

Thursday, 4 July 2013

Press eject: Did 'harsh' Egyptian media help topple Mursi?



Al Arabiya, Matt J. Duffy

Following the dramatic overthrow of Mohammad Mursi, some experts question whether the Egyptian newsmedia treated him fairly –or whether biased coverage contributed to his ousting as president.

Most observers agree that Mursi received vicious coverage from some media outlets in Egypt.

Dr. Sahar Khamis, a communications professor at the University of Maryland, said she's no Mursi supporter and noted he had "many shortcomings."

"But, I think he's not been treated fairly," she said. "Many Egyptian media outlets have treated him too harshly."

She said that anti-Mursi diatribes on several political talk shows such as those on ONtv or CBC essentially mobilized the June 30 protests.

Khamis said it was "ironic" that many news shows criticized Mursi as a dictator like ousted President Hosni Mubarak. She said that many statements on news programs about Mursi would have never been tolerated under Mubarak.

But other observers noted that any anti-Mursi media tirades merely balanced the vitriol from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Dr. Adel Iskandar, a Georgetown professor and author of "Egypt in Flux," said no fair media exists in Egypt.

"Partisanship prevails across the spectrum of state and private media," Iskandar said.

He said that news programs on Egyptian state television and the Muslim Brotherhood channels offered their own warped perspectives. At the same time anti-government rhetoric from private media channels are “garnering huge audiences and galvanizing the public.”

Over the past few days, Iskandar said, the pro-Mursi media have turned toward anti-sectarian messages to help ally support.

Iskandar made clear that he saw incitement on both sides. For instance, on the anti-Mursi side, some media outlets claimed the president is no longer legitimate so no one “should listen to his barking.”

Meanwhile, on the pro-Muslim Brotherhood side, some media outlets would call opposition members “pagans, Christians, rapists (or) terrorists.”

Media outlets such as CBC, Tahrir, ONtv and El-Balad are viewed as being anti-Mursi. At least three pro-Muslim Brotherhood stations - Misr 25, al-Naas and al-Hafez TV - were reportedly suspended after the military decision to remove Mursi from power.

Dr. Mohamad Elmasry, a professor of journalism at the American University of Cairo, said many press outlets –including independent newspapers Al-Yawm Al-Saba’, Al-Fagr, and Al-Dostoor –were particularly unforgiving of Mursi. He noted that pro-Mubarak media tycoons owned these outlets, as well television channels such as Dream, An-Nahar, ONtv, Tahrir, and CBC.

“In spite of claims of detachment, objectivity, and balance [these independent outlets] have taken on a decidedly anti-Mursi, anti-Muslim Brotherhood tone,” Elmasry said. “Frequently, there is no attempt at balance whatsoever.”

He said that some channels would fill news talk-shows with anti-Mursi, anti-Muslim Brotherhood guests who “gather for what appears to be a venting session.”

Elmasry said that the government-owned stations predictably offered reports aligned with government policies. However, he said, the coverage of Mursi was less personal than under Mubarak with less focus on the creation of a cult of personality.

Iskandar said the state media are trying to “strike a balance between the polarization of pro- and anti-Mursi camps.”

He said that some anchors had recently quit, chafing at the directions from a Muslim Brotherhood Minister of Information.

Lapses of objectivity are not new in the Egyptian media. The country did, after all, live under an authoritarian media system for 60 years. With no media freedoms, professional ethics often fell by the wayside. In one famous example, a state newspaper in 2010 Photoshopped a picture of President Hosni Mubarak to move him ahead of President Barack Obama.

Khamis said that much of the Egyptian media operates with the same lack of ethics and professionalism.

"There are serious problems facing Egyptian media," Khamis said. "We have a high level of polarization and fragmentation. We have an attitude that says, 'If you're not with me, then you're against me'."

She said that the solidarity—between Muslim, Christian, men, women, rich, poor— seen during the first revolution is now gone.

Khamis said that the media has helped create this polarization. She said these polarizing news outlets—on both sides—take actions way beyond the types of partisan news outlets seen, for instance, in the United States between Fox News and MSNBC.

Anti-Mursi programs such as those seen on ONtv use language that calls people who disagree with them "traitors" or "not legitimate Egyptians." Meanwhile, on the religious channels, the anchors use "shocking language" to describe their opponents. Khamis said she was surprised since the religious shows were "supposed to be nicer."

But certainly some of Mursi's woes can't just be blamed on unfavorable media coverage.

Elmasry said the presidency's media relations efforts were quite "subpar and naïve."

The former president offered infrequent press conferences, delayed statements for too long on important matters, and gave long public addresses that tended to ramble.

Elmasry also chided the government's decision to press "insulting the president" charges against journalists, bloggers, and high-profile media personalities such as satirist Dr. Bassem Youssef.

These moves hurt Mursi both among secular liberals and the international community.

"To many, these charges have made President Mursi appear petty and lacking in confidence," he said.