Meir R. Walters
Georgetown University, Department of Government
April 1, 2015

Dear DCC Graduate Workshop Participants,

This is a very rough working draft of a section of the second chapter of my dissertation, "The Politics of Censorship in Media-Saturated Autocracies: Contemporary Egypt in Comparative Perspective." This chapter is the first of three case studies of censorship and propaganda formation in post-Mubarak Egypt. My research is largely based on fieldwork in Egypt between June 2012-October 2014. In my first chapter, I go into more detail about the literature on censorship and how the case of Egypt fits into existing theories. In the next two chapters, I discuss the politics of producing satire and pro-military pop culture products amidst security crackdowns in contemporary Egypt.

I am especially curious to get feedback about how much more background information and perspective from interviews with a wider range of actors would be helpful to clarify my argument in this chapter. (The sections I left out in this manuscript were mostly a discussion of rival concepts of censorship.)

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read this. I am looking forward to the discussion.

WORKING DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE, CITE OR CIRCULATE

Censorship as a Populist Project: The Case of Post-Mubarak Egypt

What role does the Egyptian censorship bureaucracy play amidst the political and media crackdown following the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt? How do state censorship officials justify curbing expression, and how do they position themselves in relationship to other official or unofficial "censors"—from religious institutions, the security services, politicians, or the broader public? Political scientists and human rights advocates tend to view censorship in functionalist terms—as a tool autocrats use to secure their hold on power (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; King et al. 2013; Lorentzen 2012; Stockmann & Gallagher 2011), or as a violation

of a universal right to free expression.[1] This paper argues that such approaches are incomplete

for understanding the decentralized and often conflictual process through which censorship

occurs in contemporary Egypt. Drawing on alternate accounts of censorship from disciplines

such as anthropology and cultural theory (Bourdieu 1991; Boyer 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff

2004; Darnton 1995; Fish 1993; Foucault 1977; Freshwater 2003; Mazzarella 2013; Steiner

1995), I argue that censorship is a creative act, rather than simply a negation of free speech.

Of course, amidst the current crackdown on political protest and dissident media in

Egypt, censorship does sometimes operate as a flagrant authoritarian tool to silence opponents,

and as part of a broader wave of egregious human rights violations (including mass political

killings and detentions). However, functionalist accounts of censorship are incomplete. Focusing

on censorship as a mere act of negation or silencing ignores how these actions are sold to the

public—and, in particular, how they are often presented as a response to public demands to

protect public security and national reputation amidst a supposedly unprecedented time of crisis.

Treating censorship as an authoritarian tool or negation of free speech also ignores the

(often publically contested) process through which acts of censorship actually occur. It

deemphasizes the creative work that censorship and debates about it do in shaping norms of what

is sayable, what the nation is, and who has the right to represent it. As a decentralized, contested,

and often publicly debated process, censorship in Egypt reveals institutional and discursive

constraints that aspiring leaders must work within as they attempt to consolidate power.

Additionally, I argue that censorship and propaganda creation are interrelated, and their exact

---

[1] For examples of definitions of censorship as a violation of a human right to free speech, see The Index on Censorship, http://www.indexoncensorship.org/about-free-expression/ and Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/issues/freedomexpression#.VP36clogz7V.

content or impact is often not subject to centralized control, since they depend upon bureaucrats and public intellectuals (with competing interests, ideals, and political visions) to be carried out.

Drawing on interviews with Ministry of Culture censorship officials working from the late-Mubarak era till the present, I discuss how they conceptualize censorship and their role in administering it. Several common themes emerge: several senior censorship officials describe themselves as "censors against censorship," and laud themselves as heroic defenders of freedom of expression. Relatedly, the censorship officials I interviewed tended to portray themselves as victims of pressure from other institutions, politicians, or society that continually attempt to curb artistic freedom. While these censors' depictions of their own revolutionary heroics are likely overstated, they do reflect real tensions between various agents of censorship (e.g., the security services, military, religious organizations, etc.) that are often at odds with one another and, to an extent, acting at cross purposes.

Overall, I argue that censorship is a fragmented process in contemporary Egypt that reflects institutional legacies and ideological tensions as much as a tool that leaders can use to curb dissent. In addition to being an authoritarian tool and a constraint on what can be said, in contemporary Egypt censorship is also justified and couched in populist terms as a demand from the people to protect national reputation or as an act to protect the people amidst a state of crisis. As a contested act justified through calls to populism, censorship and the institutions that enact it reflect constraints upon aspiring leaders in post-Mubarak Egypt as much as a tool they can employ to bolster their power.

Selling a Crackdown

In 2013, amidst the turmoil surrounding the ouster of Mohamed Morsi from the

presidency, and the subsequent military-led takeover of the government, over 1,150

demonstrators were killed as security forces violently cleared pro-Morsi sit-ins and cracked

down on other protestors.[2] While under Hosni Mubarak the number of political detainees in

Egypt peeked at around 14,000, after the summer 2013 coup, the Egyptian security forces

detained over 41,000 people.[3] This physical violence coincided with a widespread crackdown on

the media during which all pro-Muslim Brotherhood media outlets were shut down, and most

other vocally anti-coup voices were silenced.[4] Indeed, amidst the turmoil of 2013, the Committee

to Protect Journalists ranked Egypt "the third-deadliest country for the press."[5]

These crackdowns have been crucially important to aspiring leaders' attempts to

reconsolidate a security state and insulate themselves from future mass mobilization. Thus, in

contemporary Egypt, censorship is being conducted in extraordinarily blunt fashion, often at the

barrel of a gun. However, focusing exclusively on repression of the media sidesteps questions

about the constitutive work that national media has done to support the coup, and justify violent

repression and the crackdown on "dissident" media outlets and personalities. While controlling

the media such to silence politically dissident voices, Egypt's aspiring leaders are simultaneously

---

[2] http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/egypt0814web_0.pdf; for a first-hand account of the Rab'a al-Adawiya protest camp before the disbursal, see Moll (2014).

[3] http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061014.

[4] See, for example, http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/egypt_returns_to_censorship.php. For some more recent examples of the crackdown on the media in Egypt, see http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/egyptian-media-isnt-taking-prisoners-states-line-only-line.

[5] https://www.cpj.org/2014/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2013-egypt.php

attempting to gain populist credentials, and need to enlist existing media personalities, public intellectuals, and other cultural producers to support their cause and promote their actions. For example, as I discuss below, even crackdowns on the media, such as banning Bassem Youssef's wildly popular satirical talk show, are justified through populist rhetoric about protecting Egypt's national reputation, security, identity, and public morality amidst a supposedly unprecedented time of crisis. In short, Egypt's post-coup leaders have been pursuing a dual strategy of cracking down on the media and using well-established "independent" media personalities to support their cause.

Below, I discuss how censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture view their job, and the broader political significance of censorship. I interviewed censorship officials who worked from the late-Mubarak era till the present, and I argue that there are striking similarities in how some censors portray their work, despite the dramatic political transformations that occurred between their tenures. Since the Ministry of Culture's role in censorship is limited to certain products, my aim is not to give a comprehensive portrait of all censorship activity in Egypt. However, while the Ministry of Culture is primarily responsible for censoring films and theatre productions, and not, for example, talk shows (which falls under the purview of the Ministry of Information), understanding how these censors view their role may be reflective of broader trends and tensions within bureaucracies responsible for dealing with culture and media. Many government bureaucrats responsible for censoring mass media and culture may be complicit in supporting the reconsolidation of an authoritarian security state. However, this does not mean that acts such as censorship are highly coordinated, or that the character of government messaging and the parameters of what is sayable are clear cut or part of a broad consensus among government officials and established figures in the state-approved culture industry.

Four Egyptian Censors on Censorship

When I first started interviewing prominent players in the Egyptian cinema industry and censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture in the autumn of 2012, I expected that the two would be locked in perpetual conflict. Not knowing much about how censorship actually worked in Egypt, I naively imagined the censor as an iron-fisted bureaucrat whose aim in life was to prevent anything too incendiary or politically risky from being said. In other words, I succumbed to the Manichaeism Darnton (1995) cautions against—assuming artists to be the wellspring of dissident thought, and the censor their antithesis. In a still politically vibrant and hopeful Egypt, I assumed that artists would be vanguards of the revolution, and the censor at the forefront of the counterrevolution.

What I found was more complicated. What surprised me most when I started interviewing prominent players in the Egyptian film industry about their experiences with censorship was that many of them did not see censorship as a major challenge to their work. Indeed, many of them were personal friends of current or former censorship officials. While everyone I spoke with had stories to tell about censorship, and limitations on what could be shown in a public medium such as commercial film, they did not seem very incensed by these limitations, or that they were the primary hindrances to their ability to make creative expression.

Many well-established players in the film industry were on friendly terms with senior censors and other officials from the Ministry of Culture. In fact, I first got introduced to censorship officials through the prominent scriptwriter Bashir El-Dik.[6] Censors and many well-established members of the film industry were part of the same milieu. Their relationship was

---

[6] Bashir El-Dik is famous for writing the scripts to acclaimed films that fall into the "new realist" genre that began in the 1980s. For a discussion of "new realism" in Egyptian cinema and Bashir El-Dik, see Shafik (2007), 142-143.

marked more by shared interests and values than by conflict. They went to the same cultural events, had mutual friends, and seemed to share similar values about the role of artists vis-à-vis the security state. Part of this may have been generational. Scriptwriters and filmmakers whose best work was done in the 1980s-90s, and were now living very materially comfortable lives, and enjoying their status for past accomplishments are probably not the most likely to support radical socio-economic change.

Indeed, many young filmmakers (in their 20s and 30s) I talked to expressed disdain of old-guard cultural bureaucrats who thrived in government positions during the Mubarak years. Many of these younger interlocutors (who had benefited less and had less at stake in forming a cozy relationship with state-supported culture) viewed this old guard as complicit with the Mubarak regime, and some of its vanguard filmmakers as pro-regime propagandists. However, many of my interlocutors still did not view the official censorship process as their biggest hurdle. This is not because they necessarily shared similar values or political commitments with the censors (as some older film makers seemed to), but that they simply did not feel compelled to make the types of films that would get censored.

For example, the directors Hala Lotfy and Ahmed Abdullah both emphasized how easy it is for them to avoid problems with the official censorship board. Instead, they emphasized problems such as bureaucratic red tape to get approval to film or access to locations as a much bigger problem than censorship.[7] These and other filmmakers I spoke with did not necessarily view the most politically or socially important types of expression as matching up with what censors would view as "red lines."

---

[7] Interview with Hala Lotfy, Cairo, June 10, 2014; Interview with Ahmad Abdalla, Cairo, May 21, 2014.

Censors against Censorship

One key theme that emerged during my interviews with current and former censorship officials from the Ministry of Culture was that many of them position themselves as champions of freedom of expression and artistic freedom. The Ministry of Culture's chief censors are generally involved in the arts themselves (film directors, script writers, and critics), not lifelong professional bureaucrats, party apparatchiks, or retired military officers.

For example, the film critic Ali Abu Shadi, who served as the head of the Ministry of Culture's censorship office from 1996-1999 and 2004-2009, describes himself as a censor against censorship. In the context of post-revolution Egypt, I would have expected one of Mubarak's long-serving chief censors to be defensive about working for an ousted autocratic regime. Instead, Mubarak's chief censor postured himself as a prescient champion of the revolution.

In my discussions with him, Abu Shadi focused on what he depicted as his own heroic role in allowing political films (such as Youssef Chahine's final film, *Chaos* (2007),[8] and *The Yacoubian Building* (2006)[9] staring comedic icon Adel Imam) to get past the censorship process. Abu Shadi described these films as some of the most audacious political films about the Mubarak era, which exhibited tremendous bravery for criticizing the Mubarak regime when it was still in power.

When discussing *Chaos*, Abu Shadi claimed that he helped to get the film released without any cuts or changes to the script. Though he also claims that Youssef Chahine's fame and national stature would have made it difficult for politicians to block the film. Abu Shadi

---

[8] For a discussion of Youssef Chahine's *Chaos*, see Gordon (2013).

[9] For a discussion of *The Yacoubian Building*, see Armbrust (2012).

claimed that three lower-level censors who were responsible for commenting on the script turned in 50 combined suggested changes to him. Abu Shadi claimed that if all of these changes were made, there simply would be no film left. In response, he wrote that he agreed with all of these comments, even though he knew that Chahine would not make the suggested changes. Thus, even while legally bound to request draconian censorship of what most know would be the last film of Egypt's most famous living director, Abu Shadi interpreted his actions as tacitly siding with the artist against less-enlightened politicians. Abu Shadi felt emboldened to support the film partly because he knew that no one could challenge it once it was already made, given Chahine's stature and old age. "No one would bury that coffin."

Likewise, Abu Shadi valorizes his role in enabling the release of the Yacoubian Building. Abu Shadi claimed that he wants everything to be expressed with small limits (because of political limitations), for example comments against Mubarak would be going too far. There were also many censors' comments on the script for The Yacoubian Building. As with *Chaos*, Abu Shadi claims that he told the filmmakers to go ahead with filming, even while technically approving the lower-level censors' extensive recommended cuts and changes.

Abu Shadi claims that his reason for tacitly facilitating these films' release was that he was genuinely excited about them. Abu Shadi claimed that like politically scathing late-Nasser-era films (such as Tawfiq Saleh's *al-Moutamarridoun* (*The Rebels*, 1968), *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* (which he considers the most important political films of the Mubarak era) criticized Mubarak during Mubarak's own lifetime. Abu Shadi claimed that he respects such direct criticism of the current regime, since it takes great courage to criticize a living president. "Egypt is not like America where such criticism is easy to do." He facilitated their release

because he wants everything to be expressed with small limits (because of political realities), for example direct comments against Mubarak would be going too far.[10]

Similarly, during my interview with current president of the Ministry of Culture's censorship board, Abdel Satar Fathi, he presented himself as a censor against censorship. As he put it to me, "artists are happy that I am the chief censor, because I am one of them." When I met Fathi at his office in downtown Cairo, a group working on a television series came into his office to protest the censors' decision not to allow a song that was in the script. After arguing with the crew, Fathi told them that it is out of his hands. As he explained it to me after the aggrieved serial producers left, he supports great latitude for freedom of expression, but "the law has me against the wall." Fathi went on to justify his work as a censor by claiming that every country censors public media (e.g., America and France label some films as for "adults only"). Like Ali Abu Shadi, Fathi lauded his role in permitting films that would have previously been unreleasable. As a self-identified intellectual, Fathi depicted himself as a vanguard of the revolution who was being held back by Islamists and other regressive political and social forces to which he attributed the continuation of draconian forms of censorship. His own role in the censorship process is out of his hands, since he is beholden to an imperfect set of laws.[11]

Ahmed Awad, who briefly served as chief censor from September 2013-April 2014, also presented himself as a censor against censorship in its current form. Awad claimed that he was one of the leaders of the sit-in at the Ministry of Culture that began on June 5, and that he got requested to serve as chief censor there. Awad cited as one of his key achievements his attempt

---

[10] Interview with Ali Abu Shadi, Cairo, January 13, 2013.

[11] Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.

to replace elements of the censorship process with a rating system that would categorize films' appropriateness for viewers of different ages.

Like the other chief censors I spoke with, Awad lauded his role in permitting unprecedentedly edgy films. When I asked Awad about the difference between the political films permitted during the late Mubarak era with those he allowed, Awad described the politics of censorship under Mubarak as a political game with only certain types of criticism permitted mostly by filmmakers with established clout and connections. Awad described the climate for cultural producers under Mubarak as a "fake democracy" that allowed only the empty shell of opposition. The space for freedom of expression was tight, and had little direct impact. Politicians let artists talk a bit, but this had no political impact.

Awad contrasts this with his experience as censor during which he permitted films such as Amr Salama's *Lamoaakhza* (*Excuse My French*, 2014) that had previously been blocked by the censors, and politically critical films such as Hazem Metwaly's *Bad al-Tufan (After the Flood,* 2012*)* and Ahmad Abdallah's *Farsh w Ghatta (Rags and Tatters,* 2013).[12] According to Awad, the revolution rejected the constraints upon freedom of expression of the Mubarak years, bringing about a nascent generation of revolutionary films that could not have been released prior to the uprising. Awad defended the increased freedom of post-Mubarak Egypt even though he resigned from the censorship office "out of self-respect" (as Awad put it to me) following a controversy in which the Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehleb personally banned the movie *Halawet*

---

[12] For Awad's account of his role in permitting controversial films during his time as censor, also see http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/qa-egypt's-head-censorship-ahmed-awaad.

Roh (*Sweetness of Spirit*, 2014), staring Lebanese bombshell Haifa Wehbe, that Awad approved for release.[13]

I met with Awad on the day that results from Egyptians abroad were coming in for the presidential elections pitting former army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi against Hamdeen Sabahi. Despite the recent security crackdowns, Awad, who was rooting for a Sisi landslide, and kept checking his smartphone for the latest results. When I asked him about the current political climate, he did not backtrack on his optimism about free expression being better than under Mubarak.

"Hosni Mubarak is not going to come back again. Those who say that Hosni Mubarak's regime is still here are wrong. Those who say that Sisi will bring back Mubarak's regime are wrong…. Over the past two years, you have the best people in the world put two presidents in prison [Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi]. Is it possible that the army could put Sisi in power against the people's will? You saw how many people went to the streets on June 30 with your own eyes, right? The Culture Ministry sit-in [which Awad claims to have participated in] was a crucial part of June 30 [the date of the mass uprising against then-President Morsi]."[14]

The Censor as Victim

A related theme that censorship officials consistently focused on was the attacks they face from other individuals or institutions. The Ministry of Culture's censorship decisions can be challenged by religious institutions (al-Azhar or the Coptic Church), the military and security services, powerful politicians, or subject to lawsuits from the public. Thus, in their role as "censors against censorship," officials such as Ali Abu Shadi, Abdel Satar Fathi, and Ahmed

---

[13] For coverage of the controversy surrounding *halawet rooh*, see
http://www.madamasr.com/news/prime-minister-orders-suspension-provocative-film;
http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/cairo-court-overrules-pms-decision-ban-halawet-rouh-film.

[14] Interview with Ahmed Awad, Cairo, May 19, 2014.

Awad all portrayed themselves as champions of freedom backed against the wall by arcane laws and pressures from society and other government agents.

For example, Ali Abu Shadi claimed that in response to his defense of political films critical of the Mubarak regime, the Interior Minister sent an angry letter to former Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosny, demanding that he remove Abu Shadi from his position, accusing him of wanting to make a revolution. However, Farouk Hosny[15] (who Abu Shadi lauded as an excellent Minister of Culture and defender of the arts) shielded him from this pressure, and never forced him to go against his conscience. Similarly, Abu Shadi claimed that he came under attack from powerful National Democratic Party (NDP) official, Kamal al-Shadhili, who felt that he had personally been lampooned in the film *The Yacoubian Building*. In a meeting, al-Shadhili accused Abu Shadi of permitting the film to be released even though it depicted a character al-Shadhili took to be a representation of himself taking bribes.[16]

Similarly, Abdel Satar Fathi expressed feeling trapped in his role as a post-revolution censor by the military on the one hand and Islamists on the other. In particular, he expressed fear that the Muslim Brotherhood might appoint one of their supporters as chief censor. Fathi also cited the example of the documentary film *Jews of Egypt* (2013), which state security tried to block, but was released "under my personal responsibility."[17]

---

[15] For background on Farouk Hosny, see Winegar (2006).

[16] Interview with Ali Abu Shadi, Cairo, January 13, 2013.

[17] Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.

Censors Should Censor: Protecting Public Morals and National Reputation

On September 20, 2014, the American University of Cairo (AUC) hosted a panel

discussion about censorship featuring Ali Abu Shadi and several film critics (Walid Saif and

Kamal Ramzy). Taking place amidst a widespread security crackdown, which featured the

closure of numerous media outlets, and the arrest of journalists, it was remarkable both that such

an event could be held at all, and that it almost entirely avoided these ongoing issues.

During the discussion, Ali Abu Shadi and the film critic Kamal Ramzi criticized national

controversies over films, such as Darren Aronofsky's biblical epic, *Noah*, which al-Azhar

recommended be banned but was approved by the censorship committee in the Ministry of

Culture.[18] They claimed that fears over public outrage over such movies were overblown. In

reality, people are smart enough to judge these things for themselves, and they will not burn

down cinemas over a Hollywood blockbuster as some fear. Kamal Ramzi related viewing the

film in Beirut with Ali Abu Shaadi, and the theatre was empty. Far from being a dangerous event

inciting the masses, it was a non-event.

This posturing stands in contrast to the notion of the censor employing the specter of the

unruly masses as a justification for censoring mass media. As William Mazzarella shows, this

argument was used to justify censorship in India from colonial times to the present. The censor

tends to posture her or himself as part of an enlightened intellectual elite who are immune to the

dangers that mass media can pose to the masses. Indian censors tend to not only reason that

"censorship should be abolished-but not yet," but also that "censorship is, for now, necessary-but

---

[18] For background on this controversy, see http://www.madamasr.com/news/weekly-spotlight-
state-culture-'noah'-be-screened-egypt.

not for me." In doing so, they differentiate between the enlightened public and unruly crowd at the movies (Mazzarella 2013, 18).

This differentiation between publics and crowds, enlightened intellectuals versus unruly masses also tends to present the current state of affairs as particularly liminal and dangerous. In India, according to Mazzarella, the present has been in a perpetual state of emergency for centuries: "the legitimation of censorship—whether in the regretful liberal mode or the less apologetic conservative mode—depends on a diagnosis of being in a historically liminal state of transition….In the liminal present…Indians are adrift in a rudderless mass society, buffeted by provocative image-objects and solicited by all manner of shrill mass moralizers. Under such conditions, many justify censorship as a pragmatic, albeit lamentable, way of preventing things from spiraling into complete chaos" (Mazzarella 2013, 17).

During the question and answer period, a member of the audience who identified himself as on the Ministry of Culture's board of censors of foreign films stood up and expressed indignation at the notion that critics and censors would permit films that are deemed morally or religiously suspect. In other words, he defended elements of Mazzarella's censors' justifications for banning content dangerous to the masses. He seemed to view the posturing of "censors against censorship" as both dangerously liberal and disingenuous. He argued that the job of censors is, after all, to censor, and that some affronts to religion simply should not be shown to mass audiences.

When I met this censor for coffee in downtown Cairo a few weeks after the panel discussion at AUC, he was even more blunt in expressing his outrage of what he viewed as the hypocrisy of claiming to be "a censor against censorship." He listed several historic censorship officials who worked from the 1960s onwards who went on to become (disingenuous) liberal

critics of censorship policies. "They claim to be against censorship, but then why do they accept the position of censor?...The contradiction makes me furious."

This censor's incredulity partly matched up with an ethos of intellectuals protecting the susceptible and dangerous masses. He did at times distinguish between "intellectuals" and ordinary viewers, assuming (pace Mazzarella's Indian censors) that the former can safely watch films that could dangerously incite or undermine the morals of the latter. For example, he told me, "[T]here is a difference between intellectuals and ordinary people. If you end a movie saying there is no God, it will shock the people. If the main point of the movie is to say there is no God, it will shock the majority, even if the elites understand." Thus, he argued that censorship of commercial movies could only be decreased gradually. Since mass publics could be dangerously incited by controversial movies, if religiously incendiary movies were released now, people could be incited to acts such as burning down cinemas or Christian neighborhoods.

In contrast, he stated, "there is no danger for elites to watch anything." Thus, festival boards should simply choose the films that will be shown at film festivals (which have a limited and purportedly "elite" audience). He argued that the only reason that festival heads want to go through the Ministry of Culture's censorship board is to use the government censors as scapegoat if anything should go wrong. Similarly, he argued that while it was acceptable for *The Da Vinci Code* to be available as a book in Egypt (since novels have a limited readership), but the movie version, which "millions would see" in theatres, was appropriately banned. Likewise, "curse words are also only appropriate for elites who could understand the context and enjoy it."[19]

---

[19] Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.

Other censorship officials also described the censor's role in elitist terms. Abdel Satar Fathi, for example, claimed that "the role of the censor is to protect the people,"[20] implying a gap between "the people" and the censor and his milieu. Ahmed Awad claimed that while political and social criticism should not be curtailed, "with moral matters, there are some things that society says that it cannot bear—they can bear it up to a certain degree, and not more than that."[21] In short, like Mazzarella's account of film censors in India, Egyptian censors do distinguish between enlightened publics and dangerous crowds, and justify tough censorship practices by invoking the notion of the present as a state of emergency.

However, this narrative was not always the dominant one. In my discussion with the censor of foreign films, he more frequently and emphatically emphasized the actual dangers (and inherent offensiveness) of certain creative products, not just for the unruly masses, but for everyone. In particular, he emphasized how certain books, movies, and television programs offend Egypt's national reputation and moral values. While the censor must (almost by definition) think of her or himself as somehow immune to the dangers of the material being censored, this does not necessarily mean that censors always make a clear-cut distinction between the dangerous effects a work could have if viewed by the public and the inherent repulsiveness of the works themselves. (Think, for example, of police tasked with monitoring child pornography or violent extremist websites. The fact that the individuals see themselves as professional enough to "safely" view the content does not mean that they do not see it as inherently dangerous or offensive.)

---

[20] Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.

[21] Interview with Ahmed Awad, Cairo, 19 May 2014.

Regarding morally dangerous films, the censor claimed that you cannot ridicule sacred beliefs. He emphasized respect for both al-Azhar and the Coptic Church, and claimed that he thought that the Ministry of Culture's censorship boards should not have an adversarial relationship with either of these religious bodies. "Why would you release something that would offend all Christians or all Muslims?" He also emphasized that as a religious man, he finds some movies personally offensive. For example, regarding the film *Noah*, the censor claimed that he found the movie shocking "because it presented God as bloodthirsty. He wants to destroy all of mankind, except for Noah and the animals. In the movie, God incited Noah to kill his grandsons." Thus, he claimed that he would have banned *Noah* as al-Azhar recommended. "You cannot abolish censorship until there is a real enforceable law to prevent the majority from seeing inappropriate content."[22]

Similarly, in my discussions with other censorship officials, they sometimes veered from emphasizing the danger that controversial topics pose to the broader public to issues that they personally found offensive. For example, Abdel Satar Fathi expressed discomfort with how homosexuality was represented in *The Yacoubian Building*, arguing that as something inherently "unnatural," it should only be represented in the context of comedy or else must be presented as a psychological problem.[23]

Similarly, during my discussion with the censor of foreign films, he emphasized the need to protect Egypt's national reputation, not only for the sake of the uneducated masses, but also for himself. For example, he brought up the topic of Bassem Youssef's widely popular satirical talk show that had recently been taken off the air. As he put it, "[y]ou have to accept that the

---

[22] Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.

[23] Interview with Abdel Satar Fathi, Cairo, June 2013.

majority of people favor Sisi. People are not ready for [extreme forms of critique] like Bassem Youssef. [Such criticism] should be introduced gradually….There is a need to hold back, even if the current regime is not fully respecting liberty. One can only express liberty when it does not offend others. You need to filter what people can accept without being shocked."

He went on, "Bassem Youssef trespassed the red line. He was out of ideas. He ridiculed the army, which is respected by everyone. If he does this, what is next? We have been saved by the army, and now he is making fun of them….People are hanging on to their last hope, and now Bassem Youssef is making fun of that. You can ridicule the President, but it is [a matter of] timing." The censor went on to differentiate between criticizing a president and ridiculing his very reputation. The latter, the censor argued, is beyond the pale of what should be acceptable, whether the president in question is Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, or Adly Mansour. That is, one should never defame a president's reputation, even if you adamantly disagree with the president's policies or view their performance as bad. Thus, according to the censor, Bassem Youssef did not only go too far when he poked fun at Sisi, but even his satires of Morsi (whom the censor loathed) went beyond the pale of acceptable speech.[24]

Room for Interpretation: The Pliability of "Taboos"

Despite their differences, all of the censors I spoke with described their job as creative— as driven by the need for the censor to actively look at "texts" as a whole in order to ascertain the value or dangers of a given work. Given the vagueness of many written censorship laws, almost anything could potentially be banned. As Ali Abu Shaadi put it, "The law is there, but the chief

---

[24] Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.

censor can change things based on his mentality and interpretation."[25] Similarly, the censor of foreign films whom I met at the AUC event emphasized that he did not view his job as the rote cutting of scenes based off of a list of controversial issues, but as synthetically looking at the overall messages of films and determining whether they are truly immoral or dangerous to the public.[26] Thus, censors need to work creatively in order to interpret and contextualize the law, and balance their own politics and aesthetics with the pressures they face from other individuals and institutions.

A common theme that censors and some critics and artists repeated in their discussions with me was the cliché that censorship centered around the "three taboos" of politics, sex, and religion. What is interesting is that these purportedly "taboo" subjects constantly appear in Egyptian cinema. Indeed, without movies about politics, sex, and religion, there would be very few Egyptian films at all (including many of the classics of Egyptian cinema). Thus, given the vagueness of the written censorship laws, all of the censors I spoke with emphasized their work as creative and even as an act of activism, whether liberal or conservative. This is true for the "censors against censorship," as well as the censor who viewed the notion of attempting to battle censorship from the inside as hypocritical.

Conclusion: Censorship, Crackdowns, and Authoritarian Reconsolidation

Censorship is not simply a tool that autocrats use to block, constrain, or manipulate public discourse at will. Even amidst a dramatic and brutal crackdown, aspiring leaders are still beholden to existing institutions, personalities, and discourses about national identity. Thus,

---

[25] Interview with Ali Abu Shadi, Cairo, January 13, 2013.

[26] Interview with censorship official for foreign films, Cairo, October 2014.

processes of censorship reveal constraints as well as possibilities for aspiring leaders. More than a negation of free speech, censorship is a constitutive process of attempting to redefine the boundaries of what is normal, desirable, offensive, or threatening. While Ministry of Culture censors may partly be acting disingenuously when they posture themselves as champions of freedom of expression, conflicts between government ministries do exist, often making censorship more of a battle than a unified decree. Perhaps this also makes it possible to work within authoritarian state institutions without necessarily seeing oneself as culpable for its abuses, to sing the praises of Farouk Hosni, posture oneself as a vanguard of the revolution, or ignore (if not celebrate) mass killings and political detentions. It makes it possible to hold panel discussions about censorship without mentioning an ongoing crackdown on the media, and perhaps to not even think about how ironic this is.

The decentralized nature of censorship in Egypt provides opportunities for cultural bureaucrats to deflect blame from themselves, and even view themselves as champions of artistic expression. However, acts of censorship are not necessarily viewed as authoritarian abuses. As the censor of foreign films made clear, not everyone is a closeted liberal democrat. Some material is too offensive or destructive of national reputation for even "elites" to want to watch it, especially in times of crisis when national security and identity are unstable. In this view, censorship can be part of a populist process, in which the censor does not simply protect the people but oneself and the nation.

Works Cited

Aday, Sean, Henry Farrell, Marc Lynch, and John Sides. 2010. *Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace.

Albrecht, Holger. 2013. *Raging Against the Machine: Political Opposition under Authoritarianism in Egypt*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press.

Anderson, Jon. 2003. "New Media, New Publics: Re-configuring the Public Sphere of Islam." *Social Research* 70(3): 888–906.

Armbrust, Walter. 2012. "Islamically Marked Bodies and Urban Space in Two Egyptian Films." *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 8(3): 354-373.

Blaydes, Lisa 2010. *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. "Censorship and the Imposition of Form," in Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press: 137-159.

Boyer, Dominic. 2003. "Censorship as a Vocation: The Institutions, Practices, and Cultural Logic of Media Control in the German Democratic Republic." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45(3): 511-545.

Brownlee, Jason. 2007. *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Brumberg, Daniel. 2013. "Transforming the Arab World's Protection-Racket Politics." *Journal of Democracy* 24(3): 88-103.

———. 2002. "The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy." *Journal of Democracy* 13(4): 56-68.

Bunt, Gary. 2009. *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Carothers, Thomas. 2002. "The End of the Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy* 13(1): 5–21.

Comaroff, Jean and John. 2004. "Criminal obsessions, after Foucault: Postcoloniality, policing, and the metaphysics of disorder." *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 4: 800-824.

Darnton, Robert. 1995. "Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789-East Germany, 1989." *Representations* 49: 40-60.

Della Ratta, Donatella. 2012. "Dramas of the Authoritarian State." *Middle East Research and Information Project* (February), http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/dramas-authoritarian-state (accessed October 19, 2014).

Eickelman, Dale. 2005. "New Media in the Arab Middle East and the Emergence of Open Societies." In *Remaking Muslim Politics,* ed. Robert Hefner. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Eickelman, Dale and Jon W. Anderson. 2003. *New Media in the Middle East: The Emerging Public Sphere,* 2nd ed. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Egorov, Georgy, Sergei Guriev, and Konstantin Sonin. 2009. "Why Resource-poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: A Theory and Evidence from Panel Data." *American Political Science Review* 103(4): 645–668.

Fish, Stanley. 1993. *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech: And It's a Good Thing, Too*. Oxford University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. "A Preface to Transgression." In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. Bouchard: 29-52.

Freshwater, Helen. 2003. "Towards a Redefinition of Censorship." *Critical Studies* 22(1): 225-245.

Gordon, Joel. 2013. "Chahine, Chaos and Cinema: A Revolutionary Coda." *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 4(2): 99-112.

Hafez, Kai, ed. 2008. *Arab Media: Power and Weakness*. New York: Continuum.

Heydemann, Steven. 2007. *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Analysis Paper no. 13. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, October. (www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/10arabworld.aspx.)

Howard, Marc Morjé, and Meir R. Walters. 2014. "Explaining the Unexpected: Political Science and the Surprises of 1989 and 2011." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(2): 394-408.

Howard, Phillip N. 2010. *The Digital Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship: Information Technology and Political Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kuran, Timur. 1991. "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics* 44 (1): 7-48.

Lorentzen, Peter. 2012. "Strategic Censorship." *SSRN*. http://j.mp/Wvj3xx.

Lust-Okar, Ellen. 2005. *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents, and Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lynch, Marc. 2006. *Voices of the New Arab Public: Al- Jazeera, Iraq, and Arab Politics Today*. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2007. "Blogging the New Arab Public." *Arab Media and Society* 1(1).

———. 2011. "After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State." *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2): 301-310.

al-Malky, Rania. 2007. "Blogging for Reform: The Case of Egypt." *Arab Media and Society* 1(1).

Mazzarella, William. 2015. "Totalitarian Tears: Does the Crowd Really Mean It?." *Cultural Anthropology* 30(1): 91-112.

———. 2013. *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. Duke University Press.

Pearlman, Wendy. 2013. "Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings." *Perspectives on Politics* 11(2): 387-409.

Shafik, Viola. 2007. *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*. American University in Cairo Press.

Shehata, Dina. 2010. *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict & Cooperation*. New York: Routledge.

Sorace, Christian. 2014. "China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei." *Critical Inquiry* 40(2): 396-419.

Stacher, Joshua. 2012 *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*. Stanford University Press.

Steiner, Wendy. 1995. *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism*. University of Chicago Press.

Stockmann, Daniela and Mary E. Gallagher. 2011. "Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China." *Comparative Political Studies* 44(4): 436 –467.

Wedeen, Lisa. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. University Of Chicago Press.

Wheeler, Deborah. 2006. *The Internet in The Middle East*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Winegar, Jessica. 2006. *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. Stanford University Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 1993. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Duke University Press.