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**The Parliament Press in Egypt 2002-2003:  
A Mechanism for Increasing Awareness  
of the Legislative Institution**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion not only through raising public awareness, but also through providing information on parliamentary life. While mass media can play an important role in enhancing public opinion, it can also falsify consciousness, reinforce particular negative images and stereotypes of individuals or groups, or keep information out of the reach of public opinion. Thus, it is important to monitor how mass media deal with news coverage, particularly news on parliamentary activities, the subject of this study.

We assert here that media coverage is one of the important tools of the information system that plays a significant role in breaking the walls of isolation between politics and citizens and between them and Parliament, which is the main political institution where political decisions are shaped in countries that seek to establish democratic systems.

The current study raises a number of questions that seek to give depth to the debate on the role of the parliamentary press:

- How can we evaluate the performance of parliamentary media in Egypt today? What are the horizons of developing its role and enhancing its performance in the future?
- Which factors determine the effectiveness of parliamentary media?
- What is the role of parliamentary media in enhancing the role of MPs? How do MPs benefit from parliamentary media and what are the prospects of maximizing these benefits in the future?

The analysis in this paper focused on a period from 2000 to 2003. This period includes a national parliamentary election round in 2000. This election has seen some new phenomena which have left their mark on parliamentary life thereafter (see annex 1).

## **2. HOW TO DEFINE PARLIAMENTARY MEDIA**

Reporting on parliament manifests itself in two stages of the political life of a polity. The first stage is that of electoral campaigns, during which media play an important role in

broadcasting candidates' programs. If the campaigns are void of well-defined programs, this greatly undermines the role of media, which are supposed to convey the pulse of the street to the candidate. Candidates don't usually have well defined programs and tend to rely on their popular base and social solidarity and not on programs. In this context, the role of parliamentary media during the electoral campaign is limited and they are not fully able to link candidates' programs to the electorate. The second stage is that of parliamentary sessions. At that stage, parliamentary media comprises specialized reporting on the workings of parliament while it is in session.

Media are not homogenous in presenting parliamentary activities. We find, for example, that the press fares better than the television and other mass media in covering parliamentary events. However, when it comes to prevalence, television is on top of all other media including the press. This is, however, problematic because TV reporting often has to remain entertaining, and this entertainment dimension is never sacrificed in favor of larger, deeper or longer coverage of parliamentary activities. The exception of course is dedicating specific channels to cover parliamentary activities such as Channel 1,2 Span that cover the activities of the US Congress. But in that case issues of coding, and thus inaccessibility of these specialized channels to most social groups make people wonder about the rationale behind airing the People's Assembly sessions on satellite channels and not on ground channels which are accessible to more public.

**In this paper, we focus on the printed media** of the official and opposition types (see annex 2). It is the less prevalent type, in terms of spread among a largely illiterate population. However, it is the type of media with longer history and ability to perform more in depth analysis. Egypt has had a parliamentary life since the establishment of its first parliament in 1866 (the MPs Shura Council from 1883 to 1866), followed by the Laws' Consultative Council and the General Assembly (1883-1913), then the Legislative Society (1914-1915) and the MPs and Senators' Council (1934-1952) and the Nation's Council (1957-1971). Since 1980, Egypt has a lower house called People's Assembly (1971-present) and an upper house called the *Shura* Council (1980-present).

Since early on, the parliamentary press had been performing its role in conveying parliament proceedings given the importance of parliament in Egypt's political life as the source of government legitimacy. The first Arab paper "Egyptian Events" (*Al Waqae' Al*

*Masreya*) reported the proceedings of the MPs and Senate councils. The issue published on 25 April 1940 included a 382- page section entitled the “Parliamentary Section.” Since then, the Egyptian press witnessed several developments and news about parliament began to occupy large space in newspapers. Senior journalists and chief editors began to report the proceedings of Egyptian parliament, and so the function of the parliamentary reporter came to life and began to take shape. Competition between editors depended on their ability to make parliamentary sessions enjoyable to readers/viewers. In order to do that, they had to cover amusing events such as run-ins or confrontations among MPs or between them and the government. The parliamentary reporter was also becoming instrumental and influential in making ‘parliamentary stars’, presenting rising politicians to the political arena, giving prominence to new faces.

### **3. THE IMPORTANCE OF PARLIAMENTARY MEDIA**

The uniqueness of parliamentary media lies mainly in its comprehensive and broad scope compared to other types of media. The subject matter of parliamentary media is not confined to parliamentary activities but goes beyond that to analyze, criticize and evaluate societal issues, either those discussed in parliament or those planned for discussion.

The relationship of parliamentary media to parliament and to society is triangular. Parliamentary media on the one hand reports about what society thinks of certain issues in discussion or planned for discussion. On the other hand, parliamentary media reports to society what parliament discusses and how parliament perceives its role as legislator in the name of the people.

Parliamentary media are considered the main liaison between parliament as a legislative body and voters as an electoral body, particularly since some voters can only evaluate the performance of MPs through media. Hence, parliamentary media are the media of democracy that consolidate the parliamentary system.

In sum, the role of parliamentary media is to:

- Raise the level of political awareness and participation among the public, and break the state of political isolation

- Achieve public control over MPs in order to ensure that the relationship between them and citizens are not severed immediately after elections
- Expand the circle of public participation in political decision making through developing the interaction between MPs, the electoral constituency and the different social sectors.
- Present different views and opinions to back the performance of MPs in parliament
- Measure the degree of citizens' acceptability of legislative decisions and different parliamentary positions
- Boost the culture of interaction with others and accept the 'other' opinion; tolerate diversity, encourage effective reasoning and loyalty to political parties and programs.

#### **4. PARLIAMENTARY MEDIA AND PARLIAMENTARY FUNCTIONS?**

One of the important activities of parliament that attracts the attention of parliamentary media is its role in making legislation, in addition to its control, financial, and political role. Parliamentary media is also interested in institutional issues related to the development of parliament as an institution, the activities of its committees, and finally the MPs general behavior and public image, which affect public opinion's attitude towards parliament in general.

##### **4.1 Legislative Performance**

This includes briefing public opinion on the discussions and deliberations within parliament around bills and draft laws. Parliamentary media explain the substance of the laws, their importance, why the government wishes to pass them, major amendments introduced to the bill in addition to comments made by MPs both for and against the bills.

In this context, newspapers, particularly national papers, focus on the draft laws forwarded by the President to the People's Assembly (lower house) and the *Shura* Council (upper house), in addition to amendments to already existing legislation.

**Box 1: Examples of issues that attracted Parliamentary Media**

**Attention:** Some of the issues which attracted attention in the Parliamentary press were the urban tenancy law, suggestions made by some MPs to cancel the requirement of using car seat belts within the city, approving a cost of living bonus to cope with the impact of the devaluation of the Egyptian Pound, the wide scale controversy on extending the enforcement of the emergency law. This shows the wide scope of interest which ranges from issues that affect the daily lives of millions of citizens to the issue of political reform and the powers of the President.

While national papers provide a comprehensive coverage of the legislative role of Parliament, focusing on policy directions that interest the government (e.g. industrial development, cultural antiquity preservation) opposition papers often highlight the negative aspects of the legislative process. For example, in the case of the labor law, *Al Ahali*, mouthpiece of the Progressive Unionist Party, insisted on pointing attention to the fact that the government was diligently trying to pass the labor law without giving enough time for its public discussion.

## 4.2 Control

National and opposition papers are particularly concerned with the control role played by members of the People's Assembly albeit with some difference in approach. National papers, on one hand, address the issue from the perspective that parliament's control role is one of the important tasks of an MP. Opposition and independent papers, on the other hand, see it in light of the procrastination and sluggishness on the part of ministers, and attempts on the part of the government to stop parliamentary control from seeing the daylight. Examples of that are to be found in the independent *Al Esbou'* and the left-wing *Al Ahali*.

### **4.3 Parliament's Financial Role**

National papers address the People's Assembly's financial role. Often the contents of the report of the Central Audit Department attract attention. Financial deficits are often highlighted by the opposition and some official newspapers. The international and regional context is often used to give government performance an excuse. Often the opposition and independent papers criticize parliamentarians for not giving much attention to the budgets and Central Audit reports.

### **4.4 Assembly's Political Role**

The national and opposition papers review the government's statement delivered by the Prime Minister, focusing on the promises made therein (e.g. regaining the development ability, increasing work opportunities, eliminating unemployment, protecting deposited funds, seeking to achieve self sufficiency particularly of agricultural crops, and limiting the increase in prices of commodities). Opposition papers focus on analyzing the statement in light of current realities and pinpoint areas of weakness.

### **4.5 Political Parties and Independent Members**

Party papers dealt with the position of their parties vis a vis some issues such as government subsidies and the performance of their members in parliament, the role of independent members in the Assembly and their wish to form a bloc in order to win more influence, in addition to the role of the People's Assembly and other institutions in reforming party life.

### **4.6 Developing the Assembly's Institutional Capacities**

Developing the organizational capacities of the Egyptian parliament should be a national concern. Despite the importance of this issue, not many papers address it. *Al Ahram* newspapers only addressed electronic voting in *Shura* Council elections.

#### 4.7 Committees and Reports

No doubt the most important internal bodies of the People's Assembly and *Shura* Council are the thematic committees that play the role of the "parliamentary kitchen". They are the dynamo that feeds the two houses. Any issue that falls within the Assembly's jurisdiction receives its share of diligent and in-depth study within these specialized committees. Discussions that take place in the committees are a prelude to what the MPs end up discussing during the Assembly's sessions and highlight the issues that the two houses will emphasize. Thus, these committees offer rich materials for the parliamentary reporter and allow them to learn about the general trend in the two houses before the issue is presented in the general assembly. The Assembly usually agrees with the committees in all the opinions they express in their reports.

Moreover, the People's Assembly thematic committees have been feeding the *Shura* Council with important studies and reports since the latter's establishment in November 1980 following the amendment of the constitution on 22 May 1980. The thematic committees participated in issuing more than 100 reports on political, economic, social, cultural and developmental issues in Egypt. Special committees also drafted reports on national unity, youth, terrorism, the Egyptian nuclear program and deficit in the Egyptian economy.

Following an analysis of the press materials on the activities of the committees in the People's Assembly and El *Shura* Council, a number of observations can be made:

- Parliamentary reporters in daily papers focus on news about the People's Assembly and *Shura* Council's sessions; news about committees come second in their importance<sup>1</sup>.
- Committee activities are depicted in brief news that do not include interpretation or detailed information. Daily papers do not publish interviews or articles, photos or caricature.
- Parliamentary reporters are only interested in the activities of some committees. Others are not covered although they discuss issues of interest to a large base of readers. Only news on field visits to production or service sites are published.

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<sup>1</sup> Although daily papers have specified columns to cover the news of the two houses, the space allocated for the committees and their activities does not exceed 5% of the whole area.

Discussions of problems faced by the public in different governorates are limited to the statements made by officials without substantiating them with, for example, interviews, investigations, commentaries etc..

## **5. MEDIA ATTITUDE TOWARDS MPS**

This study attempted to monitor some of the reports that appeared in the parliamentary press to cover the activities and practices of some MPs during the study period. The following results can be summarized:

### **5.1 Scandals of MP's**

Several papers highlighted the improper form and demeanor of some deputies which undermine their position as deputies who are elected and entrusted by their constituency. Papers urged such deputies to refrain from improper behavior that is inappropriate to their political and social position. This variety of news was mostly covered by opposition and independent papers. In this context, *Sawt al Umma* which does not represent any political party, rose to the scene. The paper condemned both the NDP and opposition parties.

### **5.2 Behavior of MP's inside the Assembly**

This can be addressed from two angles. The first is demonstrating the positive aspects and the second the negative aspects and attempting to rectify them. *Akhbar Al Yom*, in this connection, criticized an independent MP for using inappropriate language, asserting that parliamentary traditions must be respected. Al Wafd party also alluded to Dr. Zakaria Azmy's criticism to some deputies from Cairo governorate because of their attempt to befriend the governor of Cairo.

### **5.3 Role of MPs in the Assembly**

MPs play several roles on the national and the local levels and the evaluation of a local MP and his/her ability to achieve the interests of his/her constituency differ from the evaluation of an MP who plays the role of a legislator and a controller of the government.

Both national, party and independent papers have highlighted the legislative and control role of deputies. For example, *Al Akhbar* newspaper illuminated the role of MP Hossam Badrawi in proposing a law to regulate pharmaceutical research and criticized measures and experiments that could harm citizens. Other papers also highlighted the legislative amendment proposed by Dr. Zainab Radwan on amending the *Khol'* law. They further stressed the suggestions related to public interest, such as the proposal made by MP Mohamed Abdl Mo'ti and MP Sami Al Guindy to establish an authority for small enterprises, and an Egyptian waste stock exchange. *Akhbar al Yom* wondered if deputies are genuinely seeking the interest of citizens or only wish to add more financial burdens to their lives. The example gives was levying new annual fees (proposal made by MP Ali Al Refai) which ran contrary to the suggestion made by Deputy Abdel Aziz Shaaban to increase the minimum wages. The latter was considered a national suggestion that serves the interests of society as a whole. In this connection *al Gomhuria* reported that deputy Ahmed Ezzat was getting prepared to lodge an inquiry to the minister of finance on the exchange price and its impact on subsidies on basic commodities listed in the public budget as one of the main social responsibilities of the state. Some of these developments were covered as pieces of news. Other times they were dealt with as reports like the restoration of the "complaints' department" and problem of unemployment in Egypt.

#### **5.4 Membership affairs**

Matters related to parliamentary membership have recently occupied large space in all newspapers. People are still talking about the "checks MPs", the "land MPs" and the "dual nationality MPs", the "military service MPs" and finally, the "scandals' MPs".

Newspapers, particularly national papers, were largely concerned with news about the annulment of some MPs memberships. *Al Ahrar* newspaper reported the news on the annulment of the membership of Ragab Hemeida (*Al Ahrar* party) and Talaat Al Qawass (NDP), and the decision of the Assembly to enforce the decision. The same paper also reported the approval to lift the parliamentary immunity off MP Abdelwahab Qouta. Finally *Akhbar Al Yom* reported the news that a member of the Assembly was presented to the Assembly's Values Committee because of poor demeanor.

## 5.5 Parliamentary Immunity

Newspapers, particularly opposition papers, addressed the issue of parliamentary immunity to stress the fact that immunity is being abused by some MPs and ignored by the government. While some newspapers highlighted scandals of MPs getting involved in business and some illegal deals, *Al Arabi* and *Sawt al Umma* expressed their belief that arresting the two MPs Mohamed Farid Hassanein and Hamdin Sabahi was a violation of parliamentary traditions and asserted that the two members' immunity as MPs had not been lifted before they were arrested. But, their detention was considered a serious breach of parliamentary tradition. While the issue might pertain to the separation between the three powers, critics argued, it is also about curtailing the power of MPs to practice their right of controlling the government: MPs are taken to court when they criticize the government too much.

Some also claimed that MPs who are often deterred from critical remarks inside parliament have in desperation resorted to the courts to exercise their control powers over the Executive<sup>2</sup>. This alludes to the case of some MPs of the majority party who raised law suits against some ministers for making unrealistic promises that they could

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<sup>2</sup> This incident is unprecedented. The original role of parliament as defined by the constitution is to grant its members the jurisdiction and competence to practice their right of parliamentary control over the executive through public debates, inquiry petitions, and investigations in addition to forming fact finding committees. These jurisdictions do not include going to the judiciary. The law suit raised by MPs against the government requires defining the type of contested interest: whether it is private or public and whether a previous investigation or inquiry had taken place in order to determine the position of the judiciary i.e. whether it will accept the law suit or reject it as being outside its scope of competence. Kamal Ahmed believes that as long as there is no law that allows people to press charges against ministers during their term of office, it is almost impossible to go to court. He mentioned that he personally presented a bill to that effect and will present it again hoping that the Assembly would approve it. If his bill is approved, it would provide a legal base to question ministers in court during their term of office.

not keep<sup>3</sup>. MP Al Badry Farghaly claimed that deputies have been deprived of their role to pass legislation since no MP is able to pass any law without the approval of the government. Now, what is left for deputies to do is to control the government practices. Even this control task is subject to checks that have rendered it ineffective; the government could always interfere since the government party is the majority party, and so any inquiry or investigation petitions stood no chance without the approval of the government. Mr. Farghaly had tried to sue the government for allegedly breaching the constitution by failing to share the contract of the East of *Tafri'a* port, that was concluded with a foreign company, with the People's Assembly before signing it. He also claimed that he had in his possession what proved that there were serious financial violations and mismanagement of the public funds of the Suez Canal. The opposition deputy pressed these charges following an inquiry he presented in the last session of the People's Assembly about the same issue. The Assembly turned him down and recommended that the issue be listed on the agenda, thus he decided to go to court.

The fragility of the Assembly's performance also has another dimension. NDP MPs voting on issues is often not consistent. They tend to support other MPs in their opposition to certain legislation, but then when it is time to vote, they tend to change their opinion and side with the government.

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<sup>3</sup> A famous lawsuit was raised by an NDP deputy against the prime minister in his professional capacity. Not only that, but the deputy also sought to obtain the authorized support of other MPs from Upper Egypt to back his claim. The NDP deputy was speaking on behalf of sugar cane cultivators when he attacked the fake promises declared by the Prime Minister inside the Assembly. He had promised a ten pound increase in the price of a ton of sugar cane that is delivered to factories. When the sugar cane cultivators went to the factories to receive their payments, their requests were denied. Serious harms befell the peasants because as they relied on these promises, they took loans from the bank to be repaid once they received their payment for the sugar cane they delivered. The NDP deputy wanted to inflict punishment upon the government and so asked for a 300 million Pounds compensation to be deposited in banks in favor of the sugar cane cultivators in order to make up for the losses they incurred. He urged the government not to make promises before carefully investigating the issue under study.

**Box 2: Views On Immunity, MPs in Court and MPs Taking the Government to Court:**

MP Kamal Ahmed believes that to strengthen political accountability there is no way other than taking the government to court, as parliament is too weak. He also believes that as long as there is no law that allows people to press charges against ministers during their term of office, it is almost impossible to go to court. Thus he presented a bill to that effect, hoping that the Assembly would approve it. If his bill is approved, it would provide a legal base to question ministers in court during their term of office.

On the other hand, Counselor Mohamed Moussa, Chariman of the People's Assembly's Legislative Committee, said that going to court is a new and unheard of tradition. These are political matters, he said, and the judiciary has nothing to do with them. He expressed his belief that such acts are often used as 'political explosives' by MPs who do not adequately appear in public and would like to be more present on the political street. Counselor Mohamed Moussa expressed his astonishment that MPs of the NDP would resort to court since, they, more than others, can easily criticize their government. Investigations are a type of accusation and may result in withdrawing confidence from a competent minister, he said, adding that the principle of separation between powers should preclude pressing charges against the government in court because each power should have its own independent jurisdiction. He said that he hopes that MPs who raised lawsuits would drop them and go back to perform their legislative and control role in parliament.

Dr. Mohamed Merghany, professor of constitutional law in Ain Shams university's faculty of law, stated that it is important to determine the nature of the legal case raised by the MP. If it is a political, legislative or parliamentary case, one should not go to court. He believes that the judiciary should stay above political games. Its main task is to restore rights to people. If an MP feels injustice as a result of the enforcement of a particular law, he/she can contest it in his/her personal capacity and not for public interest.

## 6. FACTORS AFFECTING PARLIAMENTARY PRESS

Several factors affect parliamentary press in Egypt, including state ownership of mass media, particularly audio visual media. As to printed media, **press ownership** is regulated by seven legislations<sup>4</sup>, which – combined- impose 11 restrictions on the freedom of press. The Higher Press Council issued more than 150 licenses for newspapers, including government and party papers and magazines in addition to independent papers and joint stock companies working in the area of the press, and newspapers with foreign licenses.

The role of parliamentary press is also generally affected by the position of the press in **the political regime**. In Egypt, the press has been defined by law as the fourth power (The power of the press no. 148 of 1980). Actual practice, however, points to a great deal of legislative confusion towards mass media. The Egyptian constitution stipulates that the press is a popular authority that performs its mission in freedom and independence. It reflects public trends and contributes to its formation using different modes of expression embedded within society while maintaining rights, duties, freedoms and privacy of citizens.

Among the factors that affect parliamentary journalism is the **prevailing view among reporters** vis a vis parliament, which differs from one reporter to the other according to the paper in which he/she works, and whether it is a national or party paper. It also depends on the expertise of the parliamentary reporter. In fact, there is a large difference between professional parliamentary reporters and political parliamentary reporters.

One group of parliamentary reporters (mostly in national papers) regard parliament as a parallel institution to the executive power and focus on statements released by ministers. For them, these statements and the photographs of ministers and government representatives are more important and have more priority than news of MPs, which

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<sup>4</sup> These are: Egypt's 1991 permanent constitution and its amendments of 1980, law no. 96 regulating the press, law no. 20 of 1936 on publications, law no. 40 of 1977 on political parties, law no. 159 of 1981 on joint stock companies amended by law no. 5 of 1998, law no. 76 of 1970 on the press syndicate, and finally law no. 317 of 1956 on cooperatives.

ultimately marginalizes the role and activities of the MPs in general and opposition MPs in particular. Reporters affiliated to national papers also tend to highlight the negative incidents in parliament by highlighting wrong acts undertaken by marginal figures in parliament. On the other hand, they avoid referring to similar negative acts committed by the main parliamentary figures and elite, because the latter complement the executive power.

The other category of reporters is affiliated to opposition papers. The way this group views parliament is greatly a function of their own political parties' view of parliament, particularly the view of the mainstream trend of the party. They often seek to highlight the shortcomings of parliamentary interaction and sometimes magnify these deficiencies to serve their own party goals. They refuse to point to any positive aspects achieved by parliament and tend to portray MPs of their own party as heroes under the dome of parliament.

In all cases, the majority of parliamentary reporters are guided by an individual and not an institutional view of parliament. Their impression about parliament is influenced by the impression about some of its MPs and then they tend to generalize their judgments on all other members.

In a nutshell, factors influencing parliamentary media can be summarized as follows:

## **6.1 Mass Media Related Factors**

### **1. General political orientation of the medium**

It is natural that party papers would be influenced by their ideological perspective and would dedicate large coverage to their own party MPs<sup>5</sup>. What is not normal is that the so-called national papers (*Al Ahrar*, *Al Akhbar*, *Al Gomhuria* and others) have an important role in covering the activities of the ruling party's MPs, offering them publicity that is in no way balanced with that they offer to the opposition MPs.

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<sup>5</sup> Party papers in Egypt are: *Mayo* paper of the ruling NDP, *al-Wafd* of the Wafd party, *al-Ahali* of the Tagammu party, *al-Ahrar* of the Liberals, *al-Sha'b* of the Labor party, and *al-Arabi* of the Nasserite party.

## 2. Policy of chief editors

It is often noticed that what is published in papers and magazines does not necessarily reflect neutrally or objectively what is taking place. It often looks like large space is reserved in advance for some ministerial or parliamentary figures. In fact in many cases, the editorial board usually has a ‘filter’ that allocates space entitlements.

## 3. Competencies of parliamentary reporters

In addition to their competence and expertise, parliamentary editors must have first hand experience of events inside parliament, in order to have full control over the required knowledge. However, reporters personal political, economic and cultural interests make them feel more comfortable with the performance of some ministers or deputies who have the same tendencies or preferences. The latter are given special attention and space.

## 4. Available space for parliamentary media

There is large discrepancy between the coverage of morning and evening parliamentary sessions. The former receives more attention from the reporter and those who follow parliamentary debates observe that parliamentary reporters leave the press booth by 8 p.m. in order to be able to send their materials to their papers. This implies that any discussions that take place after 8 pm lose the opportunity of publication. Evening sessions which usually witness the discussion of draft laws, bills, important agreements and inquiries have a limited chance of press coverage. In general, the space allocated for parliamentary press coverage is inappropriate if compared to spaces allocated for sports, arts or accidents.

## 5. Public acceptance of mass media

It is interesting to refer in this regard to the observation that parliamentary coverage in opposition papers is more appealing to the public than it is in mouthpiece of the ruling party *Mayo*. On the other hand, national papers have larger distribution and outreach to a wide range of public and their coverage of parliament is seen to: (a) combine elements of conservatism with moderation and popularity; (b) diverse, bold and constructive in its criticism; (c) flexible in adopting a wide range of views on issues.

## **6.2 Personal Factors**

The level of parliamentary reporting is very much affected by the MP's qualifications and character. Those MPs who are regarded with respect and who are competent in revealing their views get better coverage. Mutual interests and the personal and social traits of MPs and media personnel are factors that contribute to the strength of relations, proximity of distances, increased understanding, and enhanced flow of news and information.

It is difficult for parliamentary reporters to be neutral. Alignment with or bias to one side or the other is largely possible and can take place in the form of loyalty to an idea or a particular policy regardless of affiliation to party. If a reporter can be described as 'independent', it does not mean that he/she is neutral in terms of political consciousness. Furthermore, reporters, just like other citizens, are part of society. They suffer society's shortcomings and are reflections of society's positive aspects. They are affected by laws as much as they are monitors of laws as societal phenomena. Their convictions are used as experiences to evaluate events both from the moral and political points of view particularly. Therefore, it is not possible to eliminate the personal traits of the parliamentary reporter but sizing them down is feasible because of the situation of the Egyptian press and the fact that journalists must comply with directives if they are to maintain their livelihood. Journalists, more than other professionals, know the difference between their personal evaluation of events and what they convey to readers or audience. Although this is not said in absolute terms, but it is possible, and is based on deep understanding of the limits of what is possible within the general policy of each newspaper.

## **6.3 Political Factors**

Within a general power structure of monopoly, national and independent papers can afford to follow events and officially present them to the readers by simply conveying the proceedings without any interference. The reign of political monopoly in the Egyptian political system makes life more difficult for the opposition parties' papers which have to search for a space or niche where they can distinguish themselves and support their MPs in parliament. Opposition parties' papers try to find loopholes or shortcomings in the

performance of ruling party MPs but do not seek to escalate the situation. After all, the ruling party is a monopolist and has a sweeping majority of seats in parliament. There is basically no argument about the main positions. It is not possible to present an inquiry that will lead to the downfall of the government or any political confrontation in which a bloc of the ruling party would dissent and join the opposition<sup>6</sup>. Egyptian parliament lacks political vitality i.e. the mobile parliamentary blocs which cause changes in positions. Because of that, newspapers are biased to the parties they represent and try to justify the positions of their deputies in a general situation that can be described as stagnant.

The lop-sided power structure in the political system is reflected in the media landscape. So-called national papers enjoy a very special status and are legally not defined in their ownership. The ruling party has inherited, practically and for no clear legal reasons, control over these papers. The papers grant NDP reporters more space than that granted to opposition views. This forces opposition party journalists in turn to do the same and highlight the role of their parties' deputies before public opinion.

A few words are needed here about the tendency of party papers to exaggerate in their criticism. It is the job of any opposition party to criticize the policy of the ruling party. Democracy means the right of all parties to reach power; the job of political parties is not to express their opinions in order to benefit the government which, alone, has the right to take decisions. Thus, the attempt of political parties to criticize the government and its party is one way to convince public opinion that the position of others is wrong and their own position is right. These include the position of their deputies inside parliament.

But in doing that, opposition party journalists earn a bad name inside parliament. Parliamentary leadership ostracizes them, granting them less weight in the public

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<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the parliament witnesses some weak inquiries presented by opposition members which focus on partial or local matters that often lack substance. On the other hand, there were instances when the Assembly witnessed some fierce inquiries both in their contents and implications. What is common in the two cases is that first, opposition does not have the required quorum to withdraw confidence from the government and second, that the majority representing the ruling party, often unanimously vote to move on with the agenda. Thus conclusions are known beforehand and the parliamentary reporter has no choice but to support his/her deputy against the unjustified majority.

discourse inside parliament<sup>7</sup> and also by excluding them from circulation among parliament's bodies. Although the official position of parliament is that there are no distinctions between journalists based on their affiliation, the practices of MPs of the ruling party raise a number of questions. For example, can one imagine that the budget of parliament which exceeds 60 million pounds annually does not have an allowance for subscription in party papers to distribute them to 18 thematic committees? Are there reasons why only national papers are bought and distributed to the committees?

## **7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Parliament and media are the two wings of democracy without which it cannot fly. Parliament works for the people and media makes public opinion. All facilities and resources must be made available in order to establish cooperation between parliament and the media in order to achieve the interests of the people and activate democracy.

If one is to follow the activities of parliament in recent times, one would notice the increasing press coverage, which reflects more public interest in the role of the legislative power, now that political conflicts between parties have calmed down. These new developments throw more responsibilities on the shoulders of parliament officials in the coming stage and equally on the shoulders of parliamentary reporters, whose task is to deepen the democratic space through presenting to the public parliament proceedings.

Naturally, before this takes place, a number of reforms have to take place.

In the general political context:

It is important to activate parliamentary activities through more political vitality. The presence of a parliament to represent the will of the people is essential for democracy.

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<sup>7</sup> In one of the sessions, a sensitive matter was being discussed which had a large impact on public opinion. Officials took steps to address the issue and as the chairman of the committee gave reasons why the issue was being discussed, he said that some writers in national papers raised the matter so it became necessary to discuss it. What this position really means is that we are used in Egypt to having party papers attack and criticize but when national papers publish something, it is different. If anything, this incident is indicative of realities of dealing with party papers and the views of officials towards party reporters inside parliament.

Equally important, however is to provide the appropriate climate to practice democracy based on freedom of expression. Parliament and freedom of expression are the main pillars for the establishment of a sound democratic life. Furthermore, all political parties must have balanced representation in parliament and the latter must have an influential and active role in monitoring the activities of the government.

In the relationship of parliament to the press:

Parliamentary reporters should not only attend the parliament sessions and the meetings of the thematic committees, but must also have mechanisms to communicate directly with the speaker of parliament and heads of the committees through press conferences and training workshops. Parliamentary reporters must convey committee proceedings to ordinary citizens so they would have background information on the laws and debates that took place before issuing them.

In the parliamentary journalism profession:

There is a need to recruit specialized reporters to attend the meetings of the thematic committees because of their ability to convey and interpret events better than reporters who may or may not be specialists. There is also a need to apply rigorous principles of journalistic writing in the presentation of parliamentary issues. Parliamentary reporters should provide the other departments in newspapers and journals with ideas and suggestions to be used in order to promote their services to readers. Parliamentary editors should focus on a selected group representing the two houses and highlight their activities in the thematic committees to readers. More attention should be paid to field visits made by some of the thematic or specialized committee members and apply exciting journalistic art of writing to illuminate them to readers.

## **ANNEX 1: PEOPLE’S ASSEMBLY 2000 ELECTIONS**

The People’s Assembly 2000 elections were associated with new phenomena that were adequately addressed by the parliamentary press. Many believed these new trends would have an impact on the future of the political regime in Egypt in general and on Egyptian political forces.

The 2000 parliamentary elections were the first to take place under the full supervision of the judicial authority<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, political leadership was for the first time keen on having good elections in which the role of the executive authority would be neutral. The elections enjoyed large media coverage and the different audio visual media had dedicated large space and opportunities for political parties and independent individuals for the first time in the history of Egyptian elections. They were also the first elections to take place on multi stages which allowed party and independent candidates to re-evaluate their positions, alliances and the tactics they were adopting, based on the results of each stage. Finally, the elections took place within a changing economic climate marked by the rise in the exchange rate of the Egyptian Pound to the Dollar, by the phenomenon of businessmen borrowing large amounts of money from banks then fleeing the country without paying their dues, by the decline in the price of stocks in the money market, in addition to the crisis of shortage of sugar. All the above factors were of concern to ordinary citizens. Thus, the elections offered a good opportunity to allow people to express their opinions and hold others responsible for these developments and policies.

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<sup>8</sup> All political parties and Egyptian political forces supported the decision to give the judiciary full control over the electoral process because it provides the necessary legal guarantees for the safety, integrity and impartiality of elections. However, some candidates, particularly from the NDP did not imagine that this supervision would be so strict so as to cause such kind of confusion within the ranks of candidates, as indicated by the results of the first round of elections. In some constituencies, there was some kind of commotion, when MPs felt that events were taking a course that was not in their favor and that the government’s administrative bodies had abandoned them in some governorates.

## **1. Judicial Supervision**

The role of the judiciary was not limited to the voting stage but went beyond that to the stage of nomination. Several nominations were contested for reasons of dual nationality, non- registration in electoral lists in the constituencies where candidates ran for elections, non performance of military service, the candidate's given category (peasant, worker, other) or illiteracy. Contestations were leveled against some well-known figures who used to occupy important positions; they were not confined to the opposition but extended to NDP candidates. Some of the rulings resulted in the NDP's loss of several of its candidates in a number of constituencies.

The judiciary also examined other legal problems in some constituencies. The well known example was the need to repeat the elections in *Al Raml*, Alexandria to enforce the principle of equality of campaigning opportunities between candidates. The judiciary also examined contestations questioning the validity of some election lists or results.

Through content analysis of election coverage during the study period, a high level of enthusiasm about the full judicial control over the electoral process, as a new qualitative shift in Egyptian elections and the march towards political reform, was noticed in all papers. All Egyptian papers addressed judicial monitoring of elections positively, saying judicial monitoring added to the probability of fairness and the perceived transparency of the election process, both of which can only have a positive and reinforcing impact on progress towards democracy in Egypt. Opposition papers took a similar stand. They voiced their belief that judicial monitoring of elections put an end to previous attempts to counterfeit the will of citizens. The papers described this new judicial justice as a disaster that befell the NDP because of the seats it lost in the elections.

## **2. Weakness of Egyptian Political Parties**

The 2000 elections revealed the inability of political parties to nominate candidates in all constituencies, with the exception of the NDP, followed by *Al Wafd* party. The general complaint among candidates of the NDP, however, was that in a number of constituencies, no objective criteria of selection were applied, which upset NDP candidates who decided to run the elections as independents. Conflict between

nominees of the same party were often more ferocious than the conflicts between the incumbent party (NDP) and opposition parties. The *Wafd* party faced the same problem but for different reasons namely the shortage of *Wafdist* candidates. On the other hand, the Islamic current came up with new faces in several constituencies and they ran as independent candidates and several of them won. Within the Islamic trend, it is noteworthy to mention that while the new faces made it, the old symbols did not.

Both national and opposition papers gave prominence to party life in Egypt. National papers stated that party life was in crisis both for the NDP and other opposition parties. Opposition papers also highlighted the weakness of party life. They particularly focused on the NDP, stressing its loss of seats in parliament in favor of independent candidates. They gave special attention to counter propaganda particularly against the NDP considering it a burden on Egyptian political life.

Egyptian papers addressed the issue of tribal solidarity and asserted that tribes and families have the upper hand in deciding the final election results in rural and urban constituencies. National papers pointed out that even in some urban constituencies families played a critical role in ending election battles particularly in run-off elections. Opposition papers also asserted that tribal loyalty is not superceded by any other loyalty not even to the party, the proof being the high turn-out in rural areas, where tribes prevail. In some cases, NDP members gave up their candidacy in favor of a family relative who was running as independent, because of belief in family solidarity or tribal loyalty.

### **3. Fragile Party Commitment**

The election results revealed that voters have very little commitment or confidence in political parties. The proof was that independents fared much better than party candidates, including the NDP<sup>9</sup>. Several independent candidates, however, re-joined the NDP.

With regard to party discipline (and commitment), elections showed that it was generally weak. Each of the party candidates had his/her own plans and alliances often at the

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<sup>9</sup> The number of independent candidates outweighed the number of party candidates by over 200%.

expense of other candidates representing their own party. No doubt the phenomenon of fragile party commitment reflects weak internal cohesion among all parties with the exception of the Islamic groups which presented a model of effective organization. The other parties, on the other hand, demonstrated poor organizational structure and performance.

Only *Al Ahali*, mouthpiece of the Progressive Unionist Party, reported the party's electoral program. The question thus arises as to whether elections take place in the interest of parties or individuals and if there is party commitment and loyalty in Egypt that goes beyond the personal interests of MPs.

#### **4. Independents**

Independent winners joined the NDP after they won seats, which raised a wide controversy in the Egyptian political arena. In this connection, one has to distinguish between two types of independent candidates. The first are those who presented themselves as independent candidates who nevertheless follow the principles of the NDP; their number is indeed large and their decision after their victory to affiliate themselves with the NDP was natural and acceptable. The second type are the independent candidates who did not declare themselves followers of the NDP and these were divided among themselves into a group that joined the NDP and another that did not. It is noteworthy that some candidates who ran the elections as independents, had clear preferences to one or the other political party, however, they decided to run the elections without affiliation to these parties and did not join their parties after their victory. This was particularly characteristic of the winning Nasserite candidates.

The fact that independent candidates joined the NDP was a source of large disillusionment and frustration in all papers. National papers highlighted statements of NDP officials that the new members are not welcome. They underlined the views of specialists that a distinction needs to be made between independent members and deserters of the "independent" status. All papers agreed in urging the NDP to carry out some reforms. On the other hand, opposition papers severely criticized this phenomenon and asserted that citizens' ability to change the situation and place matters under their control is zero.

## **5. New Blood over Bright Names**

One major characteristic of the 2000 elections was the downfall of a large number of bright names and this was particularly characteristic of the NDP but not limited to it. The main factor that contributed to the demise of these names is their lack of attention to their constituencies which led to the loss of their political base. The public celebrations that took place to mark the victory of the new generations over the older symbols, was a proof of the voters' desire for change.

## **6. Businessmen**

Another phenomenon associated with candidates is the increasing number of businessmen. The 2000 elections witnessed unprecedented interest on the part of businessmen in elections both as members of political parties and independents. They relied on their financial abilities to organize intensive campaigns and charity events. And yet, several of those did not make it despite the large expenses they incurred which shows that money alone does not lead to success.

## **7. Turn Out**

Egyptian papers referred to the technical problems related to election lists, which obstructed voting. One of the main problems that undermine the elections process is the issue of voters' registration and cleaning election lists<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> This was the subject of wide criticism addressed to officials in charge of the election process. Several problems are involved in registering in election lists that discourage many citizens from this undertaking. Registration begins in police departments, which many people don't like to visit. This visit is then followed by several routine and administrative procedures. Moreover, the period of registration is relatively limited and cleaning election lists does not take place regularly which drove some people to claim that the dead decide the results of elections! In this connection, the National Council of Women has begun a new procedure to register women immediately after they reach the legal age. Registration cards are then sent immediately to their home address. Opposition papers accused the NDP of tampering with election lists for its own interests by including the names of some deceased and migrant citizens in addition to repeating names. They accused the government of deliberate negligence in cleaning election lists and required the registration of names of all citizens who reached the legal election age in order to involve more citizens in the election process.

## **8. Voters' Preferences**

The 2000 elections were marked by a number of new phenomena with regard to voters' preferences. On top of those was the preference to choose deputies who offer services to their constituencies. This has always been the trend and it did not change in the recent elections<sup>11</sup>. Electors also chose candidates who lived among them and not those who resided in Cairo. Yet, voters showed a strong desire to bring about change. There were various degrees of voting according to political consciousness. Voters often chose candidates with limited financial abilities who competed with others with larger financial resources. Finally, in several constituencies, the number of voters who cast their ballots was much larger than in previous elections. They also believed in the role of the judiciary in the election process.

## **9. Election Brokers**

At the same time, the phenomenon of election brokers was observed in most of the constituencies, manifested in the presence of individuals who offer their services to candidates. Some of them even served more than one candidate at the same time. These brokers organized the candidates' election meetings and escorted them on their tours. They also collected the ballots. They tended to repeat the same slogans with different candidates, but making sure to change the names of candidates on the banners.

## **10. Electoral Propaganda**

Some candidates arranged to advertise for themselves and their electoral program. Such kind of election advertisement had appeared in all kinds of papers, but was particularly pronounced in independent and opposition papers. These papers accused the mass media of their bias because they were the monopoly of NDP figures and symbols.

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<sup>11</sup> Newspapers asserted that the main error committed by the NDP, which made it lose several seats, was the low standard of services in some governorates.

The national papers, on the other hand, were concerned with the economic cost of election propaganda. They agreed that it is important to set a ceiling for expenditure on the electoral process. National papers also presented the electoral programs of some candidates, while severely criticizing the advertisement of the electoral programs of other candidates, claiming that these candidates' budget exceeded the resources of any state official.

## **11. Run off elections & Results**

These were the subject of concern for several national and opposition papers because of their decisive nature. National papers covered the run -off elections in a number of constituencies and governorates. These were characterized by fierce and strong competition leading to the formation of several alliances and blocs that did not necessarily take into account party affiliations and paid more attention to how to enhance possibilities of victory. They also dealt with personal relations and the effect of home visits on concluding the election battle.

Opposition papers said the NDP retreat in election results did not come as a surprise but was natural because the NDP did not represent the Egyptian street. The NDP, they claimed, did not hesitate to tamper with the election results in order not to lose the majority required to control parliament. Opposition parties widely addressed the negative aspects of the election process, which were alluded to in a limited fashion in national papers. Opposition papers claimed that the police corrupted elections and made of the election battle a military confrontation. They used tear gases which led to the closure of some committees and prevented electors from casting their ballots which ultimately resulted in low level of voting in some committees. Other negative aspects related to MP's vested interests, and the role and impact of political money on elections.

## **12. Violence**

Opposition and national papers agreed that the election process did not take place without material and human losses as a result of the violence that took place in some constituencies. Violent confrontations took place between the police and citizens and between supporters of different candidates. National papers reported the violence

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incurred by hooligans, while opposition papers accused security bodies of instigating conflicts and confrontations which resulted in the death of some electors.

## ANNEX 2: ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPERS

Sources	Type of coverage	Position
1. <i>Al Ahram</i>	• News	• Supporter
2. <i>Akhbar al Youm, al Akhbar</i>	• Investigation (meetings and statements)	• Opponent/critical
3. <i>Al Gomhuria</i>	• Article/opinion	• Neutral
4. <i>Al Wafd</i>	• Caricature	• Reformist
5. <i>Al Ahali</i>	• Column	• Cynical
6. <i>Al Shaab</i>	• Press coverage of sessions	
7. <i>Al Ahrar</i>	• Indirect news (e.g. Al Osfoura)	
8. <i>Al Arabi</i>	• Photo and comment	
9. <i>Mayo</i>	• News report	
10. <i>Al Iktissadi</i>		
11. <i>Rose Al Youssef</i>		
12. <i>Al Siassa Al Dawlia</i>		
13. <i>Qadaya parlamaniya</i>		
14. <i>Al Esbou'</i>		
15. <i>October</i>		
16. <i>Akher Sa'a</i>		
17. <i>Al Mossawar</i>		