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Subject: Egypt's Military Censors Critics as It Faces More Scrutiny (NYT)

CAIRO (NYT) — Even the mildest criticism of the Egyptian military was too much for Mahmoud Saad, a television host on the newly founded, independent Tahrir television network.

“Any institution of the country that takes taxes from us should be open to question,” Hossam el-Hamalawy, a blogger, said in a telephone interview with Mr. Saad.

“No, no, no,” Mr. Saad interrupted. “I will not allow you to say those things on this network.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hossam,” he declared, hanging up.

The next day Mr. Hamalawy and two other liberal television journalists, but not Mr. Saad, were summoned to a military headquarters for questioning about their remarks.

The Egyptian military — facing public criticism for torturing demonstrators and admitting that it forced some female detainees to undergo “virginity tests” — is pressing the Egyptian news media to censor harsh criticism of it and protect its image. The military’s intervention concerns some human rights advocates who say they are worried that such efforts could make it harder for politicians to scrutinize the military and could possibly undermine attempts to bring it under civilian control or investigate charges of corruption.

“Nobody believes corruption was limited to the civilian government,” said a prominent liberal politician, speaking on the condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal by the military.

In recent weeks military authorities have sent letters warning news organizations to review any discussion of the military before publication or broadcast. A military court has also sentenced a blogger to three years in prison for what it called persistent attacks, and it has charged an outspoken liberal presidential candidate with libeling a general and insulting the military. And military authorities have summoned many journalists and bloggers to headquarters for questioning about their reports and sources.

In a recent interview, a military official, demanding anonymity in keeping with military protocol, insisted that the military accepted the public’s right to criticize while it was playing the political role as Egypt’s interim ruler. But he said the military also sought to balance “freedom of expression” against “respect for the institution,” drawing the distinction between criticizing individuals and insulting either those people or their institution.

“If someone presents proof that any officer is corrupt, then the officer would be subject to the law; if he doesn’t present any evidence then the journalist would be subject to the law,” he explained. “If I call you a dictator, you can take that as an insult.”

In short, he added, “criticize the military, but be sure of what you are saying.”

For his part, Mr. Hamalawy said the military’s request to question him was intended as intimidation; he said he was asked about evidence related to the torture of demonstrators that had already been made public in legal complaints, as well as online.

Still, he said, “when the military says ‘please show up’ it is kind of like an order, especially when they are ruling the country.”

His lawyer, Ragia Omran, said: “It is the high counsel of the armed forces saying, ‘We are here, we know what you are doing, Big Brother is watching.’ ”

Egyptian journalists, speaking on the condition of anonymity to avoid reprisal, said the distinction between criticism and insult was hard to pinpoint, especially under the threat of military justice. Several Egyptian journalists declined to comment or did not return phone calls on the subject.

“This is a sensitive topic,” said Osama Heikal, editor in chief of Al Wafd, a liberal paper. “One of my colleagues is currently being investigated regarding an article he wrote, so I don’t feel comfortable discussing this, considering the circumstances.” But he added: “Part of the freedom we won in the revolution is the freedom of speech, and by ruling the country the military is now in the political square, so we should be able to hold them accountable.”

Human rights advocates say accounts of military abuses — notably after soldiers broke up a nighttime protest in Tahrir Square in early March — have largely been underreported in the Egyptian news media even as they have circulated widely on the Internet, in foreign media and in reports of human rights groups. This week an unidentified military official speaking on CNN acknowledged and defended a military decision that night to force some women detainees to undergo “virginity tests” by doctors.

“Testing” the women, the officer argued, was intended to ensure against subsequent charges of sexual abuse by soldiers.

Some who said they were victims of military abuse contended that Egypt’s media were afraid to let them tell their stories.

“I appeared on many networks,” said Rami Essam, a musician who gained popularity for performances during the revolution and has shown journalists evidence of his own torture. Egyptian television journalists “all pre-warned me not to do any ‘dirty tricks’ and say anything critical of the military,” he said. “They told me that if I am to bring up my torture case that the show can be cut short and the network can be shut down. Mubarak left, but it’s the same people, the same thing.”

Last week Internet activists turned to Twitter to stage a day of criticism of the military to protest its intimidation of the media. None were arrested, the military spokesman said.

In some respects, the advent of online networks like Facebook and Twitter no longer makes such censorship as effective as it was in the days when the government controlled the primary sources of news. But most of the military’s interventions are directed at Egypt’s evening talk shows on the independent cable networks, which for years had pushed the boundaries of speech restrictions under President Hosni Mubarak. In a country where

illiteracy runs as high as a third of the population, the programs have become the most potent forum for shaping public opinion.

Michael Nabil, a blogger sentenced to three years in prison, had criticized the army for years and, unlike most bloggers here, also praised Israel. His crime was equating the military with Mr. Mubarak, its former boss, the military spokesman said.

Bothaina Kamel, a liberal gadfly and former talk show host who is now the first Egyptian woman to become a presidential candidate, had hammered the military for imposing the "virginity tests," among other things. In an interview, she said she was called in to meet with a general; she then criticized him online and in interviews, prompting the military authorities to call her back in for six hours of interrogation before she was charged.

The military spokesman noted that she remained free, however. When the military calls in journalists, he said, "it is just a friendly chat, not an order."

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