



Bawader/commentary

EGYPT'S PRESS SYNDICATE ELECTIONS: SIGNIFICANCE, LIMITATIONS, AND PROSPECTS

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About the Author

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"The first political defeat suffered by the regime in 10 years," declared Fathy Abou Hatab, the former general manager of Egypt's flagship daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, as Khaled El-Balshy won the elections to lead the Press Syndicate after a cutthroat competition with pro-regime forces.¹ Such euphoria was not felt by Abou Hatab alone. The syndicate building, located in the heart of Cairo, was rocked with chants, probably for the first time since the 2016 protests against the handover of Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia, while my social media news feeds were flooded with posts by journalists and dissidents enthusiastically endorsing the victory as a revival of revolutionary activism.²

What happened?

Roughly a dozen journalists competed for the post of syndicate chairman, all of whom came from the ranks of state-run media institutions, except for Khaled El-Balshy, a veteran leftist who runs the online portal of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party.³ Another 40 candidates contested six seats on the syndicate board.⁴

Historically, candidates from state-run institutions usually ran with a clear green light from the security services and depended on their connections with the government bureaucracy to ensure their victory. Such reliance on state backing was never dissimulated by such candidates. On the contrary, they used to highlight it as part of their points of strength, since this meant they could guarantee for the media community some economic prerogatives, such as increased pensions, more financial allowances, and some social services, for a community whose members mostly come from the lower middle classes. In a way, it has been a Faustian tactic, whereby journalists are expected to shy away from

1 Fathy AbouHatab, Twitter, @fmhatab, March 18, 2023, <https://twitter.com/fmhatab/status/1636911065203200001>.

2 For example, see Basma Mostafa, Facebook, March 17, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/Basma.mustafa2012/posts/pfbid-0Vf5cLoB54MD7iCZptLPe1YTiX7Dc4cS1oH8ddCwZAKgpkFwm2D9CSp-BVwJJCGYL>.

3 Darb portal: <https://daaarb.com/>.

4 Gamal Essam El-Din, "Heated Press Syndicate Elections," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, March 17, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/491727.aspx>.

criticism of the regime and issues related to civil liberties, in exchange for some social mobility.

In previous elections, usually the state-backed candidates ran against others who stood for the "independence current"—a generic label that used to describe either journalists who belonged to opposition parties or candidates whose agendas pushed for the "independence" of the media from state control. The latter category mostly came from media outlets owned by private businessmen and opposition parties, but not always. For example, Diaa Rashwan, the previous syndicate chairman, is a Nasserist pundit at *Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies*, who emerged after the 2013 coup as a staunch ally of the regime, yet he had been the independence current candidate in 2009 against the state-backed Makram Muhammad Ahmad at the time. While the independent current frequently managed to get candidates elected to the syndicate's board, rarely did they win the chairmanship.

El-Balshy caused a surprise by winning the chairman seat on 17 March, while other candidates who were part of the independence current, won four out of the six contested syndicate board seats. The syndicate board includes six other seats that were not up for elections this time, two of which are already held by the independence current. This means, the independence current now holds six out of 12 seats of the syndicate's board, as well as its chair, providing it with a majority control of the Press Syndicate leadership. There were few occasions when such a majority was achieved in the past, prior to 2016.

Who are the winners and what do they represent?

El-Balshy, 50, is a longtime leftist journalist. He worked in prominent dissident publications as a writer and later editor, including the old fiery *al-Dustur* and the leftist daily *al-Badil*. He embarked on a number of online projects later, most of which went defunct due to financial reasons and/or government censorship.

El-Balshy is popular among young journalists. He has been active in the syndicate's politics from early on and was previously elected to its board. He is known for his support of labor struggles, and anti-police brutality campaigns, and participated in street protests before and after the

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2011 revolution. He faced state-orchestrated defamation campaigns on several occasions and lawsuits.⁵ Moreover, the state targeted his colleagues and family members.⁶

El-Balshy embarked on the electoral battle, with a detailed program that skillfully tied what is economic to what is political.⁷ His program tackled a long list of grievances related to salaries, job security, medical services, and working conditions. Without raising any overt anti-Sisi or anti-regime slogans, he asserted he was running to reclaim the syndicate as a safe space for journalists to organize in defense of their rights. He also took a clear stand in solidarity with detained journalists, called for amending laws that curb freedom of expression, and demanded the immediate lifting of online censorship. He eventually won by a narrow margin of 2,443 votes against 2,211 scored by his main competitor, the regime-backed Khaled El-Meeri.⁸

The six members of the syndicate board who are independence current supporters are Gamal Abdel Rahim, Muhammad El-Garhy, Muhammad Kharaga, Muhammad Saad, Mahmoud Kamel, and Hesham Younis.⁹ Saad is a Nasserist. Kharaga is perceived to be close to the Islamists, although he is unaffiliated, and probably the least political and is generally regarded as being more service-oriented. The rest do not have specific ideological leanings but are generally press freedom advocates.

5 Mahmoud Mostafa, "Arrest Warrant Issued for Press Syndicate Leader Khaled El-Balshy," Daily News Egypt, April 4, 2016, <https://www.dailynews-egypt.com/2016/04/04/arrest-warrant-issued-press-syndicate-leader-khaled-el-balshy/>.

6 "Egyptian Authorities Pressure Editor by Jailing His Brother, Colleagues," RSF, October 14, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/egyptian-authorities-pressure-editor-jailing-his-brother-colleagues>; Rūzā Fahmī, "Idārat siġn Līmān Ṭura tata'annat ma' Kamāl al-Balšī wa tarfuḍ idkhāl ṭa'ām wa malābis wa mus-talzamāt naḏāfa ila maḥbasih," al-Ištirākī, October 14, 2020, <https://revsoc.me/-42937>.

7 El-Balshy's program: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid05ymLkRae1JJ4k6sTPnGNNvFHekrZeQX3czdBNxanQQwCshx-LHxngCCfZHVmghJLl&id=100090090952339.

8 "Khaled El-Balshy elected new head of Egypt's Journalists Syndicate," Ahram Online, March 17, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/491905.aspx>.

9 "Board Members List," Egyptian Press Syndicate, accessed March 22, 2023, https://www.ejs.org.eg/page_view.php?id=48935.

How did it happen?

The state intervention in syndicate elections, over the previous decades, did not take the form of rigging votes. This is partly because of the small size of the electorate, which averages a few thousands who cast their votes in one building, compared to the notoriously rigged parliamentary elections, where millions cast their votes in numerous station polls across all provinces. But more importantly, and simply put, the state never really had to rig the vote before.

The intervention in the electoral process took other "softer" or relatively "non-intrusive" forms. The state-backed candidates used to stress that their close relations with the regime would guarantee material benefits for the impoverished journalists' community and used their patronage networks to mobilize "their subordinates" into voting.

Since its foundation, the Press Syndicate included structural problems that have crippled its ability to defend journalists' interests and enabled such state-backed heavyweights to dominate it. Why? A trade union by definition is an association of workers that is tasked with defending their interests vis-à-vis management. The Press Syndicate includes both the workers and the bosses. The syndicate membership extends to include senior editors and publishers. It also includes large numbers of "non-journalists" like the administrative staff of the state-run media institutions and their affiliated non-media branches. For instance, Diaa Rashwan, the previous syndicate chairman, is not a journalist. He is a researcher (and former director) of the Al-Ahram affiliated think tank. This has historically meant state-backed candidates (virtually all held senior managerial positions in their institutions) had the authority and direct power to mobilize "their employees" and a bulk of voters who are outside the journalists' community, to ensure there is enough critical mass that guaranteed their success.

The above-mentioned toxic formula, however, failed this time to ensure the success of El-Meeri, the main state-backed candidate who ran against El-Balshy, for a number of reasons.

First, El-Meeri is the editor-in-chief of the state-run Al-Akhbar, but he hardly enjoyed the clout previous pro-regime figures had, such as Rashwan, Makram Muhammad Ahmad, or the late Ibrahim Nafie. These were considered titans by the journalists' community even when they were disliked. For many, El-Meeri was not a heavyweight. Some had never even heard of him before he worked with other pro-regime figures on justifying and enabling the state crackdowns on the syndicate in 2016. His lack of notoriety did not project the image of a state-backed strongman who can wrestle some material benefits from the regime.

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Second, the pro-regime camp was already divided between a number of candidates. This reflected confusion in the eyes of the journalists and deepened the impression El-Meeri was not “strong” enough to lobby for their interests.

Third, the economic crisis the country is going through impacted the regime's ability to back its candidate(s) with material incentives. El-Meeri's campaign promises included a trivial increase in financial allowances provided by the syndicate, from LE3,000 to only LE3,600, an increase equivalent to the price of 1.5 kg of meat. This drew ridicule from the journalists, who felt further insulted by El-Meeri's campaigners' attempts to gain their support by offering them a kabab meal from Abu Shaqra, one of Egypt's popular grill restaurants.

Fourth, El-Balshy's campaigners whom I spoke with stressed the “accumulative” factor in enabling such victory. El-Balshy has been patiently organizing for years to create a base, by previously running for syndicate board elections, engaging in bread-and-butter issues related to journalists' working conditions, and being at the forefront of solidarity campaigns with detained journalists. El-Balshy was no stranger to the majority of the community; he was the ideal candidate for many who wanted to cast a “protest vote”.

Fifth, the state intervention attempts to back El-Meeri in the final stages of the electoral race proved futile. The security services-run Nation's Future Party bused in journalists from the provinces to vote for El-Meeri. When El-Balshy was declared a winner, the pro-regime figures tried to push for a recount or cancel the results based on technical irregularities, but they failed. As I explained earlier, it is very difficult to rig the syndicate's elections. El-Balshy's campaign mobilized immediately a mass protest inside and outside the syndicate building to successfully stop such attempts.

Sixth, the journalists' anger regarding the threat of arrest on bogus charges has reached a boiling level. While under Mubarak the “redlines” were clear, and journalists could play it safe if they stuck by some rules, or would take calculated risks to push some boundaries knowing what consequences would follow, the situation under Sisi has become extremely chaotic and random. Scores of reporters have been detained since the 2013 coup, including pro-regime journalists, on the notorious loosely defined charge of “spreading fake news.” This has created a sense of fear and insecurity that runs across all echelons of the industry, which is now almost fully under the control of the General Intelligence Service (GIS). El-Balshy has been central to virtually all solidarity actions with detained colleagues from all political shades. His electoral campaign put that issue on the top of its list of concerns and demands. This touched a sincere chord with many.

Why is this victory important?

The Press Syndicate (and on occasions the Lawyers' Syndicate) has historically played the role of a “launch base” for all political forces. It provided under Mubarak a relatively safe space, where dissidents could hold meetings, organize events, and stage protests in its vicinity.

Following the 2013 coup, the regime which evolved from the bloodbath unleashed by the counterrevolution has been qualitatively different from Mubarak's authoritarian formula. Instead of managing dissent like his pre-2011 predecessor, Sisi squashes dissent in its cradle. Instead of diffusing political anger through a complex web of intermediaries in a vibrant political scene – which included a parliament, parties, youth groups, community associations, trade unions, etc.–, the post-2013 regime has decimated what once existed as a civil society in the Gramscian sense. No buffer whatsoever exists between the state and society in Sisi's Egypt. Instead, some officer from the repressive apparatus institutions (be it police, army, or GIS) is in charge of this or that. The officers are micromanaging the population directly on a daily basis, instead of outsourcing social control to civilian executives, who used to ensure discipline without the need for over-intrusive intervention by the security services.

Under such a repressive environment, the Press Syndicate was hit hard. Not only did it cease to exist as a vibrant hub for political organizing and a launch base from which street protests and campaigns reverberated across the country, but also it became, in the words of one leftwing journalist I interviewed, an “empty ghost house”. For the first time in its history, the syndicate was stormed by the police in 2016 to arrest two journalists, who had taken refuge in the building, over charges of inciting protests.¹⁰ Since then, no assemblies of any kind were allowed in the building, and chairs were even removed from there by the former chairman, Abdel Mohsen Salama in 2017, so as not to allow any journalists to sit down, meet or socialize with other colleagues. The presence of journalists in the syndicate became a rare sight, and they only showed up if they needed to process papers for official transactions.

El-Balshy's victory has given a general sense to journalists that their syndicate has been reclaimed. In a telling gesture, the first decree issued on 21 March by Balshy after he

10 Atîf 'Abd al-'Azîz, Muḥammad Tāriq, and Hiba al-Ḥanafî, “al-Amn yaqtaḥim Niqābat al-Ṣāḥafîyyîn.. wa yulqî al-qabḍ 'ala 'Amr Badr wa Maḥmūd al-Saqqā,” al-Masry al-Youm, May 1, 2016, <https://www.almasry-alyoum.com/news/details/940155>.

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assumed his post was to bring back the chairs to the building, declaring the syndicate building is now open for journalists to assemble.

The victory has also boosted the morale of the activists in the journalists' ranks. For years they felt besieged, and many were slapped with prison sentences. By the end of 2021, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Egypt as the third worst jailer of journalists in the world, after China and Myanmar.¹¹ Egypt was also ranked 168th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2022 World Press Freedom Index.¹² El-Balshy's electoral campaign placed the issue of detentions as a top priority. His victory will inevitably make it more costly (though still not impossible) for the regime to pursue such crackdowns, now that the syndicate board that formerly toed the regime's line in every single issue has been replaced.

For long, the independence current in the Press Syndicate was dominated mainly by Nasserists. El-Balshy's victory, even when it received hesitant support from the Nasserists in the end, is bound to boost the clout of those dissidents further to the left of Nasserists.

The earthquake which struck the Press Syndicate is bound to have ripple effects. Members of other professional syndicates have been watching. El-Balshy's victory revived their hopes they could mobilize over issues related to their respective sectors, including reclaiming their syndicates from regime control. Under pressure from the base, the Lawyers Syndicate was forced to endorse thousands-strong protests by its members in December 2022, against a de facto tax hike.¹³ The lawyers threatened to strike in the following month, over the imprisonment of six colleagues detained after a quarrel with abusive court officials.¹⁴ The lawyers were immediately released.

The defeat of pro-regime forces at the Press Syndicate has

11 "Number of Journalists behind Bars Reaches Global High" (NY: CPJ, December 9, 2021), <https://cpj.org/reports/2021/12/number-of-journalists-behind-bars-reaches-global-high/>.

12 "Egypt" (Paris: Reporters Without Borders), accessed January 9, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/egypt>.

13 "Fearing de Facto Tax Hike, Lawyers Strike to Protest New Digital Billing System," Mada Masr, December 1, 2022, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/12/01/news/u/fearing-de-facto-tax-hike-lawyers-strike-to-protest-new-digital-billing-system/>.

14 Beesan Kassab, "Lawyers Strike to Protest Imprisonment of Colleagues after Quarrel at Court," trans. Ahmed Bakr, Mada Masr, January 19, 2023, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2023/01/19/news/u/lawyers-strike-to-protest-imprisonment-of-colleagues-after-quarrel-at-court/>.

been warmly received by dissident lawyers, who immediately started meetings and brainstorming on how they can replicate El-Balshy's victory. My activist sources in other professional syndicates like that of doctors and engineers report similar sentiments. To what extent will this victory set in motion a domino effect process of change is still unclear, yet it seems inevitable.

Beyond the professional syndicates' circles, the regime's small defeat had dissidents immediately thinking of why not try to defeat the regime at the "Egyptians Syndicate" – a euphemism for the 2024 presidential election. Amid a deteriorating economic situation and loss of regime popularity, such small victories like El-Balshy's are bound to encourage dissent on other fronts.

Limitations and expectations

In the short run, El-Balshy's victory is unlikely to meet some of the high expectations expressed by some dissidents who think the syndicate will immediately once again host protests in its vicinity or liberate the media industry from regime control. The best one could hope for, in the coming few months at least, is to secure the release of some journalists, and possibly to halt or slow the momentum of journalists' arrests. The syndicate building could also be expected to resume, albeit slowly, its position as a hub where journalists (not the entire activist community as in the past) could meet and discuss grievances related to their profession and possible ways to confront them.

One should not forget that El-Balshy is the editor-in-chief of *Darb* online portal, which is among the hundreds of websites censored by the regime. One can expect more pressure from the syndicate leadership on the regime to lift internet censorship. How successful such attempts will be remains questionable. But at least the regime will not find a blank check for such curbs.

El-Balshy is a clever tactician and a seasoned politician. It is unlikely he will lead the syndicate into a full-fledged premature confrontation with the regime forces, which is bound to end in a catastrophic defeat. Instead, he will continue with his incremental approach to try to increase or, to be more accurate, recreate slowly the safe space on the margin where dissent can be channeled into organized action.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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