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### Egypt's Media: Endorsing Repression

Leslie T. Chang



Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images

Egypt's former army chief, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, during his campaign for president, Cairo, May 5, 2014

On January 24, 2015, an Egyptian political activist named Shaimaa al-Sabbagh was shot dead during a small protest march near Cairo's Tahrir Square. Sabbagh, who was thirty-one, and fellow members of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party had organized the march to commemorate those killed in the four-year-old Egyptian uprising, but it

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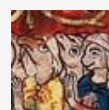
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was halted within minutes when security forces fired teargas and birdshot to disperse the few dozen participants. Videos taken by bystanders capture her last moments. Masked riot police take aim at marchers from across the street; several shots ring out; Sabbagh slumps in a colleague's arms, her gray sweater soaked in blood.

Sabbagh's death was stark evidence of what human rights groups and other international observers have long claimed: that the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has been using lethal force to stamp out any form of dissent. Since the army ousted President Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013, at least 2,500 civilians have been killed in clashes with security forces, according to estimates by human rights groups. Tens of thousands of Islamist and secular activists have been jailed. Reports of abuse and torture are widespread.

And yet on the evening Sabbagh died, almost all the major broadcasters reported on the killing without airing the video, though it was already circulating online. Ahmed Moussa, one of the country's most popular TV hosts, who appears on the privately-owned Sada El-Balad channel, claimed that activists themselves had engineered the murder of Sabbagh in order to frame the security forces. Youssef Al-Hosseini, a presenter on the private ONtv network, suggested that members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood were behind the killing. Magdy El-Gallad, editor-in-chief of the daily *Al-Watan*, said the incident proved the need for more plainclothes cops; another host named Lamis Al Hadidy lobbied for surveillance cameras in public places. Behind all these different theories there seemed to be a unified message: Don't blame the security forces.

Four years after the Egyptian people rose up against the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak, the media in the Arab world's largest country shows greater support for strong-arm government than it did under Mubarak's rule. Abroad, the Sisi administration is criticized for allowing more than a thousand people thought to be sympathetic to Morsi to be sentenced to death in mass trials; in Egypt, newspaper columnists say they should be executed without trial. Journalists occasionally criticize government performance on issues like education, health care, or religious policy. But as I discovered in interviews with leading talk show hosts and editors, they regard the defining feature of Sisi's administration—the use of state-sanctioned violence and politicized trials to maintain order and crush its opponents—with near-unanimous approval. “We’ve gone back more than twenty years,” Mona Nader, who monitors media coverage for the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, told me. “Now the media not only don’t shed light on problems, they also support the government no matter what happens.”

In this regard, they are in step with public opinion: a recent independent poll put the president's approval rating, after a year in office, at 90 percent. Following several years of political turmoil and economic uncertainty, many Egyptians have welcomed Sisi's rule as a return to stability. Attacks by militant groups in the Sinai Peninsula and elsewhere, including some affiliated with the Islamic State, that have killed hundreds, have bolstered support for a strong security state. The government has taken concrete steps to revive the struggling economy, including cutting fuel subsidies and expanding the Suez Canal, and growth is expected to improve this year—in contrast to what happened during Morsi's ineffective tenure, when policy initiatives were sometimes announced and canceled on the same day. Less noticed, however, are the media's



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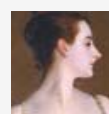
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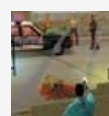
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energetic efforts to build consensus behind government security policies while ignoring their most brutal aspects.

It's not simply an issue of control from above. The majority of Egyptians get their news not from state TV but from privately-owned satellite channels. The shows on these networks boast slick production values and combative hosts whose chief talent is to rant at top volume for hours on end, and they attract millions of viewers.

Newspapers, many of which are also independently owned, offer slightly more diverse viewpoints but have limited reach; the circulation of the largest dailies, such as *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, in a country with a population of 83 million. Yet neither television nor the press offers sustained scrutiny of the regime's security policies. (More critical discussion of the government can be found on online-only news sites, but they serve only a small audience.)

The state certainly has ways to impose its will. It closed down Brotherhood-affiliated television stations immediately after Morsi's removal. The Committee to Protect Journalists currently counts at least twenty-two journalists in Egyptian jails, on charges such as "spreading chaos" and "inciting violence"; this is the highest figure since the group started keeping track. Some high-profile presenters, including satirist Bassem Youssef, have stopped broadcasting because they say the space for expression has narrowed. Liliane Daoud, who is regarded as one of the most vocal critics of government still working in television, told me that the authorities circulate a new list every couple of months of people banned from appearing on-air—lawyers, activists, and the like. Occasionally they intervene directly, calling in reporters for interrogation or confiscating an issue of a newspaper that has overstepped; recent examples include a report on electoral fraud and an interview with an intelligence official.

But the overall mood in the Egyptian media these days is less cowed than celebratory—that the Muslim Brotherhood has been vanquished, and that the army is firmly in charge. "Any leader should ask journalists to spread hope," Youssef Al-Hosseini, who hosts a nightly two-hour show on the private ONtv network, told me. "Nothing will be achieved through rumors and negativity." During the Mubarak era, many journalists argued that the Brotherhood deserved a place in political life. Now Al-Hosseini refuses to allow any member of the group on his show. "They are terrorists who have committed treason against my country," he told me. "So why should I cover them?"

Talk-show hosts on Egypt's largest television networks commonly refer to the Muslim Brotherhood as "fascists," "sons of dogs," "insects and fleas." Last October, the editors-in-chief of major newspapers issued a joint statement promising to support the state and to reject attempts to undermine the army, police, and judiciary; the main private TV channels made a similar pledge. This is not censorship, or even self-censorship. It is active support for repressive policies. "I support Sisi in everything. I'm biased," Gamal Enaiet, a veteran television and radio presenter, announced when we met.

I later asked him if he thought Sisi had made any mistakes. There was a pause. Finally, I had asked a hard question. "I wish he had tougher measures against the Muslim Brotherhood," he said.

"So that's his mistake?" I asked. "That he's too soft?"

"He's not too soft," Enaiet said quickly. "But he's not tough enough." He said that the



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Ministry of Electricity was riddled with supporters of the deposed president, then he cut himself off. “I’m not going to say any negative things. Now is not the right time to criticize him.”

“When is the right time?” I asked.

“When we start to live safely, when our projects get going, when we are not afraid to go here or there. When the United States stops defending the Muslim Brotherhood.”



*Eymen El-Gebaly/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

*Activist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh in a protest march, moments before she was shot, Cairo, January 24, 2015*

Though the media’s overwhelming support for repressive policies may seem anomalous, it reflects a shift in public attitudes in recent years. The 2011 revolution that removed Mubarak won broad support. But the turbulence of what came after—escalating political violence during the rule of a military council, followed by the polarizing era of the Muslim Brotherhood—moved popular sentiment back in favor of hardline government. By the time Sisi, as minister of defense, led the coup that removed Morsi in the summer of 2013, many Egyptians were calling for the army to step in and save the country from chaos; subsequent dispersals of pro-Brotherhood demonstrations, which led to the deaths of more than a thousand people, raised few objections among the public. Following ten months of a caretaker government installed by the military, Sisi was elected president in May 2014 with 96 percent of the vote.

It’s clear that Sisi views managing the media as a crucial way to maintain that popularity—and he has taken remarkable steps to shape how it portrays his government. In a 2013 meeting while he was still minister of defense, Sisi told an audience of military officers that the army should devote time and effort to gaining influence over the press; since taking office, he has met regularly with TV presenters and newspaper editors, about once a month on average. These gatherings are curious affairs. They are not like an American president’s briefings with the White House press corps, or the news conferences where leaders field questions about policy initiatives. Sisi’s meetings are not announced or televised, and the journalists who attend don’t write splashy stories afterward. And yet **segments** from several of these sessions were

broadcast and posted on YouTube, providing a revealing look at how the government regards the media.

In one such meeting on May 3 of last year, Sisi told a group of television hosts that they were responsible for promoting unity and raising morale; four days later he urged newspaper editors to stop sowing doubts among the population. “If you have any information on a subject, why not whisper it rather than exposing it?” he suggested, meaning that they should inform the government rather than the public. After raising energy prices last summer, he asked the media to talk about the need for sacrifice; in October 2014 he asked journalists to “take it easy on Egyptians” because they couldn’t bear more bad news—implying that reporters were choosing overly negative topics to write about. He informed the heads of state-owned newspapers last December that the country was engaged in an internal and external war. On a trip to the United Arab Emirates the following month, he reminded journalists that they must provide solutions rather than just point out problems.

One thing that comes across in these gatherings is the eagerness of journalists to do the state’s work. In the meeting in May of last year, a popular TV host named Wael Al-Ibrashi suggested that the group convene regularly under Sisi’s sponsorship and formulate a media code of ethics, because “we can’t have some people publish information that could be dangerous to the nation.” In the segments that have been released, reporters who attend the meetings occasionally raise challenging questions, such as the scope of media freedom that may be permitted under new laws. But the mood is genial and respectful, like students attending a seminar with a revered professor. Sisi adopts the same tone of gentle admonition with journalists whether addressing state-owned or private outlets. “He sees the media as a part of the ‘department of morale’ like they have in the army,” Hafez Al Mirazi, a longtime broadcast journalist and a professor at the American University in Cairo, told me.

When I met with talk-show hosts, I raised the topic of the Sisi meetings cautiously, in case I might be impugning someone’s integrity. Instead they bragged about attending them, like popular kids who have been to all the cool parties.

Gamal Enaiet: “I admire Sisi. I admire the dreams and ambitions he has for this country. He’s not a president—he’s a leader.”

Youssef Al-Hosseini: “When you meet him you can always trust him and believe him. He has this positivity.”

Ibrahim Eissa: “He makes you feel that he’s your best friend and that he’s following you daily. When you meet him, you’ll love him too.”

Two of the hosts also told me about one-on-one meetings they had had with the president at which they had suggested that Sisi amend a certain law, or pay attention to a particular issue—sounding less like journalists than informal government advisors who are grateful for their sovereign’s ear.

Though it has had authoritarian government for decades, Egypt has long possessed a robust and relatively independent press by the standards of the region. In the last years

of Mubarak's rule, private newspapers such as *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Dostour* exposed electoral fraud and housing corruption. The trend continued after the 2011 revolution, as private channels and newspapers proliferated. Criticism of the government was the order of the day; state television, which had supported Mubarak until right before his ouster, suddenly welcomed revolutionary activists as guests on its programs. But the press soon came under pressure during the rule of a military council that governed the country from February 2011 to June 2012. After Morsi was elected, he appointed political allies to run state media outlets and used Mubarak-era tactics of legal harassment and physical intimidation to try to keep journalists in line. Private media was increasingly critical of his authoritarian instincts and poor economic policies—which was less a reflection of improved journalistic standards than growing hatred of the Brotherhood because of their clannish behavior and inability to govern.

In the two years since the army removed Morsi after huge demonstrations against him, the mainstream media has lost most of the openness it briefly enjoyed. Especially during major political events, the press speaks in one voice; journalists who break ranks sometimes find themselves vilified—not by the government but by their own colleagues and the public. Liliane Daoud, who has criticized the government's jailing of activists on her ONtv program, told me that she is sometimes yelled at in the street for being a traitor and a Brotherhood supporter (though she had also been a strong critic of Morsi's government). Similarly, Ibrahim Eissa, who was known for his aggressive coverage of Mubarak before the revolution, was inundated with hate mail when he recently took the Sisi government to task on his talk show for having few concrete achievements. "In the days of Mubarak, I was considered a hero because I was in the opposition," he told me, "but Sisi is so popular that people get upset when you criticize him."

Following Shaimaa al-Sabbagh's killing, major broadcasters repeated a government statement that the police had fired only tear gas, not guns (though the widely circulated videos from the demonstration contradicted this). Some questioned why Sabbagh had joined a protest at all. Occasionally a presenter veered perilously close to implicating the police and then backtracked, as if searching for direction. "I can't claim the police did it—I don't know," said Amr Adeeb, a well-known presenter.

It's a big thing to accuse someone of murder. But I'm sure she was killed, and I'm sure she was killed by birdshot. There has to be an investigation of both sides. Someone may claim that the Muslim Brotherhood did this to agitate the situation. Let's say I agree. I'm ready for any possibility.

On February 1, following widespread international attention and an unusual front-page editorial in the state's flagship newspaper condemning the killing, Sisi finally provided the script. He called for an investigation into the death of Sabbagh, whom he called "my own daughter," but he added that an entire institution should not be blamed for the mistake of a single person. In June, a police officer was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for the shooting. Meanwhile, the country's security apparatus continues to show almost no tolerance for public protest, nor has there been any reform or training of police officers to limit the use of excessive force.

There's no guarantee that things will go on like this. Three years ago, Morsi won the

presidency with support from Muslim Brotherhood members but also many others who thought the largest opposition group under Mubarak deserved a shot at governance: “Give him a chance” was a common refrain. Many people now apply the same logic to Sisi, who acts like a leader under pressure to deliver results quickly. Egypt’s revolution taught the world that the power of a dictator can dissolve in an instant. But the lesson of the years since may be that, in a country threatened by chaos and violence, authoritarianism can hold a powerful appeal of its own. The question for Sisi has been how to make that appeal durable. For the time being, much of the answer lies with his extraordinary efforts to guide the national media.

*September 15, 2015, 4 p.m.*

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