

Egypt: New media regulations ahead of elections

CAIRO: According to the International Press Institute (IPI), Egyptian authorities have introduced a host of new regulations ahead of parliamentary elections, to be held on 29 November 2010, in an apparent attempt to clamp down on independent media.



Eissa dismissal

The move comes less than three weeks after Ibrahim Eissa, editor-in-chief and founder of the private daily *Al-Dustour*, and a critic of the government, was dismissed after the newspaper was bought out by new owners.

Eissa was apparently fired for planning to publish an article by opposition leader, and would-be presidential candidate, Mohamed ElBaradei. The owners had publicly promised ahead of the sale not to interfere in the newspaper's editorial line.

Speaking to *Foreign Policy* magazine, Eissa said: "They bought the newspaper for US\$4 million, just to stop me from writing," and called the action by the new owners the latest attempt to censor controversial and anti-government content from the newspaper.

NTRA restrictions

On Monday, 11 October, Egypt's National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) imposed new restrictions on text messages news services and mobile phone companies. Also according to the new guidelines, the NTRA would take 3% of companies' SMS-generated revenue in order to pay for text message "controllers" whose job would be to monitor and control text messages sent by opposition political groups, leading Egyptian daily *Al-Masri al-Youm* reported.

The latest move on Thursday, 14 October saw NTRA impose further restrictions on private broadcasters. The new regulations have stopped satellite broadcasters from offering live feeds to private TV channels. Channels with cancelled permits must now broadcast directly via studios affiliated with the state-run Media Production City.

Regulating independent media

According to Reuters, state media officials said the decision to cancel the feed permits was part of a broader attempt to better regulate independent media and was not a curb on free speech. Osama el-Sheikh, director of Egypt's state radio and TV union, denied the latest changes would hamper election reporting.

"These are measures to regulate the plethora of companies that set up SNG (satellite news gathering) units to offer live broadcast feeds to channels. Many of these companies have neither permits nor licenses," Sheikh told Reuters. He said any channel wishing to rent SNG units for live broadcast could do so through state television.

"This appears to be an attempt by the authorities to hamper anti-government reporting ahead of and during the November elections," said IPI press freedom manager Anthony Mills. "If elections are to be judged free and fair, the media must be able to report on them independently. The Egyptian people have a right to be informed about matters that are clearly of public interest."

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