

Report: The American University in Cairo's *Tahrir Dialogue: Media Changes in Tunisia after the Revolution* featuring Kamel Labidi

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In the months after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, many had high hopes that media reform and the strengthening of press freedoms would follow. Egypt went on to witness an unregulated growth of independent and private channels and newspapers, but little was done to curb the continuing control of the state and private media owners. Tunisia as well saw a period of chaos in the media sector, but in February 2011 the interim government took an important step by establishing a national committee tasked with drafting new press laws. Appointed to head the commission was the widely respected veteran journalist and human rights activist Kamel Labidi. He had returned from self-exile to Tunisia after the ouster of Ben Ali.

When the American University in Cairo launched its Tahrir Dialogues on media reform, Labidi was the obvious person to invite. What in the Tunisian experience could be applied to Egypt's struggle to initiate a coherent debate about regulating and reforming its media sector and institutionalizing press freedoms? On May 9, Labidi spoke to a full audience at AUC's Oriental Hall about his work leading the National Authority for the Reform of Media and Communication (INRIC). He was optimistic, but cautiously so, having only recently submitted the commission's final recommendations to the newly elected Islamist-led government.

After an introduction by the Hafez Al Mirazi, Director of the Kamal Adham Center for Television and Digital Journalism, Labidi began by describing the media landscape in Tunisia following the departure of Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. On January 17, the interim government abolished the hated Ministry of Information and Telecommunication. In the period that followed, all bodies regulating media ceased to function, leading to a period of chaos and "media drift" in both the print and broadcast sector. Rumors and defamation were commonplace. Labidi noted that the chaos reached its peak when a television station interviewed a citizen who called for the prosecution of Rachid Ghannouchi, the founder of the Islamist Ennahda Movement, who had just returned from 22 years of exile in London. In early February 2011, the interim government established INRIC and appointed Kamel Labidi as its head. Its formation was conditioned on the non-return of the Ministry of Information and Telecommunication.

The commission had four main tasks: to evaluate the current media landscape, to develop proposals to improve media performance, to propose a model for restructuring print and broadcast media, and finally, to submit the proposals to the responsible government entities whereupon a public debate would be held regarding the proposed reforms.

Labidi spoke in detail about INRIC's initial evaluation of the media sector. In an effort to make the evaluation process pluralistic and representative, he invited working journalists from the public and private media sectors, lawyers, media professors, bloggers and a group of volunteers to participate. In addition, the committee invited a variety of speakers to respond to the national body's proposals in a series of workshops, roundtable discussions, and seminars. The commission relied heavily on field visits to survey the concerns of journalists and employees working at state-owned news agencies, such as TAP (Agence Tunis Afrique Presse) and regional radio stations, such as those in Sfax, Monastir and El Kef.

In order to study existing models of media restructuring, Labidi invited experts from abroad, including Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom, to participate in workshops and seminars. Also included were experts from Eastern European countries whose transition from communism to liberal systems provided particularly relevant examples of media law reform, mechanisms for monitoring the media during elections and for establishing regulatory bodies.

After the evaluation process, INRIC made a series of not unsurprising conclusions about the existing media environment in Tunisia, namely that there existed no legal framework to guarantee media independence and the protection of journalists; that high levels of censorship and a lack of professional standards were leading to poor journalistic performance; that opportunities to practice free and independent journalism were being wasted, and perhaps most damning, that the continued presence of figures appointed by Ben Ali in sensitive decision-making positions in the government was undermining reform efforts.

Among the most important recommendations that INRIC made was that the new constitution, to be written by the newly elected government, would protect the right of freedom of expression and the right to access information in accordance with international codes. INRIC also called for reform of the administrative and human resources processes such that hiring would be based on professional qualifications rather than the favoritism and nepotism rampant in the system under Ben Ali. Such changes in the media management structure, Labidi said, would lead to a flatter structure, allowing employees to experience a greater degree of engagement in strategy and decision-making processes. Labidi warned that any meaningful change would be difficult and slow given that decision making in the management structure of both print and the broadcast media in Tunisia remains centralized in the hands of a government-appointed chairperson who acts according to formal rules and hierarchies.

Other INRIC proposals included the establishment of editorial boards for all print media outlets. Labidi described how the commission had found that one of the biggest obstacles to an independent media was the simple absence of a culture of daily editorial board meetings in which news is assessed and the day's agenda is set. Reflecting the importance of social media in Tunisia's revolution, the commission also called for the protection in the constitution of all online journalists, including bloggers, in accordance with international codes.

Finally, although the commission found that a majority of citizens supported the restructuring of the media, Labidi spoke about an overall vagueness on the part of government authorities and a lack of will from political elements to tackle media reform.

The talk was followed by comments from the audience, including Karim Yehia, a veteran journalist from Al Ahram newspaper and Mohamed Nasr, a well known media expert, both of whom laid out their criticisms of Egypt's media landscape 13 months after the removal of Mubarak.

Yehia, referring to his experience at Egypt's largest government-owned daily newspaper, called for laws protecting freedom of expression, access to information and for a ban on the pretrial detention of journalists. He hoped that Egypt would establish a committee similar to INRIC because no substantive changes had yet taken place at Egyptian national newspapers after the fall of Mubarak. Yehia also called for a law that would prohibit monopolies held by Egyptian private media which currently operate free of any competition laws regulating their behavior.

Mohamed Nasr was also critical of the Egyptian private media scene. The unregulated market and absence of laws governing media ownership—especially regarding the identity of owners—has led to a chaotic situation and has allowed powerful media owners to advance individual and self-serving agendas, all of which erode freedom of expression and the expression of alternative points of view.

As the May 9 session wound up, it was clear from Labidi's account that while the media in Egypt and Tunisia suffered from similar challenges, Tunisia had made a critical step forward in diagnosing the problems and advancing the likelihood of reform with the formation of INRIC. Many left the session believing that Labidi had presented an inspiring, if not completely replicable, model for Egypt to attempt its own media restructuring process.

Postscript: Two months after his address at AUC, on July 4, Labidi announced his resignation and the disbanding of the commission. He said at a press conference “Now that it has been two months since we submitted our general report to the three presidents (President of the Republic, Moncef Marzouki, Prime Minister Hamdi Jebali, and President of the National Constituent Assembly, Mustapha Ben Jaafar), members of the NCA (National Constitutional Assembly), to our colleagues, and civil society components, we cannot continue serving as decor, especially with the absence of communication with the public authorities.” He blamed the Ennahda-led government for reverting to “censorship and disinformation,” the same practices of the old regime. He also cited the government's refusal to acknowledge two decrees passed by the interim government—laws 115 and 116—that ensured respectively the protection of all journalists and the establishment of a regulatory framework for audio-visual media. He pointed to the fact that the government had already violated article 9 of law 116 (which gave INRIC the right to comment on the appointment of heads of radio and television broadcasting entities) with recent appointments of government supporters to key leadership positions. Particularly notable

was Labidi's expressed surprise that even liberal parties had shown reluctance to fight for media freedoms.

Looking back at his experience in a later conversation, Labidi said that in spite of signs of a lack of political will, he had been genuinely surprised by the government's behavior because in addition to the Islamist Ennahda party, the ruling coalition includes two secular parties whose leaders were well-known activists who had long fought for human rights and freedom of expression. Labidi kept returning to the absence of any real political will for reform. It had become increasingly clear to him as the commission finished its work that neither the Ennahda Party nor the National Constituent Assembly were committed to supporting INRIC's mission, leaving grave questions about Tunisia's transition to democracy. Indeed, Labidi feels that independent media is witnessing the highest level of threat since the revolution.

Freedom in Tunisia, he said, will not be granted easily, but will have to be fought for. He called on citizens, journalists and civil society organizations to work together in demanding freedom of expression and opinion. He has little doubt that, like the democratically elected Tunisian government, Egypt's new government led by President Mohamed Morsi will try to maintain power over the media, rather than learning from the experiences of countries such as Poland, Argentina, and South Africa.

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