

## Brotherhood coverage is pure journalism, not a political deal with Al Dostour: Eissa

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CAIRO: With two court cases that target his writings, Al Dostour editor Ibrahim Eissa is also accused of being a Muslim Brotherhood ally due to the paper's coverage of the banned group.

While the latter accusation hasn't taken any legal form, Eissa says those who make such claims are blind to the fact that all political streams are given an opportunity to publish their views in his newspaper.

Eissa — who is standing trial for spreading false rumors about the president's health and appealing another ruling that found him guilty of insulting symbols of the National Democratic Party (NDP) — believes freedom of the press is under severe attack in Egypt. A champion of press freedom, Eissa has been among the loudest critics of the Egyptian leadership.

**Daily News Egypt: You have been accused of being an ally to the banned Muslim Brotherhood organization. How would you describe your relationship with the group?**

**Ibrahim Eissa:** If you mean by relationship the fact that I have friends and acquaintances from among the Brotherhood's ranks then yes I do have a relationship with the Brotherhood. But you must also consider that I have relations with people inside the NDP whom I love and respect. I also have friends who are communists.

I am a journalist so I have contacts with all political streams. You must also consider that these are primarily human relationships, not political ones. But to hint or imply that the newspaper is biased towards or has cut a deal with the MB is nonsense.

For the past three years, they [state-run media] have been accusing us of cutting a deal with the Brotherhood, yet they never managed to present any evidence of such a deal. This assumption is because we publish news about the Brotherhood everyday or every week, and we publish their point of view and defend Brotherhood members who have been detained and are standing trials. In my opinion this is an honor for any journalist.

The Brotherhood represents 20 percent of parliament — 88 seats. It is the foremost opposition in the parliament, which [in itself] is insignificant and bare. It is like a semi parliament, something that resembles a parliament. The effective and active elements in it are those of the Muslim Brotherhood. The state-owned media doesn't want us to ever come near the Brotherhood.

Another point is that over the past three years the Brotherhood's members have been detained more than anyone else in Egypt. They (the Brotherhood) are being tried continuously. They don't want me to cover the trials of the Brotherhood. When I do cover the trials, they want me to present the point of view of the State Security officer on the case? How is this possible in any profession, any legislature or any mentality?

I am the only one that works professionally, they work through political affiliations. The state owned media is always defending the regime and the Ministry of Interior as if its claims are absolute truths. The state owned media have transformed the dispute with the Brotherhood from one that is security-based to one that even entails media coverage.

**In Al Dostour newspaper, we publish articles by Brotherhood writers, and we publish the opinions of communists, atheists, liberals and Nasserists. Why is it that any mention of the Brotherhood antagonizes them so severely?**

Kamal Khalil, the most important Marxist activist in Egypt, writes next to Mohamed Abdel Qoddous who writes the Brotherhood's column. If they want to label us as a Brotherhood newspaper they are free to do so. They can bang their head against the wall for all I care. We persist in our belief that there is discrimination against a political team in Egypt, which is the Brotherhood.

We promote any prisoner of conscience, whether it be Talaat El Sadat, the Brotherhood or Bahais. People should study our position with the Bahai community on freedom of belief. People should read how we defend the rights of Christians who want to return to Christianity after converting to Islam. No one in Egypt defends freedom of expression and belief more than Al Dostour newspaper.

**Wael El Ibrashy, Adel Hamouda and Abdel Halim Qandeel and you come from very different political and journalism schools, why do you think all four of you were targeted for insulting symbols of the NDP?**

This shows you that the regime is against freedom of the press because when they passed judgment, they judged four journalists that come from very different schools of journalism. Every one of them is from a different stream of the opposition. The one thing we all have in common is that we attack corruption, oppression and defend freedom of the press. That is why all four of us are attacked on a daily basis in the state-owned media.

**What is the significance of your case with regards to freedom of the press in Egypt?**

If I lose my 'presidential illness [rumor]' case, I imagine that the Egyptian press will go backwards five years or maybe more. The right of an Egyptian journalist to criticize the president's policies and attack him politically will end. We will transform the president once again to an untouchable pharaoh. All of the gains that the media made will be lost.

**Do you think there will be any political ramification precipitated by your case similar to the Saad El Din Ibrahim case where the US was pressuring Egypt on his behalf?**

I don't think so. Firstly because Dr Saad El Din Ibrahim is a renowned thinker and a well-known professor. But he is a professor at the American University in Cairo and he is a US citizen, there is a big difference.

He is my teacher and a personal friend too. I respect and love him very much. He is well known internationally, I am known locally. I am not at the level of fame that would merit US or European attention.

I think that human rights NGOs will defend me due to my profile and not my name. I am an Egyptian journalist who is being subjected to security pressures and trials or to prison, God forbid. I think there will be solidarity in that respect. I don't think it will take on a political dimension because I'm not a politician but the future is open.

I may even nominate myself for the presidency then I would be accused of forgery. Egyptian society or the system in Egypt has reached a point of intolerance, close-mindedness and patronization where the desire to destroy any real opposition is increasingly prevalent. The regime is willing to pay a very high price in terms of its international reputation to decimate any opposition on the street.

### **What is the legal status of your case at present?**

I am accused in one case of publishing untrue rumors about the health of President Mubarak and this is according to Articles 102 and 180 in Egyptian law which is a misdemeanor, where I can get a ruling from one to three years in prison.

This case is unique in a number of ways. It is the first case where I am targeted for antagonizing the president of the republic. The second point is that this case was launched by the government itself and not some average citizen. This makes it a confrontation with the regime itself. The third and most dangerous point is that in my opinion, there is no such thing as an independent judiciary in Egypt. The judiciary in Egypt is mostly under the control of the government. Therefore we are facing a case that is more of a political trial rather than a legal one.

In the other case, a ruling was recently passed convicted me of insulting Gamal Mubarak. Abdel Halim Qandeel was convicted of insulting President Mubarak, Adel Hamouda insulted Ahmed Nazif and Wael El Ibrashy was convicted of insulting Habib El Adly. The ruling came out on Sept. 13 with a one-year prison sentence, which we have appealed.

This case is unprecedented in the universe and not just the world. It is a historical case which will be examined again and again in journalism history books.