Information blockade in The Time of Social Distancing

Quarterly Report on the State of Freedom of Expression in Egypt
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Second Quarter (April - June 2020)

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This report presents and analyzes some issues related to the right to freedom of expression and access to information, with the aim of evaluating the government policies in this regard. It also reviews and analyzes the documented violations in accordance with AFTE’s monitoring and documentation standards. The violations documented in this report took place in the period from 25 March to 30 June 2020.

The methodology of this report has particularly relied on monitoring the state institutions’ response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. It analyzes the decisions and measures taken by the cabinet, the Health Ministry, and other related bodies to protect Egyptian citizens from the virus spread and to maintain public health. It also analyzes the decisions taken by other bodies, such as the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR), the State Information Service (SIS), and the Public Prosecution, to address the pandemic according to their jurisdiction.

Introduction

As the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic continued in Egypt, government practices aimed at restricting the citizens’ right to express their views, especially with regard to developments of the pandemic, have increased. Moreover, the flow of information through various platforms was restricted in favour of the official narrative, although the Egyptian government has seldom shared information about the Covid-19 situation in the country or its policies in managing the crisis. This was clearly evidenced by the constant threats made by official authorities against what they called “attempts of spreading rumours and lies”. This was reflected in the increased violations against medical staff during the second quarter of 2020, which gave indications about the government’s priorities during the crisis.

The Egyptian authorities also took advantage of the exceptional conditions imposed by the outbreak of Covid-19 to pass a number of amendments to the Emergency Law, granting greater powers to the President of the Republic as well as the Military Prosecution and judiciary over civilians.

The government practices aimed at restricting the citizens’ right to freedom of expression and access to information come at a time when all international organizations call on governments
around the world to share with their people the necessary information that enables them to determine the size of the health risks and challenges they face, and to avoid restricting the citizens’ right to express their views, and enable journalists to do their work, thus ensuring concerted efforts to control the spread of the pandemic.

In this context, a number of UN experts monitoring freedom of expression and media and others issued a joint statement\(^1\) stressing the need for governments to provide correct information on the nature of the Covid-19 threat in formats that are easy for everyone to access. The experts also noted that access to the internet is necessary in times of crisis, so it is very important that governments refrain from blocking or slowing down the internet service. The experts further stressed the need for governments to make exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists.

In its statement on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day, AFTE called on the Egyptian authorities to stop targeting journalists and seek instead to enable them to perform their work freely and without arbitrary obstacles, to release all journalists imprisoned for doing their journalistic job. The number of arrests of journalists has increased in recent months during the press coverage of the Covid-19 crisis. AFTE also called on the authorities to lift the blocking of news websites, most of which have been blocked by an unknown body.

There have been international calls, specifically by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, for reducing the number of detainees and prisoners in order to curb overcrowding inside prisons, particularly those that lack basic health facilities. The calls aimed to prevent the spread of the pandemic among prisoners, especially the elderly and people with chronic diseases, as well as prisoners of conscience. In response, AFTE launched a campaign on 1 June demanding the release of prisoners of freedom of expression in Egypt, in recognition of justice and as an effective measure to confront the threat of Covid-19 in prisons that are crowded with tens of thousands of citizens who expressed their opinions.

In a separate context, the Egyptian authorities continued to control the content posted on social media, which citizens resorted to intensively during that quarter of the year as a result of the social distancing policies that forced them to stay at home. The Public Prosecution undertook what it called the protection of Egypt’s “cyber borders” by issuing decisions to arrest a number of social media users under vague and unspecified allegations, the most prominent of which was what the Public Prosecution called “protecting the family principles and values”.

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This report attempts to shed light on the government measures aimed at restricting freedom of expression in various forms, mainly including freedom of the press and media, and the citizens’ right to access and share information. The report also highlights the extent to which the authorities in Egypt responded to the international and local human rights appeals demanding that the Covid-19 situation not be exploited in order to impose more exceptional measures aimed at closing the outlets available for citizens to express their views.

The report has two main sections; the first reviews the state of freedom of expression during the second quarter of 2020 (from 25 March to 30 June). The second section reviews and analyzes patterns of violations of freedom of expression, particularly the media freedom, freedom of creativity, and freedom of digital expression, through the violations documented by AFTE’s Monitoring and Documentation Unit during the same period.

First section:

- **First: Besieged expression in the time of Covid-19**

A state of optimism prevailed among Egyptians in the beginning of the crisis for what appeared to be a response to rational voices within the government, as the management of the crisis was assigned to a number of specialized technocrats. This prompted observers to praise the Egyptian authorities’ awareness of the imminent threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the situation changed quickly, especially after the government switched to security solutions to silence any voice that contradicts the government’s vision, whether on the level of developments of the Covid-19 situation or the efficiency of the government policies in dealing with the pandemic.

This necessarily led to a steady increase in the patterns of violations committed by the Egyptian authorities against the right to freedom of expression, particularly freedom of the press and media, freedom of digital expression, and freedom of creativity and artistic expression. The rate of violations of the right to freedom of expression varied in the first and second quarters of 2020, reaching 500%, according to AFTE.

This huge increase in the number of violations is directly related to the Covid-19 crisis, as the Egyptian authorities are trying to spread their narrative regarding the numbers of infections, deaths, and recoveries, in an attempt to convince the public that the government policies in dealing with the pandemic were successful. To this end, the security services launched extensive
security campaigns targeting activists, journalists, and medical staff for expressing their views about the way the government handled the crisis.

Media regulation councils, such as the SCMR, the National Press Authority, and the State Information Service, have also taken a series of decisions against journalists and local and foreign media organizations due to their coverage of the Covid-19 situation in Egypt and the government policies in dealing with it. These moves were consistent with the authorities’ desire to impose a tight blockade on the flow of news and information. Administrative and disciplinary penalties have also been used against doctors who expressed their views on the government policies to confront the pandemic.

These measures are closely aligned with what can be considered as government annoyance at the criticisms directed at it against the background of its efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19. Such annoyance was expressed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in what he called “attempts by the nation’s enemies to cast doubt over the state’s efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic”, according to a post on Sisi’s official Facebook page on 28 May 2020.

- Amendments to the Emergency Law, more powers for the armed forces over civilians

On 7 May 2020, new amendments to the Emergency Law No. 162 of 1958 came into force, after they were ratified by the President of the Republic. The Egyptian government said the amendments came to confront the state of health emergency imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

The amendments aimed to increase the powers of the armed forces (the Military Prosecution and the Military Judiciary) over civilians, which would constitute a violation of the citizens’ constitutional right to be tried before their natural judges. The amendments granted the President of the Republic the power to authorize the Military Prosecution to investigate crimes that violate the Emergency Law.

Article 4 of the law also entitled the Military Prosecution to investigate crimes that are reported by the armed forces, and limited the role of the Public Prosecution to referral to trial if warranted. Article 4 also increased the powers of members of the armed forces over civilians by granting them the power of judicial oversight.

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- Arbitrary security and administrative measures against doctors if they express their opinions on social media

Arbitrary security and administrative measures against medical staff have increased after they expressed their views on social media regarding the government policies in handling the spread of Covid-19.

The security services launched a campaign to arrest doctors who criticized the performance of the government or the Ministry of Health and the relevant authorities in managing the crisis. Violations against doctors increased after the widespread protests they staged due to the rise in the number of infections among medical staff. Doctors ascribed this rise in infections to the unsuccessful protocols of the Ministry of Health in dealing with doctors in contact with infected cases, the conditions for their isolation, and the lack of places in isolation hospitals for infected doctors.

The Doctors Syndicate called on the Public Prosecutor to release six doctors who it said were arrested for expressing their views on social media. AFTE documented six cases of imprisonment of doctors in several governorates, in addition to a pharmacist in Alexandria governorate and a nurse in Damietta governorate, for expressing their opinions or publishing information about the spread of Covid-19. AFTE also documented arbitrary administrative measures taken against doctors for the same reason, or for refusing to work without providing the necessary protection tools and following the precautionary measures set by the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization.

In this context, AFTE affirms that preservation of medical staff members who exert strenuous efforts to provide medical care to patients is pivotal in combatting the outbreak of Covid-19. The continued negligence in providing medical care to medical staff and providing safe work environment for them, and not giving priority to providing treatment and isolation places in hospitals for doctors may herald a real disaster, given the limited number of medical personnel equipped to deal with the infected cases. AFTE calls on the Egyptian government to make the health of medical staff a top priority on the agenda of the Crisis Management Committee, as is the case in most countries around the world. This makes the crackdown on doctors who oppose the government’s vision and policy in dealing with the crisis a full-fledged crime. AFTE calls on the Egyptian authorities to release them immediately and to stop the campaign against doctors.
- Immediate release of prisoners of conscience is an urgent necessity to confront the spread of Covid-19 inside prisons

Reports have spread about the infection of a number of prisoners with Covid-19. The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF) – an independent human rights organization – announced on Facebook⁴ that the Alexandria Criminal Court had decided to release its client, Hamdy Gaber Mohamed, with precautionary measures after he was infected with Covid-19 inside Borg al-Arab Prison. No statement was issued by the Interior Ministry or the Public Prosecutor about the incident.

ECRF said its lawyer was informed that the defendant in case No. 3058 of 2019 (administrative, Mina el-Basal), who had been imprisoned in Borg al-Arab since August 2019, could not be transferred as he was admitted to hospital after he fainted due to a cold. However, the ECRF lawyer said when he asked the court why the defendant did not attend, it replied: “Because he was admitted to hospital for being infected with Covid-19.” The lawyer asked the court to mention this in the hearing minutes.

In the same context, and two days after an employee working in Tora Prison died of Covid-19 complications, the Interior Ministry issued a statement about the incident on 31 May 2020, saying that the aforementioned employee took leave from his work on 17 May to be treated from an infectious disease. During his leave, he conducted a Covid-19 test at Imbaba Fever Hospital, but he died before the result was out, the ministry said, adding that the result showed he was tested positive.

The Interior Ministry said in its statement that it immediately took the necessary measures to sterilize the employee's workplace, and conducted Covid-19 tests for those who were in contact with him to ensure their safety. But the statement did not specify the names or characteristics of those who were in contact with the deceased. The statement noted that the employee had undergone medical examinations before he took his sick leave, just like other employees in the prison. However, a report published by the news website “Mada Masr” quoted unnamed sources as saying that the employee had felt fatigue and exhaustion since mid-May, and that he continued to go to work until his health condition worsened on 18 May.

This raises concerns about the spread of Covid-19 in prisons, and makes the release of those remanded in custody and those imprisoned pending investigation into their cases necessary in order to establish justice. The release of prisoners of conscience, as well as the elderly and people with chronic diseases, is one of the effective tools in curbing the spread of the virus inside

prisons, by reducing overcrowding, especially with the lack of adequate healthcare supplies inside prisons.

AFTE and the defence panel of political activist Ahmed Douma submitted a request to the Public Prosecutor, Hamada al-Sawy, on 6 June 2020 asking for conducting a PCR test for Douma. This came after an employee in the prison, where Douma is serving his jail term, died.

Douma is serving a 15-year term in Case No. 8692 of 2011 (felony, Sayida Zainab), which is known in local media as “the cabinet incidents” in which he is accused of protesting, burning the first floor of the People's Assembly building, and showing strength.

AFTE is deeply concerned about the Covid-19 situation in prisons, given the lack of any official information about it, whether from the Interior Ministry, the Prisons Authority, or the Public Prosecution. The Interior Ministry decided to ban family visits to prisons and police stations on 10 March. This ban continued until the end of the period covered by the report. Moreover, prisoners were not allowed to communicate by phone with their families and lawyers.

Perhaps the most evident indication of the weakness of the healthcare system inside prisons and the medical negligence that inmates are exposed to is the death of young filmmaker Shady Habash in his prison cell in Tora on 1 May 2020, two days after he fell ill after drinking some methyl alcohol, according to the Public Prosecution's statement. The Tora prison administration was sluggish over two days and did not transfer Habash to a hospital until he passed away, although he told the prison doctor that he had drunk some alcohol by mistake.

Habash was arrested on 1 March 2018 after he codirected a satirical political song entitled “Balaha” (a date), performed by Sweden-based singer Ramy Essam. The song criticized policies of the incumbent Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Habash appeared before the State Security Prosecution for the first time on 5 March 2018, as a defendant in Case No. 480 of 2018 registered with the Supreme State Security Prosecution. He was charged with joining a terrorist group and spreading false news.

Before his death, Habash had exceeded the maximum two-year period legally permitted for pretrial detention on 5 March 2020. So, the Public Prosecution should have ordered his immediate release as per Article 143 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which states that “suspects may be held in pretrial detention for one-third of the maximum penalty for the crime allegedly committed. Pretrial detention 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”. This raises questions about the role that the Public Prosecution plays in using pretrial detention as a tool for abuse and punishment of citizens who express their views against the government policies in peaceful ways, and not as a precautionary measure intended to protect the progress of investigations.
Perhaps the clearest evidence of using pretrial detention as punishment against activists and opponents is the so-called “recycling of defendants”. It is a sort of violation that has become prevalent in recent years, where the Public Prosecution waits until the maximum period of pretrial detention for those detained in connection with political cases ends, then it questions them in new cases where they mostly face the same charges. So, if the Public Prosecution has to release them after the expiration of the maximum period of their pretrial detention (two years), it will be easy for it to keep them imprisoned for another two years in a new case, without referring them to trial.

• Second: The Public Prosecution besieges the internet under allegations of morals and family values

The social distancing recommended by health authorities as one of the most important measures to confront the spread of Covid-19 has resulted in a significant increase in citizens’ interaction on social media. Many applications spread on the internet for entertainment. These include the Google-owned YouTube and the video-sharing app TikTok, which sparked widespread controversy in recent months.

The number of users of these applications has increased significantly. People resorted to these applications to express themselves more freely, taking advantage of the long time they spend at homes during the pandemic. However, AFTE and observers of the Public Prosecution’s performance have spotted an emerging pattern of violation committed by the Public Prosecution against the right to freedom of expression. The Public Prosecution has set itself up as a guardian to protect morals and family values by exploiting a number of articles in the Anti-Cybercrime Law and the Penal Code that use vague terms and phrases, such as “preserving the values of the Egyptian family, and protecting public morals”. Rights activists have long called for these articles to be amended to scrapped, as they violate the right to freedom of expression in general, and freedom of digital and artistic expression in particular.

This pattern of violation is consistent with the general context in which the Egyptian authorities are trying to control the cyberspace and tighten their grip on the last outlet for expression. For instance, the Public Prosecution has recently used the phrase “protecting Egypt’s cyber borders”, in addition to the arsenal of articles in the law on cybercrimes, the press and media regulation law, the terrorism law, and the Penal Code that have severely restricted citizens’ freedom to use the cyberspace to express their opinions.

On 21 April 2020, the police arrested Cairo University student Haneen Hossam for posting a video in which she called on women to join a group she created on the short-video sharing platform Likee, with the purpose of promoting the platform in return for payment.
Haneen faced several charges⁵, including violating family principles and values, human trafficking, using girls in work that violates the principles and values of the society to obtain material gains, and exploiting the girls' poor economic conditions and their need for money. The Public Prosecution decided to remand Haneen in custody for 15 days in Case No. 4971 of 2020 (Misdemeanour, Al-Sahel).

Cairo University said in a statement that Haneen was referred to investigation inside the university for committing behaviours inconsistent with the public morals and the university values and traditions. This is also a new pattern of violation against professors and students, as university administrations are monitoring the social media accounts of the teaching staff and students, not just monitoring their behaviours inside the university campus, under the pretext of preserving the university values and traditions. There was another incident that preceded Haneen's case, where Cairo University professor Mona Prince was referred to investigation on a video she posted on Facebook.

Haneen was not the last of such cases, as the Public Prosecution remanded TikTok influencer Mawaddah al-Adham in custody for four days on 15 May⁶, after she was accused of violating family principles and values, and creating and running social media accounts with the aim of committing and facilitating that crime.

A police force from the anti-vice department at the Interior Ministry arrested Mawaddah in a residential compound in the 6th of October district, Giza Governorate, upon a decision from the Public Prosecution to arrest her over these accusations.

On 11 June 2020, the Public Prosecution referred Haneen Hossam and Mawaddah al-Adham to the Economic Court⁷. The referral decision included another three people, namely Mohamed Abdel Hamid Zaki, Mohamed Alaa al-Din Ahmed, and Ahmed Sameh Attia. The prosecution accused Zaki and Ahmed of agreeing with and helping Haneen Hossam to post her video clip that included a call for immoral meetings. Meanwhile, the prosecution charged Attia with administrating Mawaddah's social media accounts, helping her post videos that offend public modesty, and obtaining programs that were designed without permission from the Communications Regulatory Authority and without legal justification, with the aim of using them to help al-Adham commit the crime.

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The Egyptian authorities also arrested belly dancer Samia Ahmed Attia, aka Sama al-Masry, on 24 April for using her social media accounts to post pictures and videos that would violate public decency, committing indecent and obscene acts publicly, making calls that contain temptation of prostitution, drawing attention to herself, and violating the family principles and values. She was released one day after her arrest. On 27 June, the Economic Court sentenced her to three years in prison and fined her EGP 300,000 on charges of inciting debauchery and immorality.9

On 31 May, the police arrested the blogger known as “Super Maher” from his home in a village in Sherbin, Dakahlia Governorate. He was arrested on charges of establishing websites and social media accounts that provide pornographic and indecent content, promoting abnormal ideas within society, especially among young people, and violating family values and principles.

In the same context, a police force arrested Sherifa Refaat, aka Sherry Hanem, and her daughter Nora, aka Zomoroda, from their home in Cairo’s Heliopolis on 11 June. The two were arrested on charges of using their social media accounts to provide immoral content that contain swear words, in addition to spreading ideas threatening the security of society.11

These incidents show what could be called an attempt by the Public Prosecution and the Interior Ministry to impose their guardianship over the content provided by citizens on the internet, by imposing a set of prohibitions under vague and unspecified allegations, such as preserving family values and principles.

The Public Prosecution not only arrested some of the users of these applications, but also called for enacting more legislation related to cyberspace. It also called on young social media users to play an active role in helping the Egyptian authorities guard what it called the “new cyber borders”. The Public Prosecution said in a statement that the protection of these new borders will only take place with comprehensive awareness and integrated interaction from all sectors of society in order to limit the harmful content and the evils therein.

The Egyptian authorities have enacted a set of laws to close in on internet users and monitor their content. Perhaps the most prominent of these laws is the Anti-Cybercrime Law that

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12. See reference No. 4
imposes imprisonment and fines for moral crimes that are difficult to understand or verify. Such crimes include the so-called violation of family values and principles. The same law authorizes the Interior Ministry and the Public Prosecution to monitor and block websites and personal accounts on social networking sites.

The Media and Press Regulation Law also gave powers to the judicial and police authorities as well as the SCMR to block websites and personal social media accounts with more than 5,000 followers for “national security” reasons or in cases of publishing false news, or disrespecting the revealed religions or religious beliefs. Other laws, such as the Penal Code, the terrorism law, and the emergency law, are also used against activists, journalists, and social media users under various allegations, most notably spreading false news and misusing social media.
Second section: Presentation and analysis of violations of freedom of expression

The second quarter of 2020 has witnessed a marked increase in the number of violations related to freedom of expression, especially freedom of the press, freedom of digital expression, and freedom of creativity. During the period from 25 March to 30 June 2020, AFTE documented 63 violations, an increase of more than 500% compared with the first quarter of the same year, when the Association documented 11 violations related to media, digital expression, and freedom of creativity.

Violations of the right to freedom of expression have not ceased, especially in cases related to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Egyptian authorities continued to commit the usual patterns of violation of the right to freedom of expression, at approximately the same rates.

- Spreading false news ... the permanent prison of the press

In his message on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged governments to ensure that journalists are able to carry out their work throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond, highlighting the role that the press plays in helping governments make the right decisions that enable them to save lives. He also highlighted the role of the press in confronting what he called the pandemic of misinformation surrounding the Covid-19 crisis by providing verified, scientific, fact-based news and analysis. Guterres stressed that the exceptional measures related to Covid-19 must not be abused as an excuse to crack down on journalists’ ability to do their work.

AFTE team documented 23 incidents of violation against journalists and press institutions during the second quarter of 2020. These included 35 violations, an increase of approximately 440% over the number of violations that AFTE documented during the first quarter of the same year, when only five violations were documented.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has prompted the Egyptian authorities to block information related to the spread of the pandemic in the country in favour of the official narrative that is issued either from the cabinet or the Ministry of Health. This led to a dramatic increase in the violations committed against journalists and press institutions, which amounted to nearly 40% of the total.

violations documented by AFTE. These violations had mainly to do with the coverage of the Covid-19 situation in Egypt.

In general, AFTE documented seven cases of arrest of journalists during the second quarter of 2020, three of them were released while the four others are still remanded in custody. The authorities also blocked seven websites, including five new press sites and two alternative domains of two already blocked sites. Half of these websites were temporarily blocked by a decision from the SCMR, and the other half were permanently blocked by a decision from an unknown body.

Deleting the content or banning the broadcast came in the third place with four incidents documented, in addition to one incident of physical assault and seizing press equipment. Meanwhile, 15 other violations were documented, which included fines, obligation to submit an apology, referral to investigation, warning, ban of appearance in the media, in addition to a decision preventing the use of pseudonyms without permission from the SCMR.
The SCMR came on top of the list of bodies that violated media freedom, with 16 violations. This reflects the role the council is playing in besieging and monitoring various media outlets. It was followed by the police, which committed 8 violations; then the National Media Authority, 4 violations. Three violations were committed by an unknown body that stands behind the website blocking campaign, which began in mid-2017. The State Information Service committed two violations.

Number of violations committed against journalists during the second quarter of 2020 according to the violator

- Police: 8
- The Supreme Council for Media Regulation: 16
- The State Information Service: 2
- The National Press Authority: 3
- Unknown body: 4
- Citizens: 2
At the level of violations against freedom of the press associated with the spread of Covid-19, the Egyptian authorities have intensified their repressive and arbitrary measures against journalists and news websites. This comes as part of the authorities’ attempts to block the flow of information about the Covid-19 situation in the country in order to make the official narrative prevail, in addition to pursuing the voices that criticize the government’s plans and policies in managing the crisis. Three journalists were arrested, while the SCMR, the National Press Authority, and the State Information Service continued to impose monitoring and accountability on all local and foreign media outlets, whether printed, digital or visual.
1. Arrest of journalists: Ahmed Allam, Sameh Haneen, and Haitham Mahgoub

On 25 April 2020, police forces arrested journalist Ahmed Allam after raiding his home in Al-Ayyat, Giza Governorate. Allam’s whereabouts were revealed two days after his arrest when he appeared at the Supreme State Security Prosecution’s office in Cairo’s Fifth Settlement, where he was remanded in custody in Case No. 558 of 2020 (State Security). The State Security Prosecution charged him with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and using a means of social media to carry out the second accusation.

The police also arrested journalist Haitham Hassan of Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper from his home in the Dar al-Salam district in Cairo on 11 May 2020. Hassan appeared at the State Security Prosecution’s office the next day, accused in case No. 586 of 2020 (State Security). He faced charges of joining a terrorist group, broadcasting false news and statements, and committing a terrorist crime. The prosecution ordered his detention for 15 days pending investigation. Four days later, specifically on Friday 15 May 2020, security forces arrested journalist Sameh Haneen from his home, to join the same case with the same charges.

2. Blocking websites and monitoring content: the key task of media regulatory bodies

Both the SCMR and the National Press Authority took a number of arbitrary decisions against some news websites for publishing news related to the spread of Covid-19. These decisions included:

On 8 April 2020, the SCMR decided to block the website of Al-Shura newspaper for six months after the website published alleged statements from Minister of Health Hala Zayed, which she did not make, according to the decision.

The decision said the alleged statements used inappropriate words and phrases that offended pharmacists, causing concern among the readers and raising doubt about the healthcare system in general, and the government policies to confront the Covid-19 crisis in particular.

The decision said the sanctions came as part of the Council’s tendency to control the media scene and not to allow the publishing of views that rely on rumours and lies in assessing the Covid-19 situation. The decision was based on an investigation conducted by the Council’s complaints committee after the health minister filed a complaint against the website, accusing

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14. Allam is a journalist and TV presenter who worked for a number of Egyptian and Arab newspapers and channels, most notably CBC, Lebanese Al-Mayadeen, Al-Masry al-Youm newspaper, and Al-Safir. He now works as a journalist for Al-Karama newspaper.

15. Sameh Haneen, a journalist and documentary filmmaker. He worked previously as a journalist in charge of Coptic affairs at Al-Badeel newspaper before it was closed. He founded the “Say” website in 2013, which specialized in publishing opinion articles, before it was closed several years later.
it of attributing statements to her that she did not make, in addition to casting doubt about the performance of public hospitals.

Under the same allegations, the SCMR decided to block the website of Al-Naba newspaper and fined it EGP 50,000. The Council's complaints committee had conducted an investigation into the false news published by Al-Naba newspaper on the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the decision taken on 19 May in the presence of the newspaper's editor-in-chief and its legal advisor. The decision did not mention the content of the news in question.

On 5 May, the SCMR decided to block the Opri News website for three months, accusing it of spreading false news about the Covid-19 situation in Ain Shams University hospitals and therefore causing panic among patients, workers and medical staff. However, the investigation conducted by the Council proved that the allegations were incorrect. On 17 May, the Council's undersecretary, Mohamed al-Omari, said the Council accepted the website's appeal against the decision to block it. So, the Council cancelled the blocking and obligated the website to submit an apology to Ain Shams University for the false news.

The SCMR also compelled the Cairo 24 website to apologize to Cairo University after the board chairwoman of the Cairo University hospitals, Hala Salah el-Din, had submitted a complaint against the website for publishing news on 28 April alleging that “the official responsible for distributing food in Qasr al-Aini Hospital caught Covid-19”. The Council also obligated the website to publish an explanation about the circumstances of the publication of this news, which contradicts the Council's decision to ban the publication of news about the Covid-19 pandemic except through the official statements issued by the Ministry of Health.

On 8 April, the SCMR announced the punishment of the TV show “Bab al-Khalq” broadcast on Al-Nahar channel and presented by Mahmoud Saad. The punishment, which was just a warning, came after the TV show hosted the head of the nutrition education unit at the National Institute of Nutrition, Dr. Magdy Nazih, who spoke about an Egyptian dish called “Shalawlaw”, claiming that it is effective in the treatment of Covid-19 for its role in strengthening the immune system. The TV host Mahmoud Saad said on his Facebook page: “We did not say that Shalawlaw treats the Covid-19. The show discussed food that strengthens the immune system.”

On 13 June, the National Press Authority decided to refer the editor-in-chief of Rose al-Youssef magazine Hany Abdullah to investigation, and suspended the editor in charge of Coptic affairs in the magazine until the investigation is complete. This came after the cover of the magazine’s weekly issue, which was scheduled to be published on 13 June, was slammed as offensive against the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The cover featured a photo of Bishop Raphael, the General Bishop and Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, next to Mohamed Badie, the former Supreme Guide of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood group. The photo came under a headline reading: “The Sacred Ignorance: Bishops join forces with Covid-19 against the Pope… killing in the name of the Lord,” in reference to a controversy over the administering of Holy Communion amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The Coptic Church denounced placing a picture of one of its bishops next to what it called one of the “nation’s traitors”.

The Church added in a statement that what happened was not considered freedom of expression, but rather a grave offense that must not pass without bringing those responsible for the magazine to account. It said that “these irresponsible acts will harm social peace at a time when we need all cooperation and solidarity under the current circumstances”. Meanwhile, editor-in-chief of Rose al-Youssef Hany Abdullah expressed his astonishment at the campaign launched against the cover photo and the accusations levelled against the magazine, which included “insulting the Church”. In statements to Al-Dostour website, Abdullah said his magazine is a staunch supporter of the Coptic Church and that the cover photo did not bear any harm against the Church’s symbols, but rather aimed to support the Church’s decision to suspend masses due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Abdullah said: “The escalation of events in this way is surprising. As soon as the cover photo was published, the Church issued a statement calling for investigation into the incident, although the issue was yet to be printed.” He noted that most opponents expressed their objection to the cover without reading the text on it.

The National Press Authority said the magazine would publish in its next issue an apology to the Church for the “offence”. For its part, the Church issued another statement thanking the National Press Authority for what it called the firm and swift action it took to deal with the...
issue. The statement said: “The Church hopes for more caution, professional discipline, and wise handling of the Church’s news, in order to preserve social cohesion and the supreme interests of Egypt, which needs all of us to collaborate, show solidarity, and defend it sincerely.”

As for violations against press freedom that are not related to the Covid-19 crisis, security authorities and various media councils continued to target journalists and press institutions during the second quarter of 2020. The most prominent of these violations were:

1. SCMR’s decisions against Al-Masry al-Youm daily for publishing a series of articles on Sinai

On 21 April 2020, the SCMR issued its decision No. 16 of 2020 regarding the investigations conducted by the Council with the legal representative of Al-Masry al-Youm newspaper against the backdrop of the newspaper’s publication of a column written by a pseudonymous “Newton” under the headline “Suspicious Deals” on Sinai.

According to the decision, the Council obligated the newspaper and its website to publish within three days a clear apology to the public for the violations it committed. It also obligated the newspaper to remove the column from its website, and blocked the section in which the column was published both in the newspaper and its website for three months. The Council also referred the newspaper’s editor-in-chief to a disciplinary committee at the Journalists Syndicate, while taking a “precautionary measure” to oblige newspapers, audio and visual media outlets, and websites not to host or interview businessman and founder of Al-Masry al-Youm Salah Diab for a month. Diab’s articles are published under the pseudonym “Newton”. The Council fined the newspaper EGP 250,000 and referred the incident to the Public Prosecutor to take action on the criminal side.

The SCMR said it took these measures against the newspaper for violating the constitution and the law as well as the professional ethics, norms, and standards by conducting a systematic campaign for spreading grudge through a series of articles written by the newspaper’s founder and co-owner, Salah Diab.

On 23 April, Al-Masry al-Youm published an article headlined “Al-Masry al-Youm apologizes to the readers”, in which it said: “As per the SCMR’s decision No. 16 of 2020 which forced Al-Masry al-Youm newspaper and its website to publish a clear apology for the violations the Council referred to, and in implementation of this part of the decision, Al-Masry al-Youm apologizes to its honourable readers for the series of articles it published about Sinai in a way

that the Council deemed grave violations. Al-Masry al-Youm affirms its support of the state’s efforts in developing and building our homeland, with Sinai being at the heart of it. We hope that this apology will bring this issue to an end, and that we work together for the sake of development and construction.”

2. SIS continues its siege of foreign correspondents

The SIS, headed by the chairman of the Journalists Syndicate Diaa Rashwan, continues its siege of foreign newspapers, websites, and correspondents in the country. It issued a statement on 23 May saying that Rashwan received Washington Post’s Cairo bureau chief Sudarsan Raghavan to discuss what it called the “professional violations” contained in the newspaper’s reports on Egypt. The statement noted that some of the newspaper’s reports included inaccuracies and incorrect information, breached all rules of journalistic work, and relied on unknown sources and individuals living outside Egypt. It said the newspaper could have followed the rules of journalistic work by resorting to the relevant official sources and taking their views into account when publishing its reports, as well as following up on the reality in the Egyptian street. It urged the newspaper to observe impartiality, respect the opinions of the concerned authorities, and not be biased towards anything negative.

Rashwan handed Raghavan a letter sent to the editor-in-chief of The Washington Post detailing “the journalistic violations by its Cairo-based reporter, who was issued a warning that in the event that such professional violations . . . appropriate measures permitted by both the law in Egypt and the rules of many countries worldwide shall be taken against him”.

In the same context, Rashwan also met with Cairo bureau chief for The New York Times Declan Walsh, and alerted him on “numerous professional violations in some of his recent reports”. However, the statement did not mention any details of those violations.

3. Continued targeting and imprisonment of journalists is flagrant violation of the right to freedom of journalistic work

On 17 May, the Maadi Prosecution released editor-in-chief of Mada Masr website Lina Atallah on a 2,000-pound bail, after she was charged with taking pictures of a military facility (Tora Prison) without obtaining a permit from the competent authorities, in Case No. 8009 of 2020 (Misdemeanour, Maadi). The police forces in charge of guarding the Tora Prison arrested Atallah on the same day while she was conducting an interview with the mother of political activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, Laila Soueif, while the latter was in front of the prison building.

Meanwhile, a police force raided the headquarters of the “Al-Manassa” news website and arrested the website’s editor-in-chief, Nora Younis, after searching the computers at the headquarters. The police force informed Younis’ colleagues that they would take her to the headquarters of the Censorship on Artistic Works Police to check a laptop that was seized from the website’s headquarters, as the laptop was run with the Ubuntu operating system, one of the Linux open source systems. However, the force took Younis to the Maadi Police Station, where she was detained until she was referred to the prosecution the next day for investigation in Case No. 9455 of 2020 (Misdemeanour, Maadi).

The prosecution charged Younis with creating an online account to commit a crime that is punishable by law, possessing software programs designed and developed without a permit from the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, violating the intellectual property and financial rights of the software owner, and making unlawful use of the information system network or one of the information technology means, the telecommunications service, and one of the audio and visual services. The prosecution released Younis on a 10,000-pound bail.

In the same context, security forces arrested journalist Mohamed Mounir25, 65, at dawn on 15 June 2020 from his home in Sheikh Zayed district, Giza Governorate, hours after he posted on Facebook a number of videos filmed by surveillance cameras of what he said was a raid by a police force of his house in his absence.

Mounir was referred to the State Security Prosecution on the same day, in Case No. 535 of 2020, where he was charged with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and misusing social media.

According to a statement from Mounir’s family, it is likely that he was arrested for his appearance on Qatari Al-Jazeera TV to comment on a crisis that erupted between the Egyptian Orthodox Church and Rose al-Youssef magazine over a controversial cover of the magazine’s weekly issue. Later, the prosecution decided to release Mounir without guarantees.

On 12 April 2020, a National Security Police force arrested business journalist and founder of Business News Company Mustafa Saqr, after raiding his home. He was referred to the State Security Prosecution in the Fifth Settlement on the same day, in Case No. 1530, where he was charged with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and using an account on a social networking site for the purpose of carrying out a crime.

25. Mohamed Mounir is a member of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate, a co-founder of the “Front for the Defence of Journalists and Freedoms”, the editor-in-chief of Al-Diyar newspaper, and the deputy editor-in-chief of Youm7 newspaper before he was dismissed from it in 2016 against the background of his opposition to the Egyptian-Saudi border demarcation agreement, according to which the Saudi Arabia annexed the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir to it.
Meanwhile, journalists Mustafa al-Aasar and Moataz Wadnan were exposed to the so-called “recycling”, as they were kept in pretrial detention in new cases after they were released from detention where they were remanded in connection with previous cases. The Public Prosecution uses this pattern of violation so it can keep journalists in custody despite exceeding the maximum period of pretrial detention (two years) according to Article 143 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

On 7 May, the Supreme State Security Prosecution released al-Aasar after he exceeded the maximum period of pretrial detention, in Case No. 441 of 2018, in which he was accused of joining a terrorist group and spreading false news. On 14 February 2020, al-Aasar’s lawyer was finalizing the procedures of his client’s release, but he was surprised by the Fayoum police station dying al-Aasar’s presence. Al-Aasar appeared the next day at the State Security Prosecution office in the Fifth Settlement, where he was charged with promoting the commission of terrorist crimes, in Case No. 1898 of 2019.

On 21 February 2020, Wadnan exceeded two years of pretrial detention in Case No. 441 of 2018, but the State Security Prosecution released him on 7 May 2020. He was not moved from his detention in the Scorpion Prison despite the prosecution’s decision to release him, and his fate remained unknown until he appeared at the State Security Prosecution’s office on 9 May as a defendant in a new case, where he was charged with promoting the commission of terrorist acts. The prosecution ordered his detention for 15 days pending investigation, in Case No. 1898 of 2019.

4. Blocking is massacre of press freedom in recent years

During the second quarter of 2020, AFTE documented the blocking of two new websites, in addition to two alternative domains of two already blocked websites. The “Darb” website of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party, whose editor-in-chief is journalist and former board member of the Journalists Syndicate Khaled al-Balshi, was blocked on 9 April, only one month after its launch. The “Egypt 360” news website was also blocked on 13 May. In both cases, the staff of the two websites did not know the reason for the blocking or the body behind it. Moreover, two new domains for Mada Masr and Al-Manassa websites, which have already been blocked in Egypt since mid-2017, were blocked as well.
• Freedom of digital expression: Continuous attempts to close the last outlet for expression in Egypt

AFTE documented 39 violations against online users during the second quarter of 2020, an increase of 900% compared with the first quarter of the same year when only four violations were documented.

This spike in the number of violations resulted from the Covid-19 crisis, as the authorities focused their efforts on blocking the information related to the spread of the pandemic in favour of the official narrative regarding the numbers of infections, deaths and recoveries, in addition to promoting the government policies in managing the crisis.

However, the violations of the right to freedom of digital expression were not only limited to the spread of Covid-19. The Egyptian authorities continued their usual violations against freedom of digital expression with the aim of controlling the circulation of news, data and information on the cyberspace, which is considered the last outlet for free expression and circulation of information in Egypt.

During the same quarter of the year, AFTE also documented a new pattern of violation committed by the Public Prosecution against users of social media applications under vague allegations related to the preservation of family values and societal principles. The Public Prosecution also created a unit called “Monitoring and Analysis” to monitor citizens’ online activity and to control the violations they commit.

AFTE documented 39 incidents that included 41 violations, 20 of which are related to the circulation of information about the spread of Covid-19 or criticizing the government policy in dealing with the pandemic. The arrest of citizens and keeping them in pretrial detention were among the most prominent violations committed during the second quarter of the year, with 31 violations having been documented in this regard. AFTE also documented a number of arbitrary measures against some members of the medical staff. It also documented the permanent blocking of two news websites and the temporary blocking of three other websites, as well as the blocking of two new domains of two previously blocked sites.
At the level of violations against freedom of digital expression related to the spread of Covid-19, the security authorities targeted internet users, including journalists, activists, and citizens. Even medical personnel were not spared from these campaigns, which mainly aimed at blocking information and preventing criticism of the government policy in managing the Covid-19 crisis.

AFTE also documented the arrest of nine medical personnel, including seven doctors, a pharmacist, and a nurse. The Supreme State Security Prosecution ordered all of them to be remanded in custody in two cases No. 588 and No. 535 of 2020, where the prosecution charged them with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, using accounts on a social media platform for the purpose of committing a crime. The decision to remand them continues to be renewed until now.
However, the reasons and the circumstances of their arrest were different as follows:

**Alaa Abdel-Latif:** On 28 March 2020, a police force arrested Alaa Shaaban Hemeida Abdel-Latif, a doctor at El-Shatby Hospital of the Faculty of Medicine, Alexandria University, while she was at the faculty dean's office. She was arrested because a nurse used her phone to report a case of Covid-19 infection at the hospital, which angered the hospital's director and prompted him to accuse her of infringing on his competence, according to a testimony of an official at the Medical Professions Union who refused to be named. Shaaban appeared at the Supreme State Security Prosecution's office in the Fifth Settlement on 30 March as a defendant in Case No. 558 of 2020.

**Hany Bakr and Ahmed Sabra:** On 10 April 2020, a police force arrested ophthalmologist Hany Bakr Ali Kahil from his home in Toukh district, Qalyubiya Governorate, for a Facebook post in which he criticized the Egyptian government sending medical aid to Italy despite the lack of protective equipment in Egyptian hospitals. Bakr was subjected to enforced disappearance for 18 days until he appeared at the Supreme State Security Prosecution's office as a defendant in Case No. 558 of 2020.

On 16 April 2020, assistant professor at the Faculty of Medicine, Benha University, Dr. Ahmed Sabra Ibrahim was arrested from his private clinic in Benha, Qalyubiya Governorate. His whereabouts were unknown until he appeared at the Supreme State Security Prosecution's office in the Fifth Settlement on 28 April as a defendant in the same case, facing the same charges.

**Mohamed al-Fawal and Ahmed Safwat:** On 25 June, a police force arrested board member of Al-Sharqiya Doctors Syndicate Dr. Mohamed Moataz Mansour al-Fawal from his home in Al-Wataniya district in Zagazig. Al-Fawal, who works as head of the Radiology Department at the Emergency and Accidents Hospital in Zagazig, appeared at the State Security Prosecution's office on 28 June as a defendant in Case No. 588 of 2020. According to an official in the Medical Professions Union, the arrest of Al-Fawal came against the backdrop of a blogging campaign calling on the prime minister to apologize for his statements, in which he held doctors responsible for the rise in the number of Covid-19 deaths due to their inaction.

The Supreme State Security Prosecution decided to detain doctor Ahmed Safwat, a board member of the Cairo Doctors Syndicate, on 28 June for the same reason and in the same case. Safwat was brought to the prosecution on 30 June.

**Mohamed Hamed and Ibrahim Bediwi:** A police force arrested Mohamed Hamid Mahmoud, an orthopedic surgeon at Gamal Abdel Nasser Hospital in Alexandria Governorate, from his brother's home. Hamed was referred to the Supreme State Security Prosecution as a defendant in Case No. 535 of 2020.
On 27 May, a police force arrested Ibrahim Abdel-Hamid Bediwi, a pediatric surgeon at Al-Mataria Teaching Hospital. Bediwi was brought to the State Security Prosecution on 31 May as a defendant in the same case, facing the same charges.

Mohamed al-Sayyis: A police force arrested pharmacist Mohamed Kamel al-Sayyis on 4 April 2020. He was brought to the Supreme State Security Prosecution on 9 April, and the prosecution decided to remand him in custody in Case No. 588 of 2020. Al-Sayyis was arrested for his criticism of the Egyptian health minister regarding the ministry’s policy in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to the crisis of appointing the pharmacists graduated in 2018.

Hadeer Salem: On 22 March, the Interior Ministry announced on its Facebook page the arrest of a woman in Damietta Governorate after she had posted a video on Facebook that, according to the ministry, promoted false news about the spread of Covid-19. The State Security Prosecution accused Salem of joining a group in contravention of the law, spreading false news, and misusing social media in Case No. 535 of 2020. Salem had shared a video on the transfer of a nurse from Damietta General Hospital to a quarantine hospital due to his infection with Covid-19.

A doctor arbitrarily moved from his workplace and referred to investigation:

The undersecretary of the Ministry of Health in Al-Sharqiya Governorate, Dr. Hisham Shawky, assigned the financial and administrative control department to discharge a doctor working at Diarb Negm Central Hospital and move him to another hospital as needed, while referring him to the legal affairs department at Al-Sharqiya Health Directorate for investigation. The move came after the doctor posted a video on social media claiming that the hospital lacked personal protective equipment. Shawky said the video did not show the reality and it caused confusion and anxiety among healthcare workers as well as citizens in the governorate. We were not able to know the doctor's name or follow up the decision to refer him to investigation.

Disciplinary penalty against doctor Mahmoud Tariq Abdel Azim:

The legal affairs department at the Cairo Health Directorate referred doctor Abdel Azim, who works at Al-Mounira General Hospital, to investigation for publishing a Facebook post on 23 March in which he criticized the shortage of medical supplies and personal protective equipment at the hospital. He got a 15-day salary cut as a penalty.

27. Testimony of an official at the Medical Professions Union, who refused to be named
AFTE also documented the arrest of editor-in-chief of Al-Qarar newspaper in Aswan Atef Hasaballah last March, against the backdrop of a Facebook post in which he called on citizens to adhere to social distancing rules and not to believe the low numbers of Covid-19 infections announced by the Ministry of Health. The journalist was subjected to enforced disappearance for more than a month. Security forces also arrested TV anchor Khaled Helmi Ghoneim in mid-April for a Facebook post in which he criticized the Alexandria Health Directorate’s blackout on news that five doctors had caught Covid-19 at Al-Agami Hospital. Ghoneim’s whereabouts were not known until the end of April.

Both journalists were brought to the State Security Prosecution’s office as defendants in Case No. 558 of 2020. The prosecution charged them with joining a group in contravention of the law, spreading false news, and using a social media account for the purpose of committing a crime.

In the same context, the police arrested lawyer and unionist Mohsen Bahnasy on 27 March near his home, where he “received a phone call from a person claiming to have a case and requested to meet him quickly to inform him of the details and to give him the fees. When Bahnasy gave him the address and agreed to meet him near his home, Bahnasy was surprised by a security force that beat him and pushed him into a microbus,” according to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI). The police force later went to Bahnasy’s home, searched it and seized sums of money and his mobile phone. Then, he was taken to the National Security Police headquarters in Helwan, according to the report published on ANHRI’s website. Bahnasy was later taken to the State Security Prosecution, where he was charged with “joining a banned group and misusing social media,” in Case No. 558 of 2020. Bahnasy said during the investigation that he was summoned to the National Security Police headquarters in Abbasiya days before his arrest, where he was asked about what he wrote on social media calling for the release of prisoners for fear of the spread of Covid-19. Although he removed what he wrote, he was arrested, according to ANHRI.

On 25 May 2020, a police force arrested researcher Abdo Fayed from his home in the Haram district of Giza Governorate. Fayed’s whereabouts were not known until he appeared at the State Security Prosecution’s office in the Fifth Settlement on 31 May as a defendant in Case No. 535 of 2020. The prosecution charged him with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and using a social media account to commit a crime. Prior to his arrest, Fayed published several posts in which he criticized the policies adopted by the government and the Ministry of Health in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.

Activist Sanaa Seif was investigated on 23 June 2020, and the Supreme State Security Prosecution charged her with spreading false news, inciting terrorist crimes, and misusing social media. The prosecution also decided to remand her in custody for 15 days pending...
investigation in Case No. 659 of 2020. During the investigation, Seif was asked about what she posted regarding the interruption of her family’s communication with her brother activist Alaa Abdel-Fattah who is held in pretrial detention in Tora Prison, in light of the family’s fear for his life due to the outbreak of Covid-19. Seif was arrested in front of the Public Prosecutor’s office in downtown Cairo while she was going to submit a complaint after she and her family were physically assaulted outside Tora Prison under the nose of police forces.

Away from Covid-19, security forces arrested the head of Bibliotheca Alexandrina’s language control department, Kholoud Saeed, from her home in Alexandria on 21 April. Her whereabouts were not known until she appeared at the State Security Prosecution’s office in the Fifth Settlement on 28 April, as a defendant in Case No. 558 of 2020. The prosecution charged her with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and using a website with the aim of committing a crime. She was remanded in custody for 15 days pending investigation.
A police force also arrested Noha Kamal from her family’s home in Alexandria on 30 March. On 1 April 2020, she was brought to the State Security Prosecution’s office as a defendant in Case No. 558 of 2020. The prosecution charged her with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and misusing social media. It is likely that Kamal was arrested for her posts that called for the release of prisoners of conscience.

Similarly, a police force arrested Shaima Samy from her home in Alexandria on 20 May. Her whereabouts were not known until she appeared at the State Security Prosecution's office in the Fifth Settlement on 30 May as a defendant in Case No. 535 of 2020. The prosecution charged her with joining a terrorist group, spreading false news, and using a social media account to commit a crime.

The Egyptian authorities continued to block websites, especially news websites, as AFTE documented the blocking of the “Darb” website of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party only one month after its launch. The authorities also blocked the “360 Egypt” website, which was run by the Center for Development, Support and Media, although the website had obtained the necessary licenses, according to a journalist working for the website. The authorities also blocked two alternative domains of two already blocked websites, namely Mada Masr and Al-Manassa.

• **Freedom of creativity ... marked decrease in number of violations**

AFTE documented one violation of freedom of creativity during the second quarter of 2020, as a police force arrested film producer Moataz Abdel-Wahab on 5 May from his company’s headquarters in Cairo’s Wadi Degla. Abdel-Wahab appeared at the State Security Prosecution’s office in the Fifth Settlement on 11 May as a defendant in Case No. 586 of 2020. The prosecution charged him with joining a terrorist group and spreading false news.

Abdel-Wahab founded the “Team One” film production company in 2010, and co-produced many films and documentaries, most notably “When We Are Born” which won the Best Film Award at the 46th Film Society Festival. He also produced “Basamat Sayed Hegab” in 2010, “Al-Tayyib A Biography of the Homeland” in 2012, and “The Heart of Cairo” in 2020. Abdel-Wahab previously worked as a production manager for Al-Ahram Advertising Agency and Orbit TV Network.

As for imprisoned creators, the State Security Prosecution decided to release graphic designer Mustafa Gamal on 31 May after he spent two years and three months in pretrial detention in Case No. 480 of 2018, known in local media as the “Balaha Song Case”. As Gamal was finalizing
the procedures of his release at a police station in 6th of October City, the police station denied his presence on 5 June. His whereabouts remained unknown until the end of the period covered by the report.

A police force arrested Gamal from his home in 6th of October City on 1 March 2018, as part of a security campaign that targeted people close to Egyptian singer Ramy Essam, days after he released a video clip under the title “Balaha” in which he attacked the current president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi sarcastically. Gamal did not appear before any official body until 4 March when he was brought to the Supreme State Security Prosecution’s office in the Fifth Settlement as a defendant in Case No. 480 of 2018. The prosecution charged him with joining a terrorist group and spreading false news. Although Gamal had exceeded the maximum period of pretrial detention (two years), the prosecution decided to release him on 31 May.

Gamal was the last person kept in detention in the aforementioned case, after five defendants in the same case were released on different dates. Young filmmaker Shady Habash, who codirected the satirical song “Balaha”, died in prison in early May. Habash was awaiting a decision to release him after he exceeded the maximum period of pretrial detention, but he died due to the slowdown in treating his health condition.

Fears are increasing that Mustafa Gamal will be charged in a new case in order to circumvent the decision to release him, a practice that the security services have become accustomed to recently with the help of the State Security Prosecution. The practice is locally known as “recycling of defendants”.
Conclusion and recommendations

AFTE aims through its second quarterly report to motivate those interested in the human rights situation in Egypt to continue efforts to defend freedom of expression and access to information, particularly as new restrictions were imposed on freedom of expression during that period of the year, due to the government’s desire to prevent any criticism of its policies in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.

This report aims to document the significant increase in violations of freedom of expression and access to information during the second quarter of the year, so it can be used in urging the Egyptian authorities to change their repressive approach to human rights.

AFTE offers the following recommendations to the concerned bodies:

- The Public Prosecution should release the doctors detained in Cases 588 and 535 of 2020 (Supreme State Security Prosecution), as they are detained for expressing opinions critical of the government policies in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

- The Public Prosecution should release the journalists remanded in custody and stop re-detaining those released in connection with new cases, in what is known as “recycling of defendants”.

- The SCMR should stop blocking news websites and guarantee freedom for all media outlets to work and publish news.

- The Prisons Authority should announce the policies it follows in confronting the spread of Covid-19 and reveal data on the number of infections and PCR tests inside prisons.