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President Barack H. Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500
USA

Paris, May 28, 2009

Dear President Obama,

Reporters Without Borders, an organization that defends press freedom worldwide, would like to draw your attention to the frequent violations of free expression by the government of Egypt, which you are to visit next week. We hope your talks with your Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak, will include this subject as you have often indicated that your presidency will be marked by a commitment to human rights.

According to the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, an average of one lawsuit affecting free expression is brought before Egypt's courts every day – lawsuits against newspapers, journalists, websites and bloggers. One of the latest to be heard concerned Tamer Mabrouk, a blogger who was ordered on appeal on 26 May to pay 8,000 dollars in damages for accusing a chemicals company of dumping hazardous waste in the Suez canal. Some 500 Internet users were arrested in the course of 2008 because of what they posted online. This is all the more disturbing as Egypt has one of the highest rates of Internet use in Africa, with 20 percent of the population going online.

We would also like to point out that blogger Kareem Amer was sentenced to four years in prison on 22 February 2007 on charges of "inciting hatred of Islam" and "insulting" President Mubarak in blog entries that just criticized the government's religious and authoritarian excesses as well as Egypt's leading religious institutions such as the Sunni university of Al-Azhar, where he studied law.

Contrary to repressive countries such as China and Cuba, and nearby ones such as Tunisia, Libya and Saudi Arabia, the members of the political opposition in Egypt are not dissidents who have to act clandestinely. The activists who use the Internet to criticize the government do not conceal themselves and their means of communication rely on completely transparent methods.

But the control is tightening on telecommunications as a result of this enthusiasm for the Internet. Since 2008, Egyptians have not been able to get a phone line without registering first. New regulations have changed the conditions for Wi-Fi Internet connections. All connections now have to be paid for and in order to connect, an email address must be given to which the required username and password is sent.

Furthermore, an Internet regulation bill is currently before parliament that would make “improper use of the Internet” and the “posting of multimedia content without government authorisation” punishable by imprisonment. Such penalties would directly violate the principle of the free flow of information.

Meanwhile, anyone wanting to publish a newspaper in Egypt has to get permission from the state-controlled High Council for the Press, various security agencies and the Council of Ministers. Despite these restrictions, an opposition press is developing in Egypt and Law No. 40 has allowed every political party to set up its own newspaper since 1997. Nonetheless, if the articles they publish are deemed to pose a “threat to national security,” both the party and the newspaper can be closed. Most newspapers do not have their own printing press. The government has managed to monopolize printing and owns 99 percent of the country’s presses, which means it is able to block distribution of a newspaper at any time.

The independent daily *Al-Dustour* has had to defend itself in court 2,050 times since 2005 against lawsuits and prosecutions prompted by articles criticising government policies. Most of these cases were criminal prosecutions which could have resulted in members of the newspaper’s staff being jailed. In fact, the newspaper has won 85 percent of the cases and another 10 percent have been dismissed for procedural irregularities.

A total of 32 articles in different laws – including the criminal code, the press law, the publications law, the law on state documents (which forbids journalists to access certain official documents), the civil service law and the political parties law – stipulate penalties for the media. And when a press case comes before the courts, the authorities are allowed to choose the judge who tries it.

We would also point out that a state of emergency that has been in effect for the past 26 years allows the authorities to imprison government opponents and prevent them from expressing their views freely.

We therefore feel that you cannot visit Egypt without mentioning the need to repeal the state of emergency, free Kareem Amer, decriminalise press offences and withdraw the Internet regulation bill. We recall that on 1 May, you voiced your support and admiration for “all those brave men and women of the press who labour to expose truth and enhance accountability around the world.”

As we said in our 17 February letter to you, the consistency and credibility of US foreign policy will depend on your administration’s ability to demonstrate the same vigilance in relations with your partners and allies.

I thank you in advance for giving this request your careful consideration. Reporters Without Borders International Secretariat and its Washington DC office remain at your disposal to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,



Jean-François Julliard
Secretary-General