of Press and Media No. 180 of 2018 and (54) of the Law on the National Press Authority stipulated a one month period in which the nominations for the board members of the three media organizations should be sent to the president of the republic to choose from. Otherwise, the president shall have the right to choose them.

On September 8, 2018, president of the SCMR Makram Mohamed Ahmed stated that “the changes in the formation of the three media bodies are expected to be made within one month at the latest, according to the new laws for media organizations that President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi recently ratified.”<sup>12</sup> Makram pointed out that further changes in the national press institutions, which include the heads of boards of directors and editors-in-chief, will be announced by the National Press Authority in its new form.

However, the president’s decision regarding the new formations was not issued, without explanation, and despite the fact that the relevant authorities sent their board membership nominations of the three bodies to the president.<sup>13</sup> This is also despite the fact that 32 months have passed since the press regulation law was passed. The head of the National Press Authority had to begin holding elections for boards of directors of the national press institutions, as he could not delay it any further.

President of the SCMR Makram Mohamed Ahmed responded to questions from journalists regarding his re-assignment to head the SCMR, indicating that no one has contacted him yet regarding this. He added: “But if I am asked to continue my mission in my post, I will be a soldier for this country, completing what SCMR has accomplished in the recent period.”<sup>14</sup> He confirmed that since his presidency of the

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12. Mina Ghali, “The Supreme Council: Formation of Media Organizations within a Month”. Al-Masry Al-Youm, Posted on Saturday 8 September 2018, last visit 23 March 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/3bjvMB1>

13. Ibid

14. Ibid

council he has been working on implementing President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's vision in the media field.

In a dialogue that brought together the Prime Minister and chief editors of newspapers with the State Minister for Information at the end of December 2019, the minister stressed that there is no overlap between the role of the new "Minister of Information" and the existing councils and bodies. He also stated that the SCMR has a regulatory role, while the role of the two press and media bodies is managing state funds in the media field.<sup>15</sup>

However, after the ministerial reshuffle and the appointment of Osama Haikal as State Minister of Information and the delineation of his prerogatives, the head of the SCMR Makram Mohamed Ahmed appeared angry in a television interview<sup>16</sup> on the Sada Al-Balad TV channel with host Ahmed Moussa on February 23, 2020. Makram declared his indignant rejection of the changes in the press and media landscape. He underscored the executive authority's desire to restore its control of the media and to intentionally marginalize his role and that of the SCMR, ignoring their opinion of the changes. He denounced the withdrawal of some of the SCMR's prerogatives in favor of the new minister, disregarding the council's opinion. He maintained that he does not know anything about the formation of the media bodies, which was delayed by nearly a year and a half, and that he will find out when it is published in newspapers. In fact, he went further, stating for the first time that "freedom of expression in Egypt is lacking" and that one of his articles was banned from being published in Al-Ahram newspaper. He claimed that the current individual management and predomination of one vote exceeds what occurred during the period of the rule of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, referring to the totalitarian state and the centrally-directed media administration.

All of this occurred before the new minister met with members of the SCMR and its president, Makram Mohamed Ahmed, on March 15, 2020. In this meeting Osama Haikal and Makram declared the need for coordination and the importance of the Ministry of

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15. Mahmoud Mosallam, "The New Minister of Information: The Supreme Council has a regulatory role and the bodies manage state funds." Al-Watan newspaper website, published on December 27, 2019, last visit March 22, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2UqyZlg>

16. Sada Al-Balad channel on YouTube, an interview with journalist Makram Mohamed Ahmed, On My Responsibility, TV talk show with Ahmed Moussa, February 23, 2020. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg3UoaWnRk8>

Information and its role in the next stage. They also affirmed their agreement on joint coordination for the sake of regulating the media landscape.<sup>17</sup>

However, we do not know whether it was a substantive agreement or merely a diplomatic meeting aimed at ameliorating appearances and settling the dispute. This is especially considering that the prerogatives of the new minister have not yet been published in the official newspaper, despite the fact that nearly three months have passed since his appointment. This dispute can be attributed to the division of jurisdiction with the SCMR, which derives its powers from the Media Regulation Law no. 180 of 2018.

We can connect this to the new minister's and the heads' of the three bodies avoidance of discussing a position on the formation of new boards for the media bodies in meetings<sup>18</sup> between the minister and each of them. It seems that the new minister's affairs have not yet been settled, but are in the process of becoming so.

## The new minister's political and executive powers

On January 28, 2020, Al Youm Al Sabee (Youm7) published<sup>19</sup> that it obtained the text of the prime minister's Resolution No. 210 of 2020 defining the goals of the state's media policy and the tasks and functions of the Minister of Information. However, this has not been published in the official newspaper yet. The draft of Osama Haikal's prerogatives was careful to avoid provoking a clash with the SCMR and its president. Of course, it failed to do so because those who prepared it (Osama Haikal, Mustafa Madbouly) had excluded the council and its president from any discussions on the prerogatives before it was approved, which is what Makram stated in the aforementioned television interview.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Mostafa Ali, "Osama Haykal to the Supreme Media Members: We will coordinate together to implement the state policy." Masrawy, Posted on March 15, 2020, Last visit March 23, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/39dnucv>

18. Mustafa Ali, "Details of the Minister of Information's meeting with the president and members of the national press." Masrawy, Posted on March 2, 2020, Last visit March 24, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2wwro2X>, Ibid.

19. Mohamed Magdy El-Sisi, The Government Decides media Policy and the Tasks of the Minister of State for Information .. Osama Heikal Terms of Reference include a plan providing a wider space for opposing opinions ... Posted on January 28, 2020, Last visit March 24, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2QDYyEC>

20.<sup>20</sup> Ibid

Additionally, the executive power's desire to withdraw the file of "African journalists" from the SCMR and assign it to the new minister has outraged the president of the council. The latter stated that this has been a task for press regulators for the past 40 years. He denounced the disregard of his or the council's opinion before withdrawing prerogatives.

What was presented and approved in the cabinet session cannot be considered a "media policy" in a precise sense of the term, as the new minister presented five general objectives governing his business strategy, which were vague and did not express any intention to effect fundamental changes in the state's media policy.

The objectives are as follows:

1. Preserving the Egyptian value system and the cohesion of the internal front.
2. Developing the Egyptian personality on a logical and objective basis, and preserving the country's moderation in a manner that guarantees steering clear of extremism and exaggeration.
3. Highlighting the state's efforts in national projects and their impact on the future of citizens.
4. Strengthening the Egyptian media locally, regionally, and internationally, and fortifying its ability to deal with various crises.
5. Establishing citizens' awareness of the provisions of the constitution and the law and raising efficacious societal awareness.<sup>2121</sup>

As for prerogatives, they can be divided into two categories: one related to the political tasks of the new minister, and the other related to supervision and regulation, allowing the minister to contribute to regulating the press and media landscape. For example, political prerogatives include coordinating with various ministries to put forward and highlight the efforts of the state and its national projects. The minister is to represent the state at international conferences and forums that require the presence of a state media representative. The minister works on preparing media plans for various local and international political situations in cooperation with the different ministries

21.<sup>21</sup> Ibid

and agencies. The minister prepares for the president's domestic and international conferences and reviews the statements issued by the government and the presidency before publication, etc.

Meanwhile, executive prerogatives include: proposing a state media policy in coordination with the president and the prime minister, implementing it in coordination with the organizing bodies, supervising performance development plans for public and private visual media platforms in cooperation with expert bodies, working in cooperation with expert authorities to support official state media and make it competitive once again, and supporting the freedom of private media. This is in addition to working in cooperation with expert authorities to professionally support electronic media in line with global developments in the media field. Finally, this includes supervising the Center for Media Training and Studies for Africans, and transferring its affiliation to the State Ministry of Information.

Thus the prerogatives of the executive minister collide with the objectives and prerogatives of the Supreme Council. There is large sphere of overlapping work with the Supreme Media Council, which operates according to prerogatives, objectives, and strategies stipulated in the press and media regulatory law No. 180 of 2018. The consequences of this overlap are widely expected in the coming days—especially after the issuance of the executive regulations of the Press and Media Regulatory Law, which were delayed for more than a year. This gave the Supreme Council greater flexibility in implementing its prerogatives and achieving its objectives, set by Law no. 180 of 2018.<sup>22</sup> The SCMR has been operating in accordance with the old regulations for more than a year<sup>23</sup> despite the abolition of the provisions of the law regulating it—law No. 92 of 2016—which has greatly reduced its functions.

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22.<sup>22</sup> Stipulation of the Law on the Institutional Organization of Press and media and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation No. 180 of 2018. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation official website. Link: <https://bit.ly/2QCb3AA>

23. Mustafa Ali, "The official newspaper publishes the prime minister's decision to adopt the SCMR regulations." Masrawi, posted on February 28, 2020. Last visit March 24, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2QIaSUx>

## Conclusions: What does it mean to appoint a State Minister of Information?

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The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression believes that the deteriorating state of freedom of the press in Egypt will not improve much with the creation of the position of State Minister of Information, given the stifling and restrictive journalistic work environment. Accordingly, the association came to the following conclusions:

**First**, at the time of this publication, the State Minister of Information has not presented a different vision for dealing with basic issues, namely:

- Blocked press and media websites, the number of which has reached 124 websites, according to AFTE's latest survey.
- The vast monopolization of the visual media and press markets in recent years, and the emergence of entities affiliated with security agencies that have taken control of almost all press and media outlets, resulting in the absence of pluralism and guarantees of free competition.
- The issue of imprisoned journalists, which the new minister has been silent on, and which according to AFTE's latest inventory numbered 13 journalists.
- Recurring disputes between international press institutions and the State Information Service, and the harassment and stalking of the offices and correspondents of press agencies.

**Second**, at the time of this publication, the official newspaper has not published the aforementioned decision regarding the powers of the State Minister of Information. This likely means that there is an awareness that such powers violate the provisions of the constitution related to independent bodies of media regulation. The current amended constitution of 2014 approved the abolition of the Ministry of Information, replacing it with the Supreme Council for Media Regulation. It also replaced the bodies responsible for the national press and public service media with new bodies that enjoy administrative and financial independence from the executive authority. The constitution aimed to liberate the state-owned media in order to serve the citizen

and not the regime. Media administration was to be free from politicization and manipulation according to the wishes and policies of the ruling regime. Rather, it would serve its taxpayers and their right to be informed of and exchange news.

**Third**, the appointment of a State Minister of Information is a political process that the Sisi regime is using to rearrange the agenda of media affairs, which has remained one of the government's highest priorities since the summer of 2013. It seems that the last possible way to salvage its diminishing influence—caused by the involvement of different agencies, specifically, the security agencies—is to restore the central grip of the executive authority over it. President Sisi personally believes that the constitution was written with “in good faith”<sup>24</sup> and was approved through a popular referendum<sup>25</sup> in April 2019, amending a number of articles, the most important of which allows him to remain president for a longer period. During that period, some demanded that the constitutional amendments presented to Parliament include the return of the Ministry of Information and the position of Minister of Information. However, proponents of this retreated due to the fear of clashing with the SCMR and its president, Makram Mohamed Ahmed, or the press and media community at the time.<sup>26</sup>

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24. Muhammad alGali, “Al-Sisi: The Egyptian constitution was written with good intentions and states are not built with good intentions.” Youm7, posted on September 13, 2015, last visit 24 March 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/3bnXjS1>

25. Sayed Saber, “Referendum on the 2019 constitutional amendments has highest participation rate.” Youm7, Posted on April 23, 2019, last visit March 24, 2020. Link: <https://bit.ly/2QAFyqH>

26. “On February 2, 2019, (155) members (more than one-fifth of council members) submitted a written request to the president of the council calling for the amendment of some articles of the constitution, which included a proposal to replace the stipulation of articles: (102 / first and third paragraphs / 140 first paragraph adding The necessary transitional articles, 160 / first and fifth paragraphs, 185, 189 / second paragraph, 190, 193 / third paragraph, 200 / first paragraph, 204 / second paragraph, 234, 243, 244) of the constitution, and the addition of new (eight) articles and abolishing articles no.(212, 213), based on the provisions of Article (226) of the Constitution, and Article (140) of the council's internal regulations”. “Over the course of four sessions held by the council on the 13th and 14th of February 2019, the report of the general committee was considered, whereby it was decided to approve the principle of the amendment, as included in the request, except for cancelling articles no.(212, 213).” Report of the Legislative Committee on Constitutional Amendments, April, 2019. Link: <https://bit.ly/3aFtRqG>

## Conclusion

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Throughout this paper, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE) has sought to highlight the fact that the constitution and the law have never been a hindrance to political will. There are several ways to circumvent the prerogatives of the SCMR and the two national bodies for press and media in favor of a broad role played by the State Minister of Information. Granted full powers as head of the media system in Egypt, the minister would be able to supervise and politically manipulate it. This therefore belies the propaganda, which claims that the State Minister of Information does not possess a ministerial portfolio and does not regulate the media.