

Media and Corruption

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Oct.11, 1999 Workshop on Middle East at the IACC conference
Durban, South Africa

I will speak in Arabic upon the request of Sion Assidon although I prefer using the English language when tackling subjects related to freedoms. However, because I learnt of the presence of representatives of Arab governments in this hall, I became convinced of the use of the Arabic language to get my message clear.

Without mentioning names, as Transparency International prefers, one of the correspondents of an Arabic satellite channel asked me, few days before my departure to South Africa, to help him in a TV programme on corruption in the Arab countries. My joy of the audacity of the anchor soon evaporated when he gave a name of a senior official he had hosted in a previous show. I was disappointed..the official he referred to is widely known for being corrupt or at least dishonest.

My enthusiasm to participate in the Durban conference was also gone...it seemed like all those who talk in the media and political circles on fighting corruption are themselves corrupt or condone corrupt practices. The issue of corruption has become a la mode and part and parcel of the political discourse that media means promote without verifying information or checking whether the government is serious in its pledges to fight corruption.

I do not mean to make the press assume all of the responsibility; it is infiltrated on one hand and suffers tremendously from government interference and social pressures on the other hand to the extent that all of what the journalist is concerned about is criticising fellow journalists.

The logical analysis of events since 1989 when the democratic experiment was launched in Jordan and until this day clearly shows how weak and fragile the argument of press freedom defenders is in the face of backward forces and how unripe its experience is in performing its role properly in monitoring the government's performance, revealing corruption and upgrading the level of human rights.

It is important to point here that the first case that the Jordanian press adopted right after the commencement of the democratic march is the nine famous corruption cases where four former ministers were involved. It was the first time

in the history of the press that newspapers published information and details about the corruption of public personalities and their involvement in shaking the confidence in the national economy and the devaluation of the Jordanian Dinar in the late 1980's.

But this great achievement had its ramifications. The conservative, backward forces, which had an interest in maintaining the status quo, got note of the pivotal role that the press can play in revealing corruption related cases and moved swiftly to counter any further progress. The successive attacks they launched in recent years against press freedoms succeeded in muzzling the press- with the society's blessings.

As soon as the private press appeared following the promulgation of the 1993 press law, the attacks and pressures on press freedoms in the name of morals and ethics started. The private press, which found in the disclosure of corruption cases to the public a juicy product for circulation, were under heavy fire and were accused of encroaching on the social ethics and morals.

The government filed tens of lawsuits on the private press and prosecuted them for news that are related to "morals" when they publish articles that reveal the involvement of officials in corrupt practices such as misuse of public post, appointment of relatives and suspicious deals as well as violation of laws and the constitution. Although verdicts in most of the cases filed against the press ended in acquitting journalists, the journalists were often summoned to court and humiliated by prior-trial detentions. In recent days, the backward forces used also another weapon that was successful: enraging journalists against their fellow journalists. Attacks on the press started coming from within the journalistic milieu and pressures on journalists not to tackle press freedom related issues emanated from fellow journalists warning them against possible infringement of moral and ethical standards. The press as a whole lost credibility and respect and circulation of newspapers dropped tremendously.

Not only that, but less than four years after the promulgation of the first law that gives the right to publish, the government imposed a new temporary law without submitting it to parliament. The law cancelled the right to get a license and the right to publish that were guaranteed in the 1993 law. The law increased penalties prompting publications to censor even the simplest of news. Most importantly is that the law of 1997 banned newspapers from covering court cases (some of which dealt with corruption related stories) unless authorised.

This law led to the closure of 13 weekly newspapers in September 1998 and deprived tens of journalists and workers from their means of living. Although the High Court of Justice cancelled the law, the regime openly criticised the

court's ruling and the government came with a new law for 1998 that is considered even worse than the 1997 one.

Two months ago, the same parliament that voted on the 1998 law voted on a new 1999 law (that is considered the fourth press law in six years). Although the most recent law cancelled penalties and harsh conditions on licensing publication, press freedoms advocates failed in their venture- despite the optimistic atmosphere and the regime's desire to enhance freedoms- press freedom defenders failed to introduce any provision that reinforces press freedoms or prohibits authorities from detaining journalists in press related cases.

This failure is due to several reasons:

- The regime's historic alliance with conservative forces which made out of the word 'freedom' a term with negative connotations. Freedom in Arabic became in contradiction with the society's ethics, traditions and morals.
- The corruption of the journalists themselves. The successive governments succeeded in luring journalists with rewards either in the shape of a government post, gifts, custom-free cars or by simply helping them get promoted in their newspapers.
- The weakness of the arguments in favour of press freedoms. Most defenders of press freedoms have not yet reached a compromise between their beliefs in basic principles of human rights and their attachment to social traditions.
- The spread of corrupt practices within the press establishments themselves where most of the newspapers depend on nepotism and favouritism as a principle to appoint and sack employees.

Most important of all is the absence of real support from civil society institutions or from developed countries that demand third world countries to change their legislation to go hand in hand with transparency. Except for the annual reports, the US and the European countries have not adopted any measure nor were they critical of Jordan's policies when it promulgated the successive press laws.