



Banned from the Cairo International Book Fair

A report on the activities of the 54th Cairo International Book Fair

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Cairo International Book Fair

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Methodology

This report is based on the testimonies of six writers and publishers ,most of whom participated in the 54 th Cairo International Book Fair .It also relies on the reports and statements issued by the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression about the fair over the past years ,in addition to the most important news and reports on the fair.

Introduction

The 54th Cairo International Book Fair was held during the period from 25 January to 6 February 2023 under the slogan "In the name of Egypt.. together we read, we think, we create"¹, with the participation of around 1,047 Egyptian, Arab, and foreign publishers. Egyptian ministries and institutions also participated in the fair. These included the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, the Administrative Control Authority represented by the National Anti-Corruption Academy, the Ministry of Endowments, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Social Solidarity, Al-Azhar, Dar al-Ifta, and others. Some 53 countries participated in the fair, including countries that participated for the first time, such as Hungary and the Dominican Republic, in addition to a number of Arab institutions.

The fair is considered the largest cultural event in Egypt since its establishment in 1969. It is still a destination for hundreds of thousands of intellectuals, both inside and outside Egypt. The number of visitors this year reached approximately 3.5 million.²

The fair used to be held at the fairgrounds in Nasr City (eastern Cairo) for 20 years. It used to have pavilions in which live activities, such as signing ceremonies, debates, and sometimes protests, were held, but things have changed in recent years. In 2019, the Egyptian government decided to move the venue of the fair to the "Egypt International Exhibitions Center" of the army-owned National Company for International Exhibitions and Conferences. Since then, tents and pavilions have been replaced with luxurious concrete buildings limited to selling books.

For decades, the book fair was an open cultural arena, where opponents would stand in the streets and in front of the tents and say whatever they wanted, if they were unable to stand on one of the platforms. In 1991, journalist and writer Mohamed Hassanein Heikal raised, in his open meeting at the fair, the issue of "aging", which affected our discourse, our ideas, and our ability to express. He said: "We are facing an authority that has grown older in its seats,"³ speaking of the regime of late President Hosni Mubarak.

¹ Mohamed Abdel Rahman ,Cairo International Book Fair kicks off today with the participation of more than 1,000 publishers ,Youm7 25 ,January,2023 last visited on 19 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/YHqxUU>

² Mohamed Abdel Rahman ,Record numbers of visitors and sales ..The54 th Cairo International Book Fair ,Youm7 ,2023 ,last visited on 1 March,2023 <https://bit.ly3/mjuyRl>

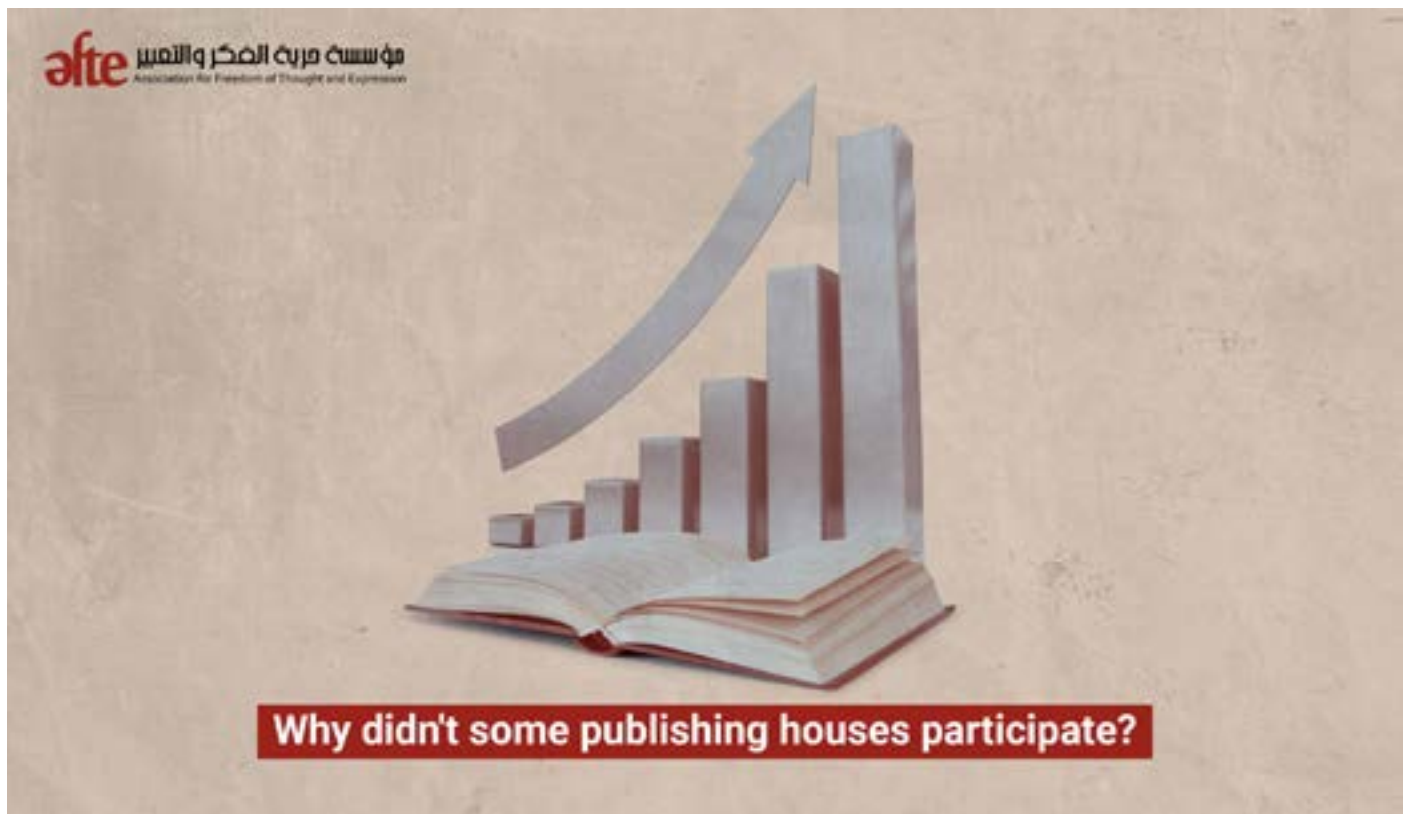
³ Adel Hammouda ,Face the truth ,what happened at the book fair in January 1991 because of Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and the secret of the book "The Game of Power in Egypt , "Cairo News Channel 24 ,November ,2022 last visited on 11 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/IV9TF5>

In 1992, the book fair witnessed a famous debate⁴ which some considered a major reason for the assassination of the well-known thinker Farag Foda. The debate was held between Foda and a number of political Islam figures, including late Sheikh Mohamed al-Ghazali and Dr. Mohamed Emara. The event, held under the slogan “Egypt between the religious state and the civil state”, was attended by thousands. Foda presented his courageous and daring ideas about a civil state and criticized all attempts to drag Egypt into a religious state that rules in the name of divine right. He considered the rhetoric adopted by the Salafists a great danger to the future of the country.

On 25 January 2023, the 54th Cairo International Book Fair opened its doors and witnessed a high turnout. The clamour of the cultural event was loud, but behind it there were other muffled voices, as some publishing houses were banned from participating in the fair, in what can be described as a bid to make the fair a place for creativity that does not anger the authorities. AFTE documented a number of violations in this year’s fair, all related to freedom of expression and the right to creativity. These included preventing some publishing houses from participation, removing books from the shelves or refusing to give them registration numbers. This report is trying to highlight these violations.

⁴ The age of reason ,an improved version of the responses of Dr .Farag Foda during his debates with Muslim Brotherhood leaders in ,1992 published in ,2020last visited on 20 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly/3/IVqy23>

First: Why didn't some publishing houses participate?



It was reported ahead of the fair that some publishing houses, which had participated in the fair for many years, would not participate this year, mainly for financial reasons. Publisher Mohamed Hashem said: "Merit Publishing House will not participate in this year's book fair due to its failure to pay overdue debts to the Ministry of Culture, despite previous promises by the ministry to settle the issue in return for purchasing some of the house's publications."

Publishers used to pay half of the rent for the space in which they display their publications ahead of the fair, and the other half during the fair period. Some publishers expressed their dissatisfaction with the high rent rates, which increased from 1,200 pounds per square meter last year to 1,350 pounds this year (up 12.5%). This prompted Minister of Culture Nevine Al-Kilany to issue a decision to reduce the increase rate to only 5%, suggesting that small publishers who cannot afford to rent an entire booth to take part in a 45-square-meter pavilion that can accommodate 12 small publishers (3.5 square meters per publisher).⁵

The publishing industry in Egypt suffers from additional burdens in light of the devaluation of the local currency, which led to a significant rise in paper prices and the cost of printing.⁶

In another context, Tanmiya (Development) Publishing House announced that it would not participate in this year's fair, without giving a reason. It just said that it would organize events under the title "Tanmiya Cultural Festival" in January and February of each year, as both months represent "the pinnacle of the cultural sea-

⁵ Alaa Othman ,No place for defaulters in the book fair ,Al-Manassa 17 ,January ,2023 last visited on 15 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/k9XJW2>

⁶ Alaa Hassan ,How does the rise in paper prices affect the book industry ?Publishers answer ,Al-Dustour ,published on 14 May ,2022 last visited on 26 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/IXohUk>

son” in Egypt. The house was banned from participating in the fair for two years in a row⁷, after the arrest of its founder, Khaled Lotfy, who was sentenced by a military court to five years in prison on charges of divulging military secrets and spreading false news. This came after he published a book authored by Israeli historian Uri Bar-Joseph, titled in its Arabic version: “The Angel: The Egyptian spy who saved Israel”. Lotfy agreed with the Lebanese Arab Scientific Publishers Group, which translated the book into Arabic, to print copies of the book in Egypt so that its price would be affordable to Egyptian readers.

Security authorities and financial crises are not the only reasons for banning writers and publishing houses from participating in the fair, but also political disagreements. The echo of the conflict over legitimacy between the two rival governments in Libya reached the Cairo book fair this year, as the head of the Libyan Publishers Union, Ali Awain, revealed in a statement⁸ reported by several news websites the reason behind banning Libya from participating in the 54th Cairo International Book Fair.

According to Awain, the ban came from the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after the Ministry of Culture in the Libyan parallel government headed by Fathi Bashagha submitted a request to participate in the fair instead of the Ministry of Culture in the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) headed by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. However, officials in the Ministry of Culture of Dbeibah's government said that the correspondent of the Ministry of Culture in Bashagha's government had requested that Dbeibah's government be prevented from participating in the fair.

Awain noted that the Egyptian foreign ministry banned both Libyan governments from participating in the fair.

Local media in Libya criticized⁹ the country's absence in the fair, blaming what they described as the sterile competition between the two governments over power. However, Egyptian foreign ministry sources confirmed that the absence was not politically motivated, but rather due to procedural issues, giving no further details.

⁷ AFTE ,AFTE calls for the immediate release of publisher Khaled Lotfy and considers his military trial a severe blow to freedom of creativity²⁹ , December ,2013 last visited on 21 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/ZkD4gR>

⁸ Al-Wasat gate ,Ali Awain reveals the truth of banning Libya from participation in the Cairo Book Fair 15 ,January ,2023 last visited on 21 February ,2023<https://bit.ly3/Zr0OQJ>

⁹ Khaled Mahmoud ,The Book Fair ...Cairo's cultural weapon for punishing Libya ,Raseef22 17 ,January ,2023 last visited on 21 January ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/EpQDUo>

Second: The muffled voices at the fair



The muffled voices at the fair

During the first week of the fair, author Dr. Mohamed Medhat Mustafa announced on his Facebook page that his book, published by Al-Muntada Publishing House under the title “The history of the Zionist movement and its organizations”, was removed from the house's pavilion at the fair without clear reasons. The publishing house, meanwhile, said that the security authorities demanded that the book be removed, without sending an official notification to the house. It noted that the authorities did not confiscate the book, adding, however, that it was subjected to “security harassment that created an uncomfortable atmosphere”. “We do not know the reason for that, especially as the book is academic, chronicling the history of the Zionist associations in Egypt, their beginnings and their roles in the period before the July 1952 Revolution, from a completely neutral point of view,” Mustafa said.

Sayed Saber, the publishing director at Al-Muntada, described what happened as security harassment that led the publishing house to remove the book from its shelves. Several days later, the author announced again on his Facebook page that the book was back on display at the fair, without knowing the exact truth of what happened. Mustafa thanked “those who stood in solidarity with freedom of expression until the book's return,” in an indication that the return of his book to the shelves of the house's pavilion came thanks to the wave of solidarity on social media.

In the same context, political writer Anwar al-Hawari commented in a post titled “Incomplete joy” on the prevention of his two books “The Taming of Tyranny” and “The New Dictatorship” from display at the book fair. In the beginning, he considered the presence of his two books at the fair “a kind indication of tolerance shown

by the authorities towards different opinions", since the two books carry an explicit criticism of the authorities. However, his joy was not complete.

According to al-Hawari, the two books were removed from the shelves upon an order from an unknown body, and without a legal basis, so the books were moved from the shelves to the closed cartons.

Although the two books went through the usual procedures to be displayed, including revision and the obtaining of a registration number, they were not banned during that process. However, a commentator from the publishing house, who preferred not to be named, said: "Perhaps someone from the security authorities did not like the books, or did not want to see them displayed among other books, so he asked the house owner to move the books from the shelves back to the cartons." He pointed out that this request did not come through official channels, adding that the books remained available in bookshops and publishing houses without being displayed, as happened with Al-Muntada Publishing House.

In the same context, we contacted Dr. Khaled Abdel Rahman, a former member of the "Doctors Without Rights" movement, who said that his book was banned from display at this year's fair. He said: "After we agreed with the publisher and finished writing, only the registration number was left for the book to be printed. However, the publisher informed me that the book was prevented from obtaining a registration number, without giving reasons from the censorship bodies, something which we expected." He suggested that the book might have been banned due to its content or his opposition activities on social media. Granting a registration number is a regular procedure for issuing any new book. The Egyptian National Library and Archives is responsible for granting these numbers.

The book titled "42 Al-Qasr Al-Ainy Street" tackles the establishment and development of the Egyptian Medical Syndicate and how it interacted with the various regimes, including the monarchy and the eras of late presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat, as well as the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to the syndicate's council. It also tackles the emergence of the Doctors Without Rights movement, the January 2011 Revolution and its political impact on the syndicate, then the decline in the syndicate's role after 30 June 2013, the attempts to revive it, and the establishment of the Health Workers Association. The book also refers to the doctors' strikes in 2011, 2012, and 2014, and ends with the 2016 mass general assembly of the Medical Syndicate, known as the "Day of Dignity", which came up with nothing, thus leading doctors to lose hope in collective salvation and the predominance of the logic of individual salvation. Since then, the number of doctors' resignations and immigration increased.

What happened with the book is a sort of pre-print censorship on creative works. This censorship takes several forms, including self-censorship practiced by the writer himself, censorship by the publishing house, and administrative censorship by state agencies.

Law No. 20 of 1936, which is currently in force, specifies the steps for issuing any

book, which begin with a deposit in the governorate or directorate in which the book is issued. A receipt shall be given for that deposit¹⁰. The law also specifies another set of conditions¹¹, including: the name and address of the printer, the name and address of the publisher - if he is not the printer - as well as the date of printing shall be mentioned on the first or last page of any publication.

As publications in general were the most widespread means of communication and dissemination of ideas when the law was issued, the legislator tried to restrict the freedom of publishing. The law stipulates that a book shall be seized and then confiscated through a court ruling if it does not mention the name and address of the printer or publisher. Therefore, the lack of a registration number does not necessitate a penalty on the author or publisher.

Thus, the required procedures are limited to documentation of the date of publication and its details without looking into the content of the book. The National Library and Archives grants the registration number when these conditions are fulfilled, without any other requirements, except for depositing a number of copies within three months from the date of receiving the registration number, confirming the book has been issued and was not just a cover.

Therefore, AFTE believes that refraining from issuing a registration number for a creative work reflects the authorities' will to impose restrictions on creative people and publications, by turning the routine procedure of issuing a registration number into a real obstacle for writers and publishing houses.

The Egyptian authorities did not only ban books issued by Egyptian publishing houses or authored by Egyptian writers, but also banned non-Egyptian books containing views different from those of the Egyptian authorities on various issues. For example, Sudanese writer Ehab Adlan told AFTE that his book "Homethology: Controversy of Identity and Myth" was confiscated from the 54th Cairo International Book Fair on its second day. He was told that the reason was that the book attributed the Egyptian civilization to Sudan and considered the current Egyptians as remnants of occupation that lasted for more than 3,000 years, and that Sudan is the origin of civilization and humanity.

He said this might have bothered the Egyptian authorities, noting that they confiscated all copies of the book amid a high demand for it. He said security individuals stormed a pavilion displaying his book and asked the publishers to remove it from the shelves. The matter caused a state of uproar¹² on the mainstream and social media in Sudan.

Adlan blamed in a Facebook post the Egyptian intelligence service for confiscating his book from the fair.

¹⁰ Article 5 of Law No 20 .of 1936 regarding publications

¹¹ Mahmoud Othman and Mohamed Abdel Salam ,Will the" registration number "become a tool to restrict freedom of creativity" ?The stake "is an example ,AFTE 10 ,January ,2017 last visited on 13 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/Ii7lpK>

¹² The Egyptian authorities confiscate a Sudanese book from the Cairo fair for strange reasons 9 ,February ,2023 last visited on 1 March ,2023 <https://bit.ly3/Ycmmn9>

Third: The publication procedures



For a writer to have his book published, he should contract with a publishing house that agrees to publish his book in return for a reasonable percentage of the sales and without going through a specific censorship agency¹³. In 1983, the President of the Republic issued Decree No. 402/1983 authorizing the Minister of Information to exercise the President's powers contained in Articles 9 and 10 of the Publications Law. So, the key players in the process of censorship of publications in Egypt include the Council of Ministers which issues decisions to ban books that spur lusts and others, the Minister of Information who has the powers of the President of the Republic in everything related to the matter, and the Publications Censorship Agency headed by the undersecretary of the Ministry of Information.

The Publications Censorship Agency is responsible for censoring books, preventing their publication, confiscating them, warning those responsible for periodical publications, and administrative seizure without referring to the judicial authorities, if it sees in any book something that harms the public interest and/or disturbs public peace and/or breaches the law.

The Agency censors books continuously. A study issued by AFTE under the title "Why you cannot be creative in Egypt" noted that in 2011 the secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Culture, Ezz El-Din Shoukry, demanded the dissolution of the Agency in protest against its decision to ban Raafat al-Mihi's novel "Horgard" and the complete works of Gibran Khalil Gibran. In 2015, the Agency banned 30 books from the book fair under the pretext that they had Shiite titles.

The study also noted that the security services usually exercise their role in cen-

13 Hossam Fazola ,AFTE issues a study entitled "Why you cannot be creative in Egypt ,"AFTE 24 ,October ,2016 last visited on 21 February ,2023 <https://bit.ly/3/SsOyNi>

soring books and publications through confiscation, arresting publishers and writers, and raiding publishing houses and offices. The security services usually confiscate books without a decision from the Publications Censorship Agency, the Council of Ministers, the judiciary, or Al-Azhar. This happened to many books, such as Karam Saber's "Where is God" in 2013 when security forces confiscated all copies of the book before a verdict was issued in the case. In 2008, security forces confiscated all copies of the "Metro" novel without a court ruling or an official order. The novel depicted political figures. Many other books and novels were confiscated over the years, such as Abdel Ghaffar Mohamed's "Judge's memoirs" in 2007, Kamal Gabriel's "ElBaradei and the dream of the green revolution" in 2009, Ali Idris's "The leader cuts his hair" in 2010, and Siza Kassem's "Introduction to semiotics" in 2014.

Conclusion

Many reports shed light on the violations and clampdown that took place during the book fair this year and over the past years, as some writers were arrested and many books were banned or confiscated. In this context, a report by Raseef22 website¹⁴, a report by Al-Manassa website¹⁵, a paper issued by AFTE, and a report by BBC Arabic website¹⁶ tackled these violations, focusing on the violation of freedom of creativity by preventing authors from obtaining registration numbers for their books. AFTE issued a report on the restriction of creativity in Egypt. Raseef22's report came under the title: "Closure, ban, confiscation: The Cairo International Book Fair repeats its usual song." The various reports focused on the arrest of creative people, but they did not explain how the book fair was turned from a cultural event into a place for displaying books only and how its relocation affected its essence.

The abovementioned incidents violate freedom of creativity and breach the law and the constitution. This requires the state institutions to protect freedom of creativity and stop restricting it under the pretext of absurd claims and bureaucratic procedures that aim to control publications.

¹⁴ Yasmine Mohamed, "Closure, ban, confiscation: The Cairo International Book Fair repeats its usual song," Raseef22, February, 2022 last visited on 1 March, 2023 <https://bit.ly/41/CsKmk>

¹⁵ Saad Al-Qurashi, "Will the state quit the publishing industry?" Al-Manassa 25, January, 2023 last visited on 1 March, 2023 <https://bit.ly/3/kDCj3Y>

¹⁶ Attia Nabil, "The Cairo International Book Fair: How did the high prices of paper and ink contribute to the high prices of books?" BBC Arabic 31, January, 2023 last visited on 1 March, 2023 <https://bbc.in/3/kCiie1>