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<http://www.rsf.org/egypt-is-the-supreme-council-a-new-10-09-2011,40962.html>

Middle East & North Africa - Egypt

Untouchable army

## Is the Supreme Council a new predator of press freedom?

10 September 2011

Reporters Without Borders is very disturbed by information minister Osama Heikal's 7 September decision, after consulting with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, to temporarily freeze the granting of satellite TV licences to recent applicants without saying how long the freeze will last.

Heikal also threatened other TV stations, accusing them of indiscipline and saying he was asking the relevant agency to *"take legal measures against satellite TV stations that jeopardize stability and security."* He said the measures were needed to restore order to the *"increasingly chaotic media scene"* and because of *"concerns over incitement to violence."*

His announcement and comments amount to a declaration of war on the broadcast media and, in particular, independent satellite TV stations that dare to criticize the Supreme Council's policies. It is very disturbing that the council regards news media as sources of "harm to the country's security and stability." It is a return to the past, to the era of the ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak.

Since taking over after Mubarak's removal, the Supreme Council has repeatedly taken decisions that negatively affect media freedom in Egypt, endangering something that Egyptians fought hard for during their 18-day uprising.

In one of the latest retrograde developments, a fine of 20,000 pounds (2,500 euros) that had been imposed on **Kareem Reda**, who writes the blog [Sarkha](#), was upheld on appeal on 7 September.

The blogger was fined as a result of a suit by Petrograde, a natural gas company, that accused him of defaming and insulting the company, damaging its interests and trying to harm the national economy because he launched a page on [Facebook](#) calling on people to boycott its services and not pay their gas bills as long as it continued to export gas to Israel at below-market prices.

The armed forces were already a taboo subject in Egypt before the revolution, but the taboo has been reinforced since the Supreme Council's creation the day after Mubarak's departure. Many journalists and bloggers who have tried to denounce abuses by members of the army or military police during the pro-democracy uprising are being prosecuted before military courts. The list of cases keeps getting longer.

The blogger and conscientious objector **Maikel Nabil Sanad**, for example, was sentenced to three years in prison on 10 April for posting a report on his blog disputing the apparent neutrality of the armed forces during the January and February demonstrations and accusing them of arresting and torturing protesters. He was convicted of insulting the armed forces, spreading false information and disturbing public order.

The sentence turned him into Egypt's first prisoner of conscience since the revolution. He began a hunger strike in Cairo's Al-Marg prison on 23 August despite suffering from heart problems. He subsequently stopped drinking as well, with the result that he had to be rushed to the prison infirmary. He insists that he will resume the [hunger strike](#) regardless of the outcome.

The blogger **Botheina Kamel** was summoned by a military court for interrogation on 15 May after she criticized the armed forces in a programme on *Nile TV*.

The blogger **Hossam Al-Hamalawy** and journalists **Rim Magued** and **Nabil Sharaf Al-Din** were interrogated on 31 May for nearly three hours about their appearances on the station ON-TV. Speaking on Magued's programme on 26 May, Al-Hamalawy accused military police of violating human rights. The next day, Al-Din talked about the chances of an alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood and the army as part of a political transition.

**Rasha Azab**, a reporter for the newspaper *Al-Fajr*, and **Adel Hammuda**, its editor, were interrogated by a military prosecutor on 19 June and were told they are to be tried because an article Azab wrote for *Al-Fajr's* 12 June issue. Azab is facing a possible jail sentence for publishing "false information liable to disturb public security" while Hammuda is facing a possible fine for alleged negligence in his role as editor.

The article was about a meeting between Cairo military commander Gen. Hassan Al-Ruwaini, a member of the Supreme Council, and representatives of a group called "No military trials for civilians" about the torture of demonstrators by civilian police. It quoted some of Gen. Al-Ruwaini's comments including the apology he reportedly gave to a woman demonstrator attending the meeting. Gen. Al-Ruwaini denied making the comments attributed to him.

**Dina Abd-Al Rahman** was fired as a presenter of the *Dream TV* programme *Sabah Dream* on 25 July after she got into an argument with a former air force officer during a live broadcast.

The Supreme Council decided on 14 August to prosecute the blogger **Asmaa Mahfouz** on charges of inciting violence, disturbing public order and spreading false information in messages she posted on Facebook and Twitter. The ensuing outcry was such that it changed its mind a few days later. Although the trial of Mubarak began at the start of August, the military are perpetuating his regime's methods of censorship and intimidation, announcing that there would be "no tolerance of insults" directed at the armed forces.

**Hassan Bahgat**, 70, a former army officer who used to head *ABC's* Cairo bureau, was sentenced to six months in prison by a military court on 17 August on a charge of "chanting anti-army slogans liable to defame the armed forces" in Tahrir Square at 1 a.m. on 6 August. The sentence was suspended but it could be activated at any time.

**Imad Bazzi** ([@TrellaLB](#)), a Lebanese blogger who has been writing the [Trella.org](#) blog since 1998 and is executive director of CyberACT, was denied entry at Cairo international airport on 5 September. He said he was questioned about his online activism by three plain-clothes men at the airport before being put on the first plane back to Beirut.

A smear campaign has meanwhile been launched in the government media against Egyptian NGOs that get funding from the United States. It is targeting only those that criticize the Supreme Council and poses a threat to many national human rights organizations.

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