The pandemic hasn't stopped repression:

An outlook on how the Egyptian state has controlled the internet under COVID-19
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The paper at hand is based on data of violations since March 2020, collected by the Monitoring and Documentation Unit at AFTE, regarding publishing about the Covid-19 crisis in Egypt. In addition to the Legal-Aid Unit’s information on the charges that the Supreme State Security Prosecution has lodged against activists, social media users, and doctors since March 2020.

Introduction

Three months ago, Egypt witnessed increasing attention to the Covid-19 crisis. The Egyptian authorities have taken preventive measures to curb the virus spread. The government has adopted objective discourse and transparent policies regarding crisis management. And several political and media voices have called upon easing the restrictions on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information. Since Egypt is a populous country, exceeding 100 million people, has no choice but cooperatively mobilizing all the available potentials of the State bodies, NGOs, syndicates, and political parties to line up against the pandemic.

However, the Egyptian authorities have neglected all these voices by considering any attempts of publishing or circulating news on Coronavirus spread as an unlawful act. Accordingly, the security apparatuses have detained some citizens pending investigations in the lawsuit known as Corona Case. And despite the rising demands of releasing detainees in Freedom of Expression-related lawsuits by Human Rights Organizations, the State Security Prosecution has kept detaining dozens because of posting on Covid-19 developments in Egypt.

Moreover, for the first time, the security apparatuses have notably laid charges against doctors in Digital Expression-related lawsuits. There are fears of doctors’ involvement in criticizing the Ministry of Health’s policies and circulating information on the health sector’s preparedness against the spread of infection.

On a parallel side, although AFTE had not monitored any new blocking practices until the end of last March, the Egyptian authorities have blocked alternative domains of some independent and partisan press websites, at the beginning of April. The websites have resorted to alternative web domains after being blocked before, such as Darb, Al-Manassa, and Mada Masr.
Apparently, the Egyptian government considers the Internet more threatening to the stability of the political regime than the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the security and public prosecution bodies have poured their efforts to detain dozens under charges of spreading false news on the Coronavirus crisis.

This paper addresses the notion above, besides shedding light on the most indicative lawsuits and charges in this regard.
First: Digital Expression; Criminalizing Posting on Covid-19 Crisis

Last March, the Prime Ministry initiated its crisis management of Covid-19 since the detection of several infections and identifying outbreak foci. While the Human Rights Organizations having fears of virus spread in prisons and demanding the release of the pre-trial detainees and the most vulnerable prisoners to infection.

At this time, the Prime Minister, Mostafa Madbouly, seemed to adopt a different method in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic; he was continually holding periodic press conferences to explain measures taken by the government and to clarify the spread situation according to MoH’s data. Such a method is quite different from the governmental bodies’ usual practices of obscuring information and neglecting the public’s right to be informed about any crisis facing the State institutions.

The Media attention to the Coronavirus crisis has increased, particularly, regarding the MoH’s policies and measures. Then, this attention has expanded to Social Media users and political activists. Some of them have started posting information or complaints about the healthcare system, while others commented on how the State institutions are well prepared for facing such a challenging situation.

Correspondingly, instead of releasing in remand detainees, the security apparatuses have started arresting more people under a new lawsuit, referred to as Corona Case in media coverage. Later on, Human Rights lawyers knew that the Supreme State Security Prosecution is interrogating several individuals about their online posts on the Covid-19 crisis. And this was just a start, as the security bodies have continued arresting more political activists, Social Media users, and doctors, which seemed to be a systematic, intentional strategy to hinder the citizens’ discussion about public health policies or questioning official information.

- Cases of Activists and Social Networks Users.

On March 24, 2020, Al-Shorouk newspaper published a story on arresting two young males in Alexandria because of spreading false news about Coronavirus spread, quoting a security source.1

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This story did not help understand what is, actually, happening at this time. Later, in the first week of April, Human Rights lawyers knew that the Supreme State Security Prosecution interrogated several individuals, who were arrested in March, under a new lawsuit, referred to as Corona Case in the Public Prosecution.

The security bodies’ actions are probably a reflection of a broader strategy to intimidate Egyptian citizens from expressing their opinions on the State policies against the Covid-19 crisis. Since the Corona case, lawsuit N. 558/2020 Exclusive State Security, has still opened to include more activists and Social Media users.

AFTE has documented cases of detainees pending investigations on the lawsuit above besides lawsuit N. 535/2020 Exclusive State Security. Generally speaking, AFTE has concluded three main reasons behind arresting most of those activists and Social Media users; first, they criticized MoH policies in handling the pandemic situation. Second, they posted unannounced information about Covid-19 infections. And third, they called upon releasing detainees under the fear of infection spread in prisons’ facilities.

The government considers all these three acts as spreading false news via Social Media Networks. And it is also usual to add the charge of joining a terrorist group regarding Digital Expression-related lawsuits and to order remand detention. It keeps renewed even if the defendant is absent from the hearing session, which is also an unlawful, habitual practice.

On April 4, 2020, the police forces arrested the activist and pharmacist, Mohamad EL-Sayes, in Alexandria. He was brought before the Supreme State Prosecution, on April 9, 2020, to be interrogated about some of his opinion posts about MoH policies on Facebook. According to his brother’s clarification, El-Sayes wrote some suggestions for more effective plans to curb infection spread. And he was about to volunteer in the MoH’s medical staff who are providing health care services for Corona cases.

El-Sayes’s opinions were the reason behind his detention pending investigations, charging him of joining a terrorist group, and spreading false news via his Social Network account. El-Sayes is still in remand pending investigations in lawsuit N. 558/2020 Exclusive State Security.

Moving from Alexandria, On March 26, 2020, the police forces arrested Hadeer Salem in Damietta governorate. On March 28, 2020, the Supreme State Security Prosecution charged Salem of aiding a terrorist group in achieving its purposes and spreading false news via a Social Network account. The Prosecution ordered her detention pending investigations in lawsuit N. 535/2020 Exclusive State Security. Hadeer Salem was interrogated about posting information on Covid-19 infections in the Damietta Public Hospital. It is worth mentioning that the MoH’s daily press statement doesn't include the geographic distribution of the Coronavirus cases.
Also, there is Atef Hasaballah, who was arrested in mid of last March. Then, the Supreme State Security Prosecution has charged him with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and using a website to commit a crime. Hasaballah has been detained pending investigations in lawsuit N. 558/2020 Exclusive State Security. He was interrogated about some of his critical opinions posted via Facebook account about the announced official numbers of Covid-19 infections. Besides Interrogating and detaining the lawyer, Mohsen Bahnasy, pending investigations in the same lawsuit, because of posting demands of releasing prisoners, to prevent the virus from spreading in prisons.

Last but not least, Sanaa Seif, the Human Rights activist, was brought before the Supreme State Security Prosecution, on June 23, 2020, to face charges of spreading false news, enticing on committing terrorist acts, and misusing the Social Media Networks. The Prosecution ordered her detention for 15 days, pending investigations in lawsuit N. 659/2020 Exclusive State Security. Seif was interrogated about her posts on being banned from reaching out to her imprisoned brother, the political activist Alaa Abd El Fattah, in Torra prison as she is concerned about his life safety under the pandemic risk.

The cases mentioned above indicate that the Egyptian authorities aim to restrain the public debate on the Covid-19 crisis by prosecuting activists and the users of Social Media Networks. The government seeks to deprive the Egyptian citizens of the last available means to engage with the public interest issues, access information, and express their opinions, online activism, and Social Media Networks. In this regard, the government depends, firstly, on the security apparatuses in applying mass surveillance on the users’ accounts and arresting them. Then, secondly, the Supreme State Security Prosecution’s turn in laying legally baseless accusations and ordering remand detention.

- Targeting Doctors who Criticize MoH’s policies.

On June 27, 2020, the Egyptian Medical Syndicate postponed its press conference on the measures against the Covid-19. And according to the Syndicate's statement on its official Facebook page, the postponement was because of technical issues. While the Treasurer of the Medical Syndicate said to Al-Masry Al-Youm that the Syndicate's board members and employees were sudden by the heavy presence of the security forces, they were banning entry to the Syndicate's building. This situation lasted for more than an hour until the board members managed to enter after talking to the security forces.

the security officials in front of the Syndicate’s headquarters.\(^3\)

This incident was the most recent security action against the doctors to prevent them from speaking up their criticism regarding the policies of MoH and the government in managing the Covid-19 crisis. This incident was preceded by an intensive, hostile campaign, whether by the government officials, led by the Prime Minister, who criticized the doctors’ performance and held them responsible for the deterioration of healthcare services, or by the security bodies that arrested several doctors.

On June 14, 2020, the Medical Syndicate sent a letter\(^4\) to the Public Prosecutor, Hamada Al-Sawy, on the arrest of several doctors after they posted their opinions about the Corona crisis. In the letter, the Syndicate stated that it received grievances in this regard. It demands the General Attorney to release them immediately until the end of investigations and to allow the Syndicate’s representative in hearing sessions, following the law provisions. He letter mentioned five particular cases, as follows;


Then, the letter concluded that such repetitive incidents feed the increasing fear and frustration among Egyptian doctors during a very critical time in our country’s history.

On March 28, 2020, Dr. Alaa Sha’ban Hemida was arrested because she allowed a nurse to report MoH’s officials of a suspected Corona case in Al-Shatby Hospital. The hospital director considered such an act as trespassing on his prerogatives, which in his turn reported her to the National Security.

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4. Review Annex (1), The Egyptian Medical Syndicate’s Letter to the Public Prosecutor, Hamada Al-Sawy.
Security officers, who instantly responded by arresting Hemida from the director’s office.

Except for Dr. Alaa’s case, the other four doctors were detained because of posting criticizing opinions on government policies against the Covid-19 crisis. Dr. Hany Bakr Ali spoke up about a shortage of the medical supplies necessary for handling Coronavirus infection cases. Moreover, on April 8, 2020, Hesham Shawky Masoud, the MoH’s Deputy in Sharkia governorate, stated\(^5\) to Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper that he referred Dr.Ali to an administrative investigation and transfer his assignment from Derb Negm Hospital. He added that these decisions came after Dr. Ali video-posted false allegations about the lack of preventive medical supplies, which caused confusion and disturbance among the health workers staff and citizens in the governorate.

Cases as mentioned above, which are documented and checked by AFTE, reveal that the Egyptian authorities have targeted the doctors posting on Social Media Networks, mostly Facebook, their opinions/information on the medical and health workers’ sufferings under the pandemic developments. At the same time, they and their Syndicate were excluded entirely from the policy-making circle that develops the confronting measures against the pandemic situation.

Although it has been two weeks since the Syndicate’s letter to the Public Prosecutor, the Supreme State Security Prosecution has not released any of the detained doctors until the time of writing this paper.

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Second: Internet Surveillance; Digital Journalism Under Blocking.

Although the first three months of 2020 passed without monitoring any blocking incidents against other new websites by the Egyptian authorities, Internet users had some trouble accessing the Darb website, on April 9, 2020. And according to AFTE’s tests, the Darb website has been blocked after launching on March 8, 2020. The Darb website is affiliated to the Socialist Popular Alliance Party and headed by Khaled El Balshy, the former board member of the Journalists’ Syndicate.

On April 9, 2020, the Mada Masr website announced its VPN is broken, and by running tests, it showed that Mada’s alternative website is also blocked. It is worth mentioning that the Mada Masr website has been blocked since May 2017 when the Egyptian authorities began adopting the mass blocking measures. Mada’s staff provided their readership with alternative ways to access the website, such as the Accelerated Mobile Pages service (AMP) provided by Google. Still, later on, AMP has also been blocked in Egypt since February 2018.

According to their official Facebook page, the Almanassa press website has been blocked on April 9, 2020. AFTE ran the checking test that confirmed the blocking of the alternative domain. Almanassa stated that on April 9, 2020, the website experienced continuous breaking attempts for five days by immense fake visits by robots. Then it has been completely blocked and all its domains.

Targeting the three websites mentioned above is due to their content, which is produced independently of the security authorities’ grip. These websites publish various types of news and press coverage on the Covid-19 crisis in Egypt. The Egyptian government is likely keen to block them as the authorities seek to restrict public debate about the pandemic.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Through this paper, AFTE aims to shed light on the Egyptian authorities' practices against Digital Rights under the Covid-19 crisis. Also, to present documented data on the violations of Digital Freedom in this regard.

AFTE prompts Human Rights organizations and groups demanding the Egyptian authorities to stop criminalizing any citizen who criticizes MoH’s policies against Coronavirus and to release the activists, Social Media users, and doctors who are in remand detention pending investigations in several lawsuits. Also, AFTE recommends the following for the competent authorities:

1. The Public Prosecution has to terminate investigations in lawsuits N. 558/2020 and 563/2020 Exclusive State Security and release all defendants detained pending investigations in these cases.

2. The Egyptian government has to guarantee Digital Freedom of Expression via Social Media Networks, particularly for doctors and health workers, as it promotes transparency and accountability under the pandemic challenging situation.

3. The Egyptian authorities have to stop internet censorship and to unblock at least the 127 press websites that AFTE monitored their block.
Annex (1)

A scanned copy of the Egyptian Medical Syndicate letter to the Public Prosecutor, Hamada Al-Sawy. Dated on June 13, 2020. Signed by the Rapporteur of the Freedoms Committee, Dr. Mohsen Azzam, and the Head of the Syndicate, Dr. Hussien Mahmoud Khairy.