Freedom of Expression in The Time of Social Distancing

Quarterly Report on the State of Freedom of Expression in Egypt
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Methodology

This report is an analytical presentation on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information violations, to evaluate the adopted public policies by the Egyptian state in this regard. The report at hand covers documented violations, according to AFTE’s monitoring standards, from January 1 to March 25, 2020.

This report reviews the State institutions’ response to the Covid-19 crisis. It analyzes decisions or procedures by the Prime Minister and Health Ministry to protect Egyptian citizens from the virus spread and to maintain public health. In addition to the interactions of other related bodies, the Supreme Council for Media, State Information Services, and Public Prosecution, to address the pandemic according to their jurisdiction.

Introduction

The 2020 first-quarter report Freedom of Expression situation in Egypt coincides with the outbreak of a global pandemic that has killed nearly 200,000 people worldwide, besides millions of infections. Such a crisis has prompted most countries to implement several exceptional measures to curb the virus spread. In this context, many rising debates on the adverse effects on the citizens’ fundamental freedoms and rights because of such protective procedures. Particularly, Freedom of Expression, Press and Media Freedom, Digital Rights, and the freedom of accessing and circulating information.

Thus, this report analyzes the Freedom of Expression situation in Egypt during the first three months of 2020 and the ramifications of the public health safeguards policies by the Egyptian authorities.

The report divides into two main sections; the first one addresses Freedom of Expression situation in light of the current restrictions to control the Covid-19 outbreak, especially on the citizens’ freedom of digital expression, Press and Media freedom, and the right to circulate information. The second section presents a subdivision of the violations patterns regarding Media Freedom, Digital Rights, Freedom of Creativity. With the differentiation between Corona related violations and the frequent breaches due to the hostile environment against Freedom of Expression in Egypt.
At the end of this report, it concludes with some recommendations by AFTE that urges the different bodies of the Egyptian state to respect all Freedom of Expression aspects. Also, it includes pressing demands of more transparent policies concerning the information on the pandemic developments and the confrontation action plans.

**First: Freedom of Expression Vs. Exceptional Measures**

Egyptian authorities have implemented several exceptional measures to maintain public health, after declaring Covid-19, a global pandemic by WHO. And its call for countries to performing every necessary, protective action. And also, after Egypt's infection surge last March.

The most outstanding steps are; restrictions on movement freedom through imposing a partial lockdown from 8 pm until 6 am, entirely suspending all education institutions, a complete or partial suspension of several governmental services that visited by citizens, and activating the electronic services instead. Besides, decisions to closing the mass social gatherings places such as theaters and malls.

- **Restrictions on Press and Digital Freedom**

AFTE believes that some of these measures mainly aim for chaining Press and Media work and restricting the citizens' freedom of digital expression via Social Networks. Because the government aspires to prevail narratives on Corona spread in Egypt and to ban any information regarding this matter except for what state institutions release.

Coinciding with the onset of Coronavirus, the Prime Minister, Mostafa Madbouly, has instructed¹ the concerned authorities to take all necessary, legal measures against anyone who broadcasts false news, statements, or rumors on the Covid-19 developments. Also, the Public Prosecution affirmed² that it would address such fake news and stories according to the Law.

In an implementation of these decisions, the security forces arrested Atef Hassaballah Al-Sayyed Ahmad,³ a 43 years-old journalist at Al-Youm newspaper and the editor-in-chief of Al-Qarar Al-Dawly newspaper, from his home. The arrest came after posting on his personal social media account, denying the Ministry of Health’s numbers on the infected people in Egypt. Also, the

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journalist, Basma Mostafa, faced unlawful detention⁴ for nine hours. She was arrested while performing her work on covering a crowd of citizens waiting for running Corona test, at the Ministry of Health’s Central Laboratories.

Strikingly, the National security officer who interrogated Mostafa told her: “There are no Corona infections in Egypt. The journalists are behind all these rumors”. Such a statement reveals that the authorities consider the press role a part of the crisis, not a vital factor in facing it. AFTE rejects this attitude because it has severe ramifications regarding the society’s right to know any information about the difficult situation experiencing.

Moreover, the Supreme Council for Media has played a notable role in besetting the news and data on the Covid-19 spread in Egypt. For instance, the Council sent a warning letter to 16 news websites and social networks’ accounts concerning posting false news on finding a Corona infection case in Tanta City. It also included a directive to ban publishing any information other than the Ministry of Health’s official data. Also, the State Information Services has ordered to withdraw the work accreditation of the Guardian reporter and to leave the country. Besides a warning statement to the New York Times reporter. Both reporters published information on the Corona spread in Egypt.

- **Restrictions on Freedom of Access to Information**

AFTE confirms that many problems mar the Ministry of Health’s and Prime Minister’s information. Whether its lack or inaccessibility, which hinders journalists and specialists from analyzing those numbers and data. Accordingly, it has restricted the Press role in revealing facts and holding officials accountable. This essential role societies need to overcome significant crises they face.

AFTE also sees that the Freedom of Information Act absence gives the security service the authority to arrest and punish journalists, who are addressing Corona issues or criticizing the government performance, under the pretext of publishing false news, circulating rumors and harming the public interest. It is also worth mentioning the Parliament’s constant delay of the FOI law issuance, although the Supreme Council for Media prepared a draft⁵ more than two years ago. And the Parliament is in its final convocation before reelection, which its date is still unknown in light of the ongoing crisis. AFTE stresses that this situation negatively affects the citizens’ right to information and knowing all facts that maintain public health.

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⁴ Basma Mostafa’s testimony, phone interview by AFTE researcher.

However, AFTE commends the Ministry of Health’s website about Corona’s situation. It contains information on the cases of infections, deaths, cured and discharged from isolation hospitals. Also, it includes guidance to avoid infection and how to act in case of showing symptoms. AFTE urges the Egyptian authorities to more transparency and provide updated information regarding its strategies of confronting all the crisis's aspects. But the available information lacks two vital disclosure conditions, which make them neither accessible by the ordinary public, or journalists and specialists. The first condition is the information comprehensiveness, and the second providing them in forms that enable running an independent statistic or data analysis.

The official information doesn't include sufficient infection categorization according to age, gender, timing, geographical distribution, etc. Also, the inadequate data on the number of isolation hospitals, its capacity, occupancy rates per each, equipment, and the number of medical staff and the available specializations. In addition to the lack of daily, thorough information on conducted and remaining PCR swabs. Besides constant information feed on the government's procedures of financial aid for the daily paid workers, obtaining terms, and its due dates. Such details enable journalists, researchers, and specialists to analyze the data effectively to advise citizens about the virus spread situation. So, AFTE demands an updated, comprehensive, and accessible information for better management of the crisis.

By the end of this section, it should be pointed out that the first quarter of 2020 has witnessed varied Freedom of Expression violations by different State institutions. Concerning Press freedom, Digital Rights, Freedom of Creativity, which the following section addresses in detail.
Second Section: Analysis of The Violations Patterns

This section presents the Freedom of Expression violations regarding Press Freedom, Digital Rights, and Freedom of Creativity.

1. Press and Media Freedom

During the first three months of 2020, AFTE monitored 5 incidents including 15 violations against Press and Media individuals and institutions. Some of these violations are related to the authorities’ restrictions on the press coverage of Covid-19 developments in Egypt, and the rest of the violations are not related to the current crisis.

The breaches have varied from raiding Press workplaces, arresting journalists, revoking work permits,...etc. These violations are the usual practices of the Egyptian authorities to control any information flow other than the official one.

A. Corona related violations

- The detention of the journalist, Basma Mostafa, while performing her work

“That I am not telling you to quit your job, but you have to stop writing provocative, anti-government stories. And I am letting you go in favor of the sound, patriotic people who asked us to release you, and because you are a woman with two kids. But you have to stop working for suspicious places, and I don’t want to see your name on any arousing story again”.

These are the Last words that Basma Mostafa heard from the National Security officer who interrogated her during 9 hours of unlawful detention between one of National Security headquarters and in Abdeen police station. Then, he ordered her release after handing back her phone and personal belongings.

The incident started while Basma was covering a crowd of citizens waiting for running Corona test, at the Ministry of Health's Central Laboratories, for Mada Masr website. Although she was cautious not to draw the police personnel's attention, they spotted her taking photos of the crowd via her phone. However, knowing that Basma is a journalist, the security threatened her with filing

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6. Basma Mostafa’s testimony, phone interview by AFTE researcher.
a report against her in the police station, charging her of impersonating a journalist, and filming without a permit, because she does not have the Journalists’ Syndicate ID card.

After a while, the security forces escorted Mostafa to Abdeen police station where she faced strip-searching. Then, the station chief ordered her to open her phone and she agreed, after many refusal, on the condition of keeping it in her hand. But in her testimony, she mentioned that the security managed to open her phone by themselves and searched all photos, videos, conversations, most of them personal. And she added: The National Security Forces interrogated me in Abdeen police station, for 3 hours, about stories I prepared and my workplace. Also, said that the police allowed her to make a phone call to inform her husband of the arrest, but they denied her presence in the station when he came to ask about her.

Later on, the security personnel moved Mostafa by a Jeep car to one of the National Security headquarters in Downtown. Mostafa said that they interrogated her for another half an hour about her work telling her that Egypt is Corona free, and the journalists who are behind such rumors. And then they told me “you are free to go”.

- **Accreditation revoking and deportation of the Guardian reporter**

On March 17, 2020, the State Information Services issued a press statement that canceled the license of the Guardian reporter and gave a warning to the chief of the New York Times bureau in Cairo over false figures on the Coronavirus in Egypt.

The Guardian published a report that cited a study by a Canadian Medical Doctor claiming that infected people in Egypt may amount to more than 19,000. Also, the New York Times reporter posted some tweets, via his personal Twitter account, included figures from the same source study. The SIS’s statement considered this as “false estimations”. Adding that both reporters relied on a sole unreliable source of information without seeking other official sources, such as the Ministry of Health or WHO office in Cairo for rebutting in accordance with the Press work basic ethics. The Egyptian officials demanded the story be retracted or that the Guardian publish an official apology, according to the aforementioned statement.

Interestingly, in the early morning on March 17, before the press statement, the official account of the State Information Service on Twitter had posted a series of tweets stating that SIS had decided to shut down the Guardian’s office in Cairo and revoke its permit. And also, it had decided to issue a final warning to the correspondent of the New York Times newspaper in Cairo, stipulating that he should refer to the official sources concerning the news on Egypt and to abide by the

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professional rules. However, the SIS’s account deleted these tweets shortly after and published a press statement, several hours later, in which the decisions were less harsh.

On the other side, the Guardian published an article saying that Egyptian authorities have forced its journalist, Ruth Michaelson, to leave the country after she reported on a scientific study that said Egypt was likely to have many more coronavirus cases than have been officially confirmed. The Guardian also said that Michaelson, who has lived in and reported from Egypt since 2014, was advised by the British embassy and her own contacts that members of the country’s security apparatus were seeking to immediately remove her from the country. Adding that Michaelson was asked to meet Egypt’s visa issuance authority but she was advised by German diplomatic officials in Cairo that she should not attend the meeting under any circumstances. On March 20, 2020, she left Egypt on a flight to Germany, and her departure leaves the north African country with no full-time British newspaper correspondents, according to the Guardian's article.

B. Violations non-related to Corona crisis

- The security forces stormed Turkey’s Anadolu Agency

In the evening of January 14, 2020, a police force raided Anadolu Agency office in Cairo, searched the premises, and seized some computers and mobile phones found inside the agency. Then, they detained four of the Agency’s staff members. A one Turkish national who is in charge of the office’s finances and management, Helmy Moa‘men Balgy, besides three Egyptians; Hussien Mohamad Mahmoud Ragab Qabany, Abd-Alsalam Mohamad Hasan, and Hussien Abd-Alfatah Mohamad Abbas. And they allowed another journalist, Viola Fahmy, to go after two hours of the raid.

After searching the premises, the security personnel escorted the four staff members to an unknown place. On the next day, the detainees were brought before the National Security Prosecution to face charges of joining a terrorist group and publishing false news via social media account in lawsuit N. 277/2020 Exclusive Supreme State Security.

The Ministry of Interior published a press statement regarding the incident. It said that the Ministry’s National Security Sector could spot an electronic platform funded by Turkey with the aim of destroying the pillars of the Egyptian state. Also added: The platform’s leaders rented an apartment in Cairo to create negative press reports that contain false and fabricated information

about the political, economic, security, and human rights situation in Egypt, and send them to the headquarters of the agency in Turkey, to distort the image of the Egyptian state on the internal and external levels.

The platform belonged to a company dubbed “Sita”, which the ministry said that it is established by the Muslim Brotherhood group, designated by Egypt as terrorist, with a Turkish fund.

On another side, Turkey’s Foreign Ministry condemned the raid, describing it as an act of harassment and intimidation against the Turkish press. Also, it demanded Egyptian authorities the immediate release of the Anadolu employees, and summoned the top Egyptian diplomat in protest. Then, on January 16, 2020, The State Security Prosecution released the four employees on bail of 10000 EGP per each.

- The journalist Mohamad Al-Eter detention

On March 30, 2020, Al-Haram Prosecution ordered the detention of Mohamad Al-Eter, the Ultra Sawt website correspondent, for 15 days pending investigations in lawsuit No. 11429/2020 Al-Haram Misdemeanor. The prosecution accused Al-Etr with joining a terrorist group, publishing false news and misusing the online social networks.

On the early morning of February 16, 2020, the security forces stormed his home in Hadayek Al-Ahram district in Giza governorate, and searched the apartment and confiscated his mobile and Laptop, according to his wife’s statement on Facebook, Amira Al-Sawah.

Al-Eter’s wife added that she was informed that he would be at Al-Haram police station, however, the police station rejected her visit or his lawyer’s, claiming that Al-Eter is the State Security responsibility and the police station is just an administrative detention until the prosecution phase.12 Al-Eter had remained in the custody of Al-haram police station until he was brought before the prosecution on February 29. Then, he was enforced disappeared, and his family couldn’t know his whereabouts until he appeared in Al-Giza Central Prison on March 17, 2020.


Three Journalists has exceeded the maximum limit of pretrial detention

On February 14, 2020, the two journalists, Mostafa Al-Aasar and Hasan El-Banna, have exceeded two years of detention pending investigations in lawsuit N.441/2018 Exclusive Supreme State Security. Also, on February 21, 2020, the journalist, Moataz Wadnan, reached two years of pretrial detention pending investigation in the same lawsuit. Such a situation requires the public prosecution to order their release, since they exceeded the maximum legal period of pretrial detention, according to Article 143 of the Criminal Procedure Code No. 150/1950. This Article defines three 15 day periods during the general prosecution's preliminary investigations, then judges can make additional renewals during court hearings, but with a limited ceiling which is standardly set at six months for misdemeanour crimes, 18 months for criminal offences and two years in case of crimes receiving the life sentence or the death penalty.

Accordingly, AFTE firmly rejects that the Egyptian prosecution authorities exploit the pretrial detention as an arbitrary punishment, not a precautionary measure to maintain the investigation process integrity. So, AFTE calls upon the General Attorney to release the three journalists immediately, since their continued detention undermines the Rule of Law and Criminal Justice values.

The banning of coverage

The banning of coverage is not only related to covering the political events, as it has become infrequent because of the constant suffocation of the public sphere for years. But this violation has turned to be usual practice by many governmental bodies and officials. It is practiced either by selective prevention of specific journalists and media outlets from covering, or by a collective banning of some press and media institutions, or all of them.

During the period this report covers, AFTE monitored one case of the collective banning. It was on last February 5, when the Maadi Military Medical Complex administration prevented 13 the journalist from entering the premises to cover the funeral event of Nadia Lotfy, a well known egyptian actress. And the journalists had to wait outside the hospital.

The banning of covering a usual social event, just because it is in a military-affiliated institution, may indicates the extent that such violative practice has reached against Press and Media work.

With the continuing outbreak of the Coronavirus, The authorities are aiming for controlling the flow of news and information not only through the traditional or digital press but also Social Media Networks. As often, these platforms play the role of an alternative tool that is more open to freely accessing and circulating information, fed by citizens themselves. So, the Egyptian State has had to impose arbitrary restrictions on the citizens’ Digital Rights. Accordingly, 2018 has witnessed the issuance of the Anti-IT-Crimes Act, followed by the Media and Press Regulation Law. For instance, Article 19\textsuperscript{14} of Media Regulation Law gives the Supreme Council for Media the authority of blocking any personal blogs or social media accounts that have more than 5,000 followers, in case of infringing the law.

2. Digital Rights

During the first quarter of 2020, AFTE has monitored several violations against citizens practicing Freedom of Expression via Social Media Networks. Two persons are facing pretrial detention on charges of posting false news. Also, the police forces arrested two women because of their online activities. Besides, The Court has sentenced a person in absentia to prison because of a tweet. Some of the following violations relate to the citizens’ online interactions regarding the Corona crisis in Egypt, and the rest of them are not related to the current crisis.

In the context of the Egyptian authorities’ interaction with the Corona crisis, adding the panic escalation of the virus spread in Egypt, the rate of the online news and posts on the crisis has increased. This situation has urged the Prime Ministry to post a statement on its official Facebook page last March 10. It warns that the authorities would take all necessary, legal measures against anyone who broadcasts false news, statements, or rumors, on the Covid-19 developments, to disturb the public peace or terrorize citizens or harm the public interest.

Few days after the statement, many stories about arresting people on charges of spreading rumors kept happening. Some stories were on news websites and the other are published on the Ministry of Interior’s official page on Facebook. On March 22, the Ministry of Interior posted\textsuperscript{15} a statement

\textsuperscript{14} Article 19 of the law states that any newspaper, media outlet or website is prohibited from publishing or broadcasting false news and encouraging or inciting violence, hatred, and/or discrimination between citizens, as well as calling for racism or promoting intolerance and violations of the law. It also prohibits slander or insult to religions. The law further states that ”the article applies to personal blogs or social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers.

titled by: The arrest of a woman in Damietta on charges of posting rumors on the Corona spread. The statement said that the arrest was because she video-posted via her personal Facebook account includes false news on the virus infection spread.

Also, on March 14, 2020, the police forces arrested the admin of the Whatsapp group (The distress of Egypt's mothers in Giza) from her home without knowing the reason. The arrest forces escorted her to an unknown place and prevented her from calling her family. Then, she was released on the next day, according to the lawyer, Amr Abd-Alsalam.

The Prime Ministry is not only the authority who threatened Social Media users by prosecutions. Also, the Public Prosecution published a statement last March 28 saying that according to the provisions of Articles 80 (d), 102 bis, and 188 of the Penal Code, it would punish anyone who spreads rumors or false news by imprisonment or a fine up to 20000 EGP. Adding that the public prosecution already interrogated some accused persons by spreading false news, but it didn't mention an exact number of those arrested people.

Moreover, on February 12, 2020, the Supreme Council for Media said that it sent a notice letter to 16 news websites and social networks' accounts concerning posting false news on finding a Corona infection in Tanta. It was warning them to enact the prescribed legal penalties in case of repeating such infringements. The notice letter also included a directive to ban publishing any information other than the Ministry of Health's official data. But the Council did not disclose those websites' names.

In a context separate from the Coronavirus, the Supreme State Security Prosecution has ordered two activists' detention, pending investigations in two different lawsuits on charges of spreading false news. Also, an Egyptian court has sentenced a prominent Egyptian human rights activist who is living outside the country, in absentia.

On March 20, 2020, the security forces arrested the activist, Nermeen Hussien, from her home. She was brought before the Supreme State Security Prosecution, which ordered her detention, pending investigations in a lawsuit No 535/2020 Exclusive Supreme State Security. Hussien is facing charges of joining a terrorist group and spreading false news, according to ANHRI.

is worth mentioning that Hussien was arrested before on August 23, 2018, and had remained in remand until the Supreme State Security Prosecution released her on May 20, 2019.

In the early morning of Friday, February 7, 2020, the National Security forces stopped Patrick George Zaki, a postgraduate student at Bologna University, at Cairo airport on his return home from Italy. Zaki was detained for more than 24 hours in one of the National Security premises in Cairo. Later, he was transferred to Mansoura Prosecution. Zaki was interrogated on charges of spreading false news, using an online account in disturbing the public order and putting the society’s security in jeopardy. Then, the Mansoura prosecution ordered his detention, pending investigations in lawsuit No 7245/2019 Mansoura Second Administrative.

According to the General Attorney statement last February 16, the arrest warrant is based on the National Security investigations, which was putting Zaki’s online account under surveillance while he was on his study trip in Italy. The investigations reported that he was using his online account to post false news and stories, aiming for inciting against the Egyptian State. So, the Public Prosecution issued an arrest and search warrant against Zaki. The statement also said that last September, a National Security force moved to arrest Zaki and inspect his residence, but it did not find him and searched his home with his mother’s consent. The investigation authority submitted to the Public Prosecution ten printed papers from Zaki’s account on Facebook, which included inciting posts against the State institutions and symbols.21

On another level, on September 19, 2019, the Criminal Court of Cairo has sentenced Bahey Eldin Hassan, the Director of Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, in absentia to three years imprisonment and a fine of 20000 EGP. According to lawsuit No 5530/2019 Misdemeanor Abdeen. He faced charges of tweeting phrases that undermine and discredit the Judiciary Authority, and spreading false news, on intention, aiming for harming the public interest and disturbing the public peace. It stemmed from commentary posted by Hassan on Twitter in March 2018, which criticized the Public Prosecution’s abandonment of its role in defending the citizenry or the public, instead siding with the state and its security apparatus against the citizenry. The tweet referenced the prosecution’s illegal conduct toward writer Alaa al-Aswany whose fundamental rights were violated as he was detained and subjected to illegal search and confiscation at Cairo’s international airport, according to Cairo Institute’s press statement. It is worth mentioning that Hassan only knew about the verdict recently, although it was issued in September last year.22

At the end of this part, AFTE draws attention that during the period covered by this report, it has not monitored blocking practice against any website. Although, such practice has been customary by the Egyptian authorities since the mass-blocking of websites in May 2017. Knowing that the total number of the blocked websites in Egypt since then until March 25, 2020, is 546 websites, according to AFTE's data.

3. Freedom of Creativity

During the first three months of 2020, AFTE has monitored two violations against Freedom of Creativity and a ban decision issued by the Syndicate of Musical Professions. At the beginning of February, the Supreme State Security Prosecution ordered the detention of the satirist Shady Abo Zaied, pending investigations on a new lawsuit. Also, the Syndicate of Musical Professions issued a decision banning the Mahraganat singers from holding public displays. Accordingly, a concert by the artist, Omar Kamal, has been banned.

AFTE believes that the Syndicate's decision is a legalization of violations pattern that has ramifications on not only the Mahraganat singers but also on many workers in the field of organizing musical events. Previously, AFTE drew attention to this pattern23, due to the continuous tensions between the Syndicate and the Mahraganat singers for two years. So, this decision can not be addressed out of the context of the general attitude against those singers and the art they make.

- The Musicians’ Syndicate Vs. Mahraganat Singers

At the beginning of 2020, The Musicians’ Syndicate has started a new attack on the Mahraganat singers, led by the syndicate head, Hani Shaker. On February 16, 2020, the Syndicate issued a decision banning the Mahraganat songs in public and touristic places. Also, it prohibits any dealings with 23 of Mahraganat singers whose names in the attached list and any musician without the Syndicate's membership or permit. The decision also warns of taking all the prescribed legal measures against the infringing places. It is worth mentioning that the Law N. 35/1978 on the Regulation of Arts Syndicats Work does not give the syndicates any disciplinary authority against individuals or facilities outside its purview. Accordingly, this decision is considered an unlawful interference in the Ministry of Tourism work regarding supervising and regulating the tourism activity.

This decision has been issued two days after holding a concert in Cairo International Stadium, on February 14. The Mahraganat singers, Hasan Shakosh and Omar Kamal, participated in this concert by singing an old version of their song, *Bent AL Geeran*, which includes (booz) and (weed) words. This infuriated the Syndicate’s head as he considered it inappropriate words, which the singers had had to change these words following the Syndicate’s instructions. But there was a technical error behind playing the original version, according to the singer’s statement.

Few hours after the decision, the Tourism Police banned Omar Kamal from holding a concert in one of Cairo’s hotels. Commenting on that, the media adviser of the Musician’s Syndicate, Tarek Mortada, said that the tourism police implemented the banning measures, believing in the decision of the Board of Musicians Syndicate, headed by artist Hani Shaker. He also added that Shaker thanked the official authorities for their cooperation in preventing the phenomenon of *Mahraganat*.

Although Shakosh and Kamal attributed the wrongdoing to an unintentional technical error, Hani Shaker has not stopped waging a fierce campaign in coordination with security, tourism, and censorship authorities to guarantee a firm implementation decision. Hence, on the following days, the Syndicate and the Department of Censorship of Artistic Works hunted down the Mahraganat singers and filed police reports against a number of them because of singing in public places or launching new songs on the Internet. The Parliament also has taken the Syndicate’s side, whether by supporting statements saying that standing up to Mahraganat songs is a shared responsibility of everyone in the Egyptian state, as it is more dangerous for Egypt than Coronavirus. Or proposing legislative amendments to escalate the punishment for indecent words to be prison penalties ranging from one to three years, instead of a fine of 500 EGP. Strikingly, Shaker has not stopped at this point, he addressed YouTube and SoundCloud to remove the Mahraganat songs from the Internet.

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24. Ibid.
More than a month after the decision, the Syndicate has created a new artistic division under the name (Popular Performance), but it refused to include the Mahraganat art. Stating that The Syndicate of Musical Professions has decided to complete what it started by establishing a division for popular performance and not what so-called Mahraganat. Adding that the members affiliated with this division have to obtain an annual permit, granted by the Listening Committee of the Syndicate. Also, the members have to commit to the regulatory measures regarding the public displays, bearing in mind that infringing these rules during the permit period allows the Syndicate to revoke the license, permanently, based on the signed consent by the members, and also in accordance with the law.

Similar to the banning decision, the decision of creating the new division also was controversial. Which made Tarek Mortada clarify that the decision does not mean a recognition of the Mahrganat, as some people claimed. He added: there is no such a thing, there is popular singing, and anyone who applies for the new division has to go through three phases of approval; submitting required papers, interviewing and performance testing, and behavior evaluation.

Such decisions represent a blatant breach of the Egyptian Constitution that guarantees the Freedom of Expression and Artistic Creativity according to Article 67 stipulating: Freedom of artistic and literary creativity is guaranteed. The State shall encourage arts and literature, sponsor creative artists and writers and protect their productions, and provide the means necessary for achieving this end. No lawsuit may be initiated or filed to stop or confiscate any artistic, literary, or intellectual works, or against their creators except by the Public Prosecutor. No freedom restricting sanction may be inflicted for crimes committed because of the publicity of artistic, literary or intellectual product

- The detention of Shady Abo Zaied pending new lawsuit

On other hand, the Criminal Court of Giza released the satirist Shady Abo Zaied to replace his pretrial detention with precautionary measures, on February 4, 2020. However, the Supreme State Security Prosecution ordered his detention pending investigations on a new lawsuit No. 1956/2019 Exclusive Supreme State Security. He was brought before the State Security Prosecution on charges of the involvement with a terrorist group knowing its goals and objectives.

Shady was detained from his house on May 6, 2018. Since then, he has been in remand, for almost two years, pending case 621/2018 as he is charged with spreading false news and joining an illegal group. Shady used to work as a reporter for the satirical TV show *Abla Fahita.*

This incident refers to a recently adopted practice by the prosecution authorities. It is known as the Activists Recycling Policy, meaning the re-detention of the activists pending new lawsuits, after their release, with almost the same charges they faced in the older suits. This policy is often used when the detainees exceed the two-years maximum period of the pretrial detention prescribed by the Law, so that the authorities can, lawfully, keep them in remand.

At the end of this part, it is worth mentioning that the end of the first quarter of 2020 coincides with Ramadan, which is the annual high season of the Egyptian drama production, AKA: Drama Ramadan’s Season. This season seems different from the previous one, as the United Media Services Company, the owner of Synergy Company, which monopolizes the largest share in the Egyptian drama production, has given way to some of the other companies. After their abstention or suffering from restrictions last Ramadan season. However, this different attitude does not appear to contribute to significant changes in the quality of the production content. Because the same supervising authorities, such as the Supreme Council for Media and the Department of Censorship of Artistic Works, still insist on strict, pre/post control over artworks production.

Press Freedom

Five Incidents included 15 violations
- Arrest
- Confiscation of Equipment or Deleting Material
- Unlawful Detention
- Raiding Workplace
- License Revoking
- Banning from Coverage
- Deportation from Egypt
- Other

Freedom of Creativity

One incident included 1 violation
- Banning from Public Display

Digital Expression

Five Incidents Included 5 violations
- Sentenced in absentia
- Pretrial Detention
- Unlawful Detention
Recommendations

AFTE calls upon the Prime Ministry, Public Prosecution, and the Supreme Council for Media to stop harassing the journalists, Media institutions, and ordinary citizens because of press coverage, government criticism, or revealing facts on Corona crisis developments in Egypt. Also, it demands the General Attorney the immediate release of every individual who is in detention because of performing journalistic work or practicing his/her Digital Rights regarding issues of Covid-19 spread.

The Ministry of Health has to cooperate with the Crisis Management Committee in launching a specialized website that includes all the government’s available data and information on the Corona crisis in Egypt. It should contain information as follows;

1. Sufficient, updated data on infections according to age, gender, timing, geographical distribution, etc., which enables journalists, researchers, and specialists to analyze the data effectively to advise citizens about the virus spread situation. And this would commit them more to the government’s decisions.

2. Adequate data on the number of isolation hospitals, its capacity, occupancy rates per each, equipment, and the number of medical staff and the available specializations.

3. Thorough information on conducted and remaining PCR swabs, and the daily swabbing rates.

4. A constant feed of information on the government’s financial aid procedures for the daily-paid workers, obtaining terms, and its due dates.

5. Direct and accessible communication channels for domestic and foreign media, to reach out to the Crisis Management Committee and any other concerned officials.

The Public Prosecution has to, immediately, release the researcher, Patrick George Zaki, and the journalist, Mohamad Al-Eter, who are in pretrial detention on charges of misusing social media networks and posting false news.

The General Attorney has to, immediately, release the three journalists, Mostafa Al-Aasar, Hasan El-Banna, and Moataz Wadnan. Since they have exceeded the two-years maximum period of pretrial detention following the Law, such a case of continued detention undermines the Rule of Law and Criminal Justice values.
The Syndicate of Musical Professions has to withdraw its decision of prohibiting Mahraganat singers from holding public displays, as it breaches the Syndicate's Law. Also, allowing them to practice their work without any arbitrary measures freely. In addition to facilitating their application process for the Syndicate's membership, which is to be under the newly created artistic division, the Popular Performance, following Syndicate's recent decision.

**Conclusion**

The report at hand is the first since the beginning of the Corona pandemic. And as we do not know when it will end or curbed. Therefore, AFTE believes it is necessary to advocate Freedom of Expression, in general. And, particularly, to defend Press Freedom and Freedom of Information, during such times of uncertainty. More importantly, since the Egyptian authorities’ extreme, hostile tendency to prevent any attempt to discuss or criticize their anti-pandemic policies. In addition to addressing, fiercely, every action that aims for circulating news and information about infection numbers, mainly if that data differs from the official version.