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Back to the future for Egypt's state media



“The army and people, one hand!” was the rallying cry of jubilant masses of Egyptians in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on the night Hosni Mubarak fell, and again last Wednesday, when the army overthrew elected President Mohamed Mursi.

It resonates loud and clear in state media that have quickly gone “on message,” as they had been for 16 tumultuous months of military rule following the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak.

The presence of Republican Guards in the studios of state broadcasting headquarters on Wednesday, the day the army staged its takeover, was an early sign that state media would reprise their traditional role as loyal servants of a military-backed administration.

Troops are still present in the building four days later.

Within hours of commander-in-chief General Abdel Fattahal-Sisi broadcasting the announcement that Mursi had been removed and the constitution suspended, authorities shut down four private television stations controlled by Islamists.

They included the Muslim Brotherhood-owned Egypt 25.

Security forces arrested several dozen employees of the stations. Among those raided was Qatar-based Al Jazeera’s Egyptian news channel, which military sources accused of broadcasting “incitement.” It remained on air.

Even before the takeover, Nile TV, one of two state channels, had begun airing video montages of triumphant soldiers performing their duties to the strains of patriotic music.

Those images were layered with others invoking national pride: the pyramids; Egypt's "victory" in crossing the Suez Canal in the 1973 war with Israel; and flag-waving masses thronging Cairo's Tahrir Square in the uprising against Mubarak.

The day after Mursi's removal, Nile TV and state radio suddenly hosted studio guests who railed against the Brotherhood as "enemies of the people" and cast Islamist supporters of the elected president as instigators of violence.

History of tight control

Editors of state-owned newspapers are also adjusting to the new disposition for fear of their jobs.

"Every editor-in-chief at national newspapers is treading water, waiting for the new regime and its policies to crystallize and taking into account that the armed forces have a stance to be reckoned with," Attiya Eissawi, managing editor at state-run Al-Ahram told Reuters.

"Many of them expect to be replaced if their new editorial policies are not to the satisfaction of the new regime."

Some 52 senior executives and editors at Al-Ahram, including the chairman of the company, which is also a publisher and houses a policy think-tank, have been axed since the fall of Mubarak and the election of Mursi, according to staff.

Although journalists from a state-run TV station and a state-run newspaper said they had not yet received direct orders from the military since it removed Mursi, activists say such a move would be consistent with the army's policies towards the media under previous governments.

"The military has always tightly controlled state media coverage of anything related to them, whether positive or negative," said Heba Morayef, Egypt director at Human Rights Watch. "A return to that is not too difficult."

Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood made campaign promises to reform laws and practices governing state media.

But rights activists and journalists say the toppled leader tried to use government-owned channels and papers to his own advantage as his predecessors had done, only less successfully.

Censorship efforts and soft pressure on editors by the Mursi administration faced resistance inside Maspero, the huge state broadcasting center overlooking the Nile river.

In May, radio journalists stopped work in protest when the top editor of state radio was transferred to a small station covering youth affairs and sports, after the minister deemed a Radio Misr broadcast insulting to the president.

As the political winds turned against Mursi, the facade of loyalty among the state newspapers began to crack.

Al-Akhbar, one of the biggest, accused the Brotherhood of meddling and incompetence in a front-page editorial by the editor-in-chief the week before the mass anti-Mursi protests that gave popular support for the army's action.

A journalist at al-Ahram told Reuters that phone calls from the military and the security services regarding news coverage had been the norm before Mubarak's fall.

"This time, they don't need to," the journalist said, citing huge popular support for the military's toppling of Mursi.

'Only one picture'

Since the Islamist channels were silenced, coverage of large protests by Mursi supporters against his removal have been scarce on state TV and at times completely absent on private satellite channels that fiercely opposed the Brotherhood.

Al Jazeera's Egyptian station, Mubasher Misr, has faced obstruction by officials and activists who accused it of bias towards the Muslim Brotherhood.

"We have always tried to cover different events happening around the country, and our split-screen coverage shows this," said Karim El-Assiuti, denying the charge of partiality.

"Unfortunately, the Egyptian media is only presenting one picture of what's happening now. It's the picture of those who want the military government," said Abdel Aziz Mujaahed, one of 29 Mubasher Misr staff members, including the station's general manager, who were arrested on Wednesday.

A prosecutor ordered their release on Friday, but they were told the case against them was ongoing, though they have not been formally charged, Mujaahed said.

Gehad El-Haddad, a Brotherhood spokesman described Egyptian journalists as "fiction writers." In a telephone interview from the pro-Mursi sit-in, he said Egyptian media were not reporting a crackdown that had killed dozens of people since the takeover.

The Muslim Brotherhood's political arm said the state-owned printing press refused to print its newspaper - Freedom and Justice - for two days after Mursi's removal, but the paper was back on some newsstands on Saturday.

A military source acknowledged restricting publication because the paper planned to splash an article, which he said was untrue, alleging that the army was split and a major unit remained loyal to Mursi.

The tone of state media since the army takeover seems to mirror the opinion of the millions of Egyptians who took to the streets last weekend to demand that Mursi leave power.

"Under the Brotherhood, people didn't watch state television. Now it has come back to the people. Since the June 30 revolution, it is reflecting the reality of the Egyptian street," said Ahmed Sherif, 59, who works for a tourism company.

"State TV reflected politics that did not match those of the people," agreed Mohamed Said, 48, a barber, sitting outside his shop reading Al-Ahram.