The Fire and the Frying Pan
Censorship and Performance in Egypt
Nehad Selaiha

Two Kinds of Censorship

When censorship is official and imposed by the state, one can hope that one day society will abolish it by bringing to power a more enlightened and liberal government. But when censorship is societal, that is, exercised collectively by society—whether spontaneously by its members in their daily lives, or in an organized form through the family, schools, unions, or other civil institutions—the situation becomes more serious. More troubling still is when oppressive official censorship imposed by a totalitarian political regime overlaps with conservative and bigoted societal censorship, equally totalitarian in its ideology. Then everybody, including artists and intellectuals, participates in censorship and self-censorship. This is the situation in Egypt and, I daresay, most of the Arab world today.

Official Censorship in Egypt

The first recorded instance I could find of censoring public performances in Egypt occurred in 1451 (855 H) when Mameluki Sultan Djaqmaq (his full name was Al-Dhahir Seif El-Din Djaqmaq Al-'Alaa'i Al-Dhahiri) placed a ban on all shadow plays and ordered the burning of all shadow puppets. He further forced the players to write affidavits promising to renounce their art and never practice it again. The ban was issued on the grounds that shadow plays were often coarse and obscene, portraying the deviations and depravities of the people, over and above containing political insinuations about, and indirect criticism of, the rulers (Musa and Awad 1995:605).2

1. The lunar, “hijri” calendar, considered the “Islamic calendar,” begins in 622 CE, the year Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina, a journey known as the hijra. — Ed.
2. Significantly, the same moral objections to the texts of the old shadow plays are still shared by some scholars. In 1963, when Ibrahim Hamada, a professor of drama and former dean of the Theatre Institute at the Academy of Arts, published an annotated edition of the three extant shadow plays (called Babat, plural of babah, a text written to be performed by shadow-puppets) of Ibn Danyl (Shams El-Din Mohamed Al-Mosuli, 1238–1311), he thought it his moral duty to bowdlerize the texts, excising all the passages he considered to be “scandalously obscene and would serve no useful human purpose” (Hamada 1963:126).

Nehad Selaiha is Professor of drama and theatre studies at The Academy of Arts in Cairo, Egypt, the resident drama critic of Egypt’s national English-language newspaper Al-Ahram Weekly, and the author of many books on theatre in both English and Arabic. She has locally published, in English, six collections of articles on the Egyptian theatre (1992–2004), and contributed studies to several publications in Europe and the US. She was honored by the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre in 1996 for her work in supporting experimental artists and awarded the Egyptian State Prize for Excellence in the Arts in 2003. nselaiha@hotmail.com
Because this kind of censoring was erratic—dependent as it was on the whims of rulers—and lacked an established official apparatus, many historians prefer to date the appearance of official censorship of artistic products from the introduction of performances in the European style in Egypt during the French campaign in 1798. According to Sayed Ali Ismael, one of the earliest mentions of censorship of theatre occurred in the French-language official newspaper *La Decade Egyptienne*, which on 19 November 1800 published a table listing the functions of the information committee on Egypt established by General Kleber; item 3 of this table concerns the work of the police, which includes supervising, among other things, “plays, feasts and public celebrations and censoring public behavior” (1997:13). Thus, the French were the first to introduce official, organized censorship of theatre and public performances in Egypt, applying the same law that was introduced in France on 16 August 1790.

The second form of official censorship of theatre appeared during the reign of Mohamed Ali (1805–1847) when he ordered Claude Bey to send a circular to all foreign consulates and troupes stating the rules that should govern the relation between performers and spectators and stipulating how both parties should conduct themselves during such public gatherings. As a result of this circular, playhouses were obliged by law to admit members of the police force and the fire brigade to every performance. Another consequence of this circular was the first edict regulating theatre work in Egypt. Though it concerned primarily the Italian theatre established in Alexandria in Consuls Square, its first article placed this theatre, regardless of who owned it, under the jurisdiction of the local authorities, and threatened actors with imprisonment if they included in their performances or dialogue anything that “breaks the rules of decorum and respectability or causes the audience offence” (Ismael 1997:13). Article 6 of this edict requires that eight policemen and a sergeant always be present at performances in order to carry out the orders of the chief of police.

In 1869, the ruler of Egypt, Khedive Ismael Pasha, built two national theatres, both in Cairo: La Comédie and the Khedival Opera House. He appointed Paolino Draneht Bey as superintendent (cum censor?) of both. The appointment was warmly praised by the *Wadi El-Nil* newspaper, which on 30 April 1869 declared: “The job of supervising theatres (i.e., playhouses) is one of the most important jobs in the state cabinet in France and many of the fine points that relate to the literary arts and good morals are a result of this sensitive job. We are therefore most happy that His Highness, the Khedive, who is always keen to copy the laws and regulations of the French state, has introduced this job and entrusted it to Draneht Bey Effendi, and who could be better?” (in Ismael 1997:16).

The first known Egyptian victim of censorship was Yacoub Sannu’, whose play *Al-Durratatyn* (The Two Wives) was banned before his theatre was closed by orders of the Khedive in 1871 (some historians date it as 1873) for being suspected of implicit political criticism. On 12 January 1879, a special bureau for “Safeguarding and Operating Theatres” was created as a branch of the Publications Department in the Ministry of Public Works. The next Khedive (Tawfiq) went a step further and on 26 November 1881 issued a law that established rules for censoring publications and printing presses; on 13 June 1891, the minister of interior (who had taken over the responsibility of censorship from the minister of public works) issued a set of rules regulating public places, including theatres, obliging their owners to obtain licenses and instructing the commissioner of police to make sure that two police officers and a number of policemen were always present at theatres during performances to preserve law and order (Ismael 1997:17, 19, 23–24).

In 1904, when censorship was expanded to include the cinema, the commissioner of police was at liberty to exercise his own personal judgment. Then, on 17 July 1911, an edict regulating the work of theatres was issued, entrusting its enforcement to a special “technical bureau in the

3. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
ministry of the interior, which also censored cinema and publications.” Article 10 of this edict states: “any scenes, representations or gatherings that do not observe public order and morals are prohibited and the police has the right to stop them and even close the theatre if necessary.” Article 12 specifies that “a suitable place should be reserved for the police officer on duty during the performance, making sure the rules are obeyed” (Ismael 1997:32).

Since many of the key positions in the country were in the hands of the British and French during the reigns of Ismael and Tawfiq, censorship was totally determined by foreigners and many plays were refused licenses on either religious or political grounds. Even when granted a license, a play might subsequently be censored while in production. Until 1919, censored plays, whether they were licensed or not, carried two stamps, one in English, another in French, and the phrases “President of the Theatre Commission,” “Commission des Theatres,” and “Ministre de l’Interieur.” When Egypt was declared a British protectorate in 1921, the foreign invader continued to censor, but through the appointed local government rather than a religious authority or society. In other words, official rather than societal censorship predominated in Egypt, until the signing of the British evacuation treaty on 18 June 1954.4

The first Egyptian National Theatre Company was established in 1935 to present only plays approved by the government; between 1923 and 1936, 43 plays were refused license, mostly on political grounds—either for attacking the rulers, or the foreign invaders, or advocating violent resistance and trying to whip up revolutionary fervor and a sense of national pride (see Ismael 1997:28–32).

After the 1952 coup d’état that overthrew the monarchy, the Free Officers, the band of military officers who had led the coup, declared Egypt a republic in 1953 and appointed—for the first time in the history of Egypt since the pharaonic period—an Egyptian ruler, president Mohamed Naguib. In 1955 the government issued a new law (number 340) to regulate censorship on films, plays, songs, records, and recorded tapes, subsequently amended in 1971 and 1992 by laws number 13 and 38 to modify minor bureaucratic details. Then in 1976, a ministerial decree (number 220) laid out the basic rules governing censorship for all artistic products, specifying the functions of censorship and listing a number of censorial stipulations, that is, exactly what the government regarded as objectionable and subject to censorship.

Article 1 of this decree states that “censorship on artistic products as defined in law 340/1955 seeks to raise their artistic standards and to ensure they contribute to the consolidation of social, religious, spiritual and moral values and to the development of public culture, to unleash creative energies in art, as well as maintain public morality and public order so as to protect the young from deviancy” (Egyptian Civil Code, 340/1955).5

Article 2 provides a list of things that should be removed from plays and films:

To achieve the objectives specified in the previous article, no artistic product may be licensed for public showing if it includes, specifically, any of the following:

4. The actual occupation ended much later, in 1956.

5. Funny how the language of censorship does not change from one country to another. Compare this statement of moral intention by the Egyptian censor to the words of Gerald Allen, the elected Republican representative of George W. Bush’s base in the Alabama state legislature, in an interview with Gary Taylor after he introduced a bill in December 2004 “that would ban the use of state funds to purchase any books or other materials that ‘promote homosexuality.’” In this interview, Allen told Taylor that he “does not want taxpayers’ money to support ‘positive depictions of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle.’” Explaining to Taylor the reason behind his motion, Allen said: “‘It was election day [...] and] 14 states passed referendums defining marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman.’ [...] We have an obligation to ‘save society from moral destruction.’ We have to prevent liberal librarians and trendy teachers from ‘re-engineering society’s fabric in the minds of our children’” (in Taylor 2004).
1. Calls to atheism, defamation of revealed religions or religious creeds or anything that glorifies black magic.

2. Showing a representation of the Messenger of Allah explicitly or implicitly, or representations of any of the orthodox Caliphs, members of the Prophet's family, or the 10 persons promised paradise, nor even their voices. This prohibition covers Jesus Christ and other prophets generally. In all this, the relevant religious authorities should be consulted.

3. Any misrepresentation or incorrect reading of Koranic verses, the prophet's tradition as well as all the contents of revealed scriptures. This covers any misrepresentation of performing religious rites.

4. Showing funereal formalities or the burial of the dead in a manner that detracts from the awesome dignity of death.

5. The justification of any acts of vice in a manner that invites sympathy for the perpetrators or suggests that they can be a means of serving noble ends.

6. Showing vice in a manner that encourages the imitation of its perpetrators, or allowing vice to dominate a course of events, relying solely on the punishment meted out to the perpetrators at the end if the general impression suggests incitement to commit vice.

7. Showing the human body naked in a manner inconsistent with common values and social traditions. The actors should not be dressed in clothes that reveal physical details that may embarrass the spectators or run counter to what is socially acceptable; the clothes should not give prominence to or scandalously stress the joints connecting the different parts of the body.

8. Titillating sexual scenes, homosexual displays, or physical and verbal expressions suggesting the aforementioned.

9. Immoral scenes or dance sequences that are sexually exciting or counter to decorum and decency in the movement of dancers and actors of both sexes.

10. Showing characters drunk or drinking or taking drugs in a manner suggesting it is a familiar or commendable practice. Showing gambling and lottery in a manner that encourages thinking either to be a source of livelihood.

11. The use of expressions, gestures, or ideas that are indecent, vulgar, or against public taste, and failure to observe sagacity and good taste in the use of words closely associated with sexual life or sexual sin.

12. Failure to observe the sanctity of marriage and lofty values and ideals. Showing scenes that fail to accord parents due respect unless a high moral message is intended.

13. Showing crime in a sympathetic light or a way that invites imitation by crowning the criminal with a halo of heroism or regarding a criminal act as nothing too grave or dangerous to society.

14. Showing criminal acts of vengeance and revenge in a manner that justifies them.

15. Showing scenes of murder, beating, torture, or cruelty in general in a detailed, brutal manner; the use of terror for the sake of terror with the result of frightening or shocking the audience.


17. Showing historical facts, especially those concerning patriotic figures, in a falsified or distorted manner.
18. The defamation of a foreign state or people bound by friendly relations to the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Egyptian people unless deemed necessary for a historical analysis required by the context.

19. To refrain from any topic representing a human race or a certain people in a manner that subjects it to ridicule and sarcasm unless necessary to ultimately make a positive impression with a definite end in view, such as combating racial discrimination.

20. To show social problems in a manner that invites despair, engenders bad feelings, creates class or sectarian prejudices, or disrupts national unity. (in Bora’e 2004:386–90)

These rules and regulations have been operative since the issuing of the 1955 law. And, despite the change of presidents and the ideological swing from left to right—from secular to Islamic—they have proved no less rigorous or repressive than the ones imposed when Egypt was a monarchy and a British protectorate.

After Nasser came to power in 1954, establishing a form of totalitarian rule that has assumed several guises since without changing fundamentally, the victims of censorship have been those who criticize the regime, call for a degree of democracy, or advocate ideas contrary to the declared official ideology of the country. Though dramatists tried to camouflage their attacks on the regime by resorting to history, fantasy, and myth, no less than 76 plays were banned between 1968 and 1988, while 33 of them were performed after Nasser’s or Sadat’s deaths, when one could criticize the dead ruler with impunity, or else after a bitter fight with the censors and some compromises on the part of the authors. More recently, between 2004 and 2007, 19 film scripts, 5 plays, and 5 television series were denied license for political or religious reasons, including portraying official figures in a mocking way, denouncing the peace treaty with Israel, criticizing the economic policy of privatization, denying for real democracy, showing love stories between a Copt and a Muslim, etc.

The Ministry of Culture’s Censorship Department, however, is not the only official censorship institution in Egypt. Other institutions include:

1. Military security apparatuses like the General Intelligence Service, Military Intelligence, and the Morale Department of the Armed Forces (Al Shu’oon Al Ma’nawiya lil Quwat Al Musalaha).

2. The Ministry of the Interior through its State Security and Artistic Products Investigation departments. These were responsible for banning Mohamed Hassanein Haykal’s book Khureef al-ghadab (Autumn of Discontent) in the early 1980s; the prosecution of ex-police officer Hamdi Al-Batran for his novel The Diary of a Police Officer in the Countryside in 1998, in which he exposed some human rights violations committed by the police in rural areas; confiscating three novels by writer Salah El-Din Mohsen (A Chat with Heaven, Epiphanic Tremors, Memoirs of a Muslim)
and landing him with a three-year prison sentence in June 2000; arresting Shuhdi Naguib Soroor in November 2002 and sending him to prison for a year for publishing some of his father’s verses on the internet, which were regarded as an insult to the state and damaging to the country’s reputation; and arresting another poet, Mohamed Higazi, in Port Said in October 2002, for writing a book of verses called Sherine Has Laughed—to mention only some glaring examples of their activities.

3. The Supreme Press Council (which replaced the Arab Socialist Union in supervising the press and the work of journalists, and has been given broad terms of reference by the constitutional amendments of May 1980 and law 148/1980). Article 36 of that law stipulates that the members of the council be appointed by a presidential decree, which ultimately makes this council a tool that can be manipulated by the executive authority to control the press and the fates of journalists.

4. The Ministry of Information, which censors publications and books coming into the country from abroad, or printed in Egypt with foreign licenses, or licensed by the Supreme Council for the Press. In April 1998, the ministry was instrumental in banning the printing of 32 newspapers and magazines that used to be printed in duty-free zones and were registered offshore, including the Cairo Times and the Middle East Times.

5. The Political Parties Committee, which controls the freedom of party activities and publications.

6. The Central Office of Mobilization and Statistics and Governmental Information Centers, which control the publication or circulation of information, and access to researchers, without the permission of the National Security and General Intelligence apparatuses. (Farouq 2006:109–12)

To make matters worse, political censorship has recently been coupled with a zealous religious atmosphere. While pretending to be secular, Mubarak’s regime, like most of its predecessors and many other Arab totalitarian regimes, sought to enforce its legitimacy by grounding itself in Islamic Sharia law. With the exception of the 1953 constitutional declaration and the 1958 constitution, all Egyptian constitutions, whether drawn up during the monarchy or the republic (there have been seven in all up to 1971, the first from 1923), stipulate that Islam is the official religion of the state and Arabic its official language. While generally conceding absolute freedom of belief, they all draw a line between freedom of belief and the freedom to perform religious rites in public, making the latter subject to the rules of public order and morality. Moreover, while in previous constitutions Islamic Sharia was mentioned as “one of the sources of legislation,” in the 1971 constitution (the only one that was put to a popular referendum), Article 2—which states that “Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic its official language”—also establishes “the principles of Islamic Sharia” as “the main source of legislation” (in Borae 2004:20; emphasis added).

The Government and Al-Azhar: A Marriage of Convenience

The Egyptian government controls the oldest Islamic university in the Arab world, Al-Azhar, and often uses it, or allows it when convenient, to issue fatwas that limit free thinking and expression while itself posing as the defender of such freedoms. In a very perceptive 2004 article entitled “Al-Azhar is wrong, but the state is the real culprit,” Hossam Bahgat, the director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, provides insight into the relationship of the government with Al-Azhar. Commenting on “the controversy in Egypt that followed the recommendation [...] by Al-Azhar to ban three books on different aspects of Islam,” which “came shortly after a similar one that banned Nawal Saadawi’s novel The Fall of the Imam,” (also in 2004) causing “the usual outcry from Egyptian intellectuals,” he shrewdly explains that “those who chose
to depict this as a struggle over the secular nature of the Egyptian state, and its undermining by the religious institution, once again ignored the fact that it is the state that should be taking the blame.” Bahgat goes on:

It is almost too easy to draw a picture of overzealous freedom-hating clerics waging a war on freedom of thought and expression. Yet every time that a book or a film has been banned in Egypt, the country’s intellectuals have consistently chosen to borrow from the terminology of the Western experience of fighting for the separation of church and state. The debate has always turned into one about the virtues of secularism and the dangers of too much interference by the religious authorities in public life. The usual scenario that intellectuals present on these occasions is that of a regime which, faced with the threat of an Islamic revolution, has chosen to expand the powers granted to Al-Azhar in order to enhance its own religious legitimacy and appear as the guardian of Islam and morals. But while there may be some truth to this, this scenario ignores the fact that Al-Azhar is actually an administrative branch of the Egyptian government. Egypt’s official religious institution is not independent, and has not been independent since at least 1961, when Law 103 on Al-Azhar was promulgated. The grand imam is appointed by an executive decree signed by the president, and the prime minister has traditionally carried the additional title of state minister for Azharite affairs. The religious institution’s budget is part of Egypt’s public budget. Al-Azhar’s chief censor (whose official title is director of research, translation, and literature) certainly made no bones about it, telling Egypt Today magazine: “The government is like our father [...]. They tell us do this, okay; don’t do that, okay. We are an institutional country governed by law.”

But the law that the sheikh spoke of only really gives Al-Azhar the right to license the printing of the Koran and the Prophet’s sayings. Azharite officials, however, have been able to use a series of judicial interpretations and ministerial decrees to claim the authority to issue binding recommendations to the Culture Ministry ordering the confiscation of books. Luckily, those recommendations have finally been classified as administrative orders that can be appealed before the Administrative Court, which has on several occasions revoked the ban. But even given this trend, Egypt is still not in a situation where a tolerant, secular regime is being pressured by political Islamist opposition on the one hand and a conservative official religious institution on the other. In fact, it is the government’s dismal record on freedom of religion and belief that has given Al-Azhar the pretext to exceed its mandate and request the ban of a growing number of books every year. Moreover, Al-Azhar’s censorship of books pales into insignificance when compared to the assaults by the security agencies against religious freedoms. When the government uses its 37-year-old Emergency Law to detain people solely on the basis of their religious beliefs, why is it a surprise when Al-Azhar decides to ban controversial books that do not reflect the mainstream interpretation of Islam? (2004)

Tracing the beginning of this alliance between the state and Al-Azhar and explaining the extent of the influence and sway of this religious institution on the Egyptian mind, aided and abetted by the state, Abdel-Khaliq Farouq writes:

When Al-Azhar was established in 973 AD (363 H) [the official date is given by the institution itself as 969 AD] by the Fatimid Al-Mu’iz li Din El-Lah, Azharite education was nongovernmental and purely religious. Gradually, however, a series of laws were issued to regulate this kind of education, starting with the law issued in 1872 and ending with law 103/1961. According to law 49/1930, it was ordained that Al-Azhar University should include only 3 colleges: Islamic Theology, Islamic Law or Shari’a, and Arabic Language. But in 1961, law number 103 sought to develop this university by adding three more colleges teaching nonreligious sciences and the number kept increasing until 1999 when it reached 55 colleges distributed over 14 governorates with a number of students totaling
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It is important to add here that according to article 48 of the Egyptian constitution, books and publications are not to be subjected to censorship except in emergency situations. But since Egypt has been under Emergency Law since 1981, and since article 3 of this law gives the military ruler or anyone he deputizes the authority to censor all means of expression and ban or temporarily suspend them, this virtually means that all books and printed matter are in effect subject to censorship. Significantly, in the 2005 International Egyptian Book Fair, according to a report by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, at least 20 books were banned and their copies confiscated. These included three novels by Syrian writer Haydar Haydar, three novels by Moroccan writer Al-Tahir bin Galloun, three parts of Abdel Rahman bin Muneif’s novel Mudun Al-Malh (Cities of Salt), Hanan El-Sheikh’s novel Misk Al-Ghazal (Musk of the Gazelle), Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry collection Ihda Ashr Qawqaban (11 Planets), another poetry collection by Adonis called Awel Hob, Awel Jasad (First Love, First Body), a translation of Milan Kundera’s novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being, a translation of a novel called 11 Minutes by Brazilian Nobel laureate Paulo Coelho, and a study by Moroccan feminist thinker Fatima Al-Marneesi called Ahlam Al-Nisaa’ (Women’s Dreams) (Bora’e 2008:1095–96; see also Farouq 2006:107–8, 112–13).

Farouq attributes this stunning increase [...] to the conservative tendencies of Egyptian society, especially in the countryside and Upper Egypt, and also to the rise to power of the Islamist trend and the increasing hegemony of religious texts over the minds of large sections of the population in the 1970s and ’80s, with the support and blessing of the regime during Sadat’s reign in order to counteract the influence of the leftists and Nasserites who opposed his policies. (2006:73)

Unfortunately, as many researchers have observed, the subjects taught at the various levels of the Azharite Islamic education urgently need reviewing since a lot of them, particularly in the area of jurisprudence, go against the spirit of the age and are inimical to tolerance and equality. As Farouq points out, “such an educational environment provides a fertile soil for the growth of religious extremists and terrorist groups who advocate the absolute authority of religious texts, as interpreted from their own point of view of course, and use them to support their ideas” (2006:75). It is a disturbing fact indeed that “10% of all students in Egypt are enrolled in an educational system that valorizes the authority of religious texts and deals with contemporary issues from an outdated, ancestral viewpoint” (76).

Encouraged by Sadat and the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism imported from Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, Al-Azhar and its Islamic Research Academy have progressively intensified their attempts to ban and suppress books and other cultural products they deem objectionable. In the years 2004 to 2007, they recommended and actively advocated the banning of 42 books on a variety of religious and nonreligious topics, including two on Jesus Christ, reprints of two works by Nawal Al-Sa’dawi, The Fall of the Imam and God Resigns in the Summit Meeting, first published in 1987 and 1996 respectively, and a collection of poetry, besides an article about Aisha, the Prophet’s wife (Bora’e 2008:643–60). But Al-Azhar and other official religious institutions (including the Coptic Church which is equally conservative) have not limited their suppressive activities to printed matter. They have expanded them to other fields, issuing a series of fatwas (religious rulings) dealing with the arts, especially the art of acting. Such fatwas generally regard acting as “a source of seduction,” “an...
invitation to promiscuity and corruption,” “exposing the spectator to certain harm,” and a “basic factor in the moral disintegration” of societies (in Bora’e 2008:667). (Do you hear an echo of the Puritans’ attacks on theatre in the 17th century?) This denunciation of acting was not limited to the practice in the Islamic world but extended to acting all over, including Hollywood and Broadway. As Nagaad Bora’e concludes, all the fatwas concerning acting, whether issued by official or nonofficial Islamic institutions, are similar and agree on regarding acting as sinful and actors and actresses as sinners.

In a fatwa issued by various sheikhs in September and October 2007, the ‘ulemas (religious scholars) of Al-Azhar objected to scenes of marriage and divorce in television serials produced by Egyptian companies on the grounds that such fictional marriages become automatically lawful (they fulfill the Islamic prerequisite of being made public before witnesses, in this case the television viewers) so that an actress who is married in real life and impersonates a character being contracted in marriage would have automatically committed polygamy in the eyes of God and society and should be punished accordingly. In the same spirit, a nonofficial Islamic institution called the Fatwa Center of the Shari’a Cooperative Society of the Advocates of the Koran and the Sunna has been vociferous in their call for a ban on the representation of all kinds of personal relations in dramatic works, claiming that such scenes help to disseminate a culture of “obscenity and depravity” (669).

Equally ridiculous and lethal are the court rulings in some of the cases brought by fanatical Islamists against artists and thinkers. In such rulings the authority of religious (Islamic) texts has dominated the minds of judges in the civil courts at the expense of the rule of reason, thus shrinking the concept of “permissible criticism” in favor of textual authority and making the latter the arbiter in legal disputes over literary and artistic works. A remarkable incidence of this was the 1995 verdict issued by Judge Farouq Abdel-’Alim at his court of appeal which ruled that eminent scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid had recanted Islam and, therefore, should be separated from his wife. In another case brought by some Islamist lawyers against film director Inas El-Degheidi and her film Diary of a Teenage Girl, the judge examining the 2002 case ruled that “the accused director be publicly flogged in accordance with the provisions of Shari’a”—an unprecedented sentence in the history of the Egyptian judiciary (Farouq 2006:108). (The judgment was appealed and never carried out.)

Abu Zeid and El-Degheidi were not the only victims of such bigotry and fanaticism. During the 1990s the Islamists launched a fierce and far-reaching persecution and harassment campaign against all who differed with them, sparing no one and targeting writers in all media, as well as all cinema, theatre, and television artists.

In some years, the legal cases filed by the champions of this trend against writers and thinkers, branding them as renegades and demanding that they be separated from their spouses on religious grounds, exceeded 130 in number, and in the period between the notorious trial of Abu Zeid, in 1993, and the year 1999, there were 650 such cases, and some of them were instigated by leading, well-known figures like Dr. Abdel Sabour Shahin and Sheikh Yusef Al-Badri. (Farouq 2006:113–14)
Ironically, in 1999, Shahin himself became the victim of similar charges when his book *My Father Adam* was published. Talk about divine retribution.

Unfortunately, the same fanatical fever infected the Coptic Orthodox Church, which repeatedly demanded the banning of artistic products and persecuted some of its own followers. As Farouq sadly comments: “In this competition over who controls the Egyptian mind, the Islamic Research Academy of Al-Azhar” pitched in, rigidly censoring intellectual and artistic products wantonly. “It was as if the Egyptian creative mind had suddenly been put up for auction and was fiercely fought over by many bidders from different religious trends and backgrounds” (2006:114).

In light of such fatwas and court rulings, Mubarak’s military regime must have appeared a secular and liberal body beleaguered by bigots and fanatics. However, the fact is that the government, represented by two of its main institutions that are supposed to defend and safeguard freedom of artistic expression, namely Majlis Al-Dawla (the State Council) and the Ministry of Culture, can sometimes prove even less liberal than its own censorship apparatus. In a notorious incident that goes back to 1977 and has cast a long shadow affecting the work of censorship since, 15 censors of both sexes—including their chief, the Public Censor, who at the time happened to be a woman, I’tidal Mumtaz—were brought before a disciplinary tribunal for licensing a film entitled *The Guilty*, directed by Sa‘id Marzouq. Ironically, that film had won the Ministry of Culture’s Best Egyptian Film award in 1976. This, however, did not deter the Ministry of Culture from referring the 15 censors to the administrative prosecutor’s office, charged with licensing the film and allowing it to be exported. The administrative prosecutor’s office referred the said censors to the administrative court concerned with trying offences committed by civil servants of high rank.

In 1982, a verdict of guilty was handed down in this case—case 35/1977. The charge read that the 15 censors had approved, each in his or her own capacity, the licensing of a film that “violated public morality and wantonly attacked the public sector.” These violations, the verdict went on to say, also “denigrated society’s religious and spiritual values by including an overt invitation to corruption and incitement to vice.” Furthermore, “the film showed no respect for religion, consequently wronging, deprecating, distorting and tainting society, making it appear as a society in total disintegration” (in Bora’e 2004:391–92). This highly significant case means that whereas the government would turn a blind eye when censors interpreted the generally loose and vague articles of the censorship law in a rigidly religious and bigoted manner that did not take the changes in social conditions into account, it would not tolerate a liberal and more open interpretation of those articles.

Rather than stand up to bigotry and fight it by spreading culture, the government was happy to let nongovernmental religious societies, both Islamic and Christian, mushroom all over the country while cutting down on cultural services. In 1994, the number of religious nongovernmental societies totaled 4,581 compared to less than 1,240 cultural organizations, which were mostly in Cairo, Alexandria, and other major cities, making the population in rural areas dependent on state-owned television for cultural services and material as well as for political information (Farouq 2006:102).

For a long time, however—since the 1970s, to be precise—state-owned television has taken to flirting with the rising religious trend, increasing the time allotted to religious programs, usually entrusting them to conservative and reactionary figures. (The burgeoning satellite television channels exclusively dedicated to the most conservative religious programming, mostly funded by Gulf countries, while noteworthy and certainly a contributing factor to this climate, is outside the scope of this study.) An average 20 percent of daily broadcasting time was dedicated to religious programs during the 1980s and ’90s (Farouq 2006:103). Moreover, the number of mosques keeps rising in rural Egypt: in 1994 Egypt boasted 24,000 mosques affiliated with the Ministry of *Waqf* (Religious Endowments), 79,000 privately established ones,
not to mention the 37,000 large mosques and the 28,000 zawyaas, or small mosques belonging to Islamic charities (see Farouq 2006:101). Not surprisingly, the number of cultural centers in the provinces went down from 527 in 1997 to 293 in 1999. Additionally, in 1991/92, only 12.9 percent of the budget of the cultural sector of the government was allocated to the Cultural Palaces Organization, which caters to more than 56 percent of the Egyptian population, and by 2001/02 — that is 10 years later — the percentage had only risen to 13.3 percent. This means that, per capita, the government spent 1–2 Egyptian pounds (US$.17–.35) on state-provided cultural services during that period (2006:82).

With such a shabby cultural policy, and with its tight control over freedom of expression through Al-Azhar and other official bodies, the Mubarak regime could afford to make a spurious show of democracy, allowing a relatively larger measure of freedom of expression in the media and arts compared to Nasser’s and Sadat’s reigns, secure in the knowledge that it had the necessary means to clamp down on such freedom if it became a real threat. Allowing this measure of freedom of speech while tightly restricting peaceful action for change, including strikes, through a powerful security apparatus and the Emergency Law, effectively reduced “free expression” to a mockery and a safety valve to defuse mounting anger. “People can bark their heads off as much as they like,” the reasoning went, “so long as the government is sure its security apparatus will not let them get any farther and will soon put on the lid again if things get too hot for safety.” Meanwhile, the predominantly conservative main legislative body in the country, namely, the People’s Assembly (where the ruling National Democratic Party had a majority and the second largest bloc came from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood) continued to censor books, films, plays, and the press.

The government allowed Islamic extremists a limited presence, because they performed several functions: first, to allow the state to appear liberal by comparison, and thus the lesser of two evils; second, to justify the government’s human rights violations in the name of “security” and “we’re protecting you from the Islamist monster”; third, to keep the populace quiet by allowing Islamic extremists to fill in the gaps in government services, such as education and health care, by founding charity hospitals and Koran schools in the poorest of rural areas; and finally, the government exploited the Islamists’ ultraconservative influence on society to justify their own policies of censorship: “You expect people to come to a play with THIS in it?!” In hindsight, the January 2011 events of Tahrir Square show that the government’s security apparatus did not have its reign of terror as firmly established as it had thought—that once its supposedly “safe” margin for freedom of expression reached a tipping-point, there was actually no turning back. They also had underestimated the potential of Facebook and other social media tools that are beyond their control. Meanwhile, its not-so-secret consent to allow Islamist groups a presence within Egypt blew up in all our faces: with the groundwork already laid and so much outreach work at the grassroots level, and with such full coffers, the Islamists were the quickest to mobilize and act while the rest of the political movements were still finding their feet.

The Case of the CIFET

The government’s moral hypocrisy, professing one thing and doing another, is also manifest in the Ministry of Culture’s management of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET). In 1998 I wrote:

Year after year, one keeps hoping that the festival will rid itself of the scourge of censorship which blots its reputation and damages its credibility [...]. [Censorship] cuts clean across all the attractive slogans that surround the festival and discredits them. Taboos are ultimately enforced and freedom of thought and expression is severely restrained. And until such time as the festival squarely faces the question of censorship and honestly grapples with it, the title “experimental” will remain spuriously ornamental, limited to formalistic gimmicks and devices. (Selaiha 1998)
Five years later, in 2003, Fawzi Fahmi—a liberal intellectual playwright and professor of drama, and the chairman of the CIFET—was at his office in the festival headquarters vetting videotapes of the foreign shows that applied to participate for any offensive material when I interviewed him. “It’s a ticklish, unwelcome task,” he admitted, “but very necessary. However liberal one’s personal views may be, one has always to take society and the current mood and tenor of the culture into account. Above all, the festival has to be guarded against any devastating assaults from the conservative camp.” What if he liked a performance artistically but judged that it would raise a big hue and cry, I asked. “When this happens, which is not often,” he was glad to say, he usually contacted the makers of the show to negotiate a compromise. “In most cases, artists show a great deal of sympathetic understanding,” he gratefully admitted (Selaiha 2003b).

Such concessions were painful to suggest or make, he said, but the alternative was having the festival banned altogether, and that would be a great loss. I suggested to him that some would favor a policy of shock and unwavering confrontation. Fahmi, however, believed it was more effective to work on people’s sensibilities slowly, imperceptibly, to secure a smooth transition to more progressive mental attitudes. For him, the question is always: How far can you go without losing your audience? Admittedly, this is a thorny issue and quite problematic when people who are brought up in the same culture differ vastly in their assessment of what is permissible in society at a certain historical juncture. However, it has been counterargued that proponents of this view are fooling themselves if they believe that people can be slowly induced to become more liberal. The opposite is true: encouraged by the concessions they receive, conservatives demand more concessions, engendering a vicious circle that slowly but surely erodes the freedoms already in place and adds to the list of things considered taboo and unacceptable. The fallacy is that the forces propagating conservatism, once assuaged, will be satisfied. In fact, their victories make them hungrier for more.

To be fair, the CIFET was initially conceived as a forum for free artistic expression and dialogue and started off without censorship. One year, however, a single, fleeting frontal view of a naked female body in a Norwegian version of Hiroshima mon amour scandalized the audience and caused an uproar in the press and intellectual circles. It was disheartening that some of the loudest and most venomous attacks on the festival came from writers and theatremakers. In subsequent years overcautious organizers guarded against such nasty surprises: videotapes of guest productions were requested in advance and carefully vetted for any signs of nudity, homosexuality, or profanity; tights were required to cover nude legs; and physical contact between performers was viewed with deep suspicion, to the extent that in 1995, the Egyptian member of the international jury (a woman, critic Sanaa Fathallah) zealously insisted on blocking an award to a foreign performance featuring two male prisoners in a work camp.

Egyptian shows are even more strictly censored and, therefore, try to tread a fine line between speaking out and provoking outrage. However much they may inveigh against taboos, they try—in terms of language, movement, and costumes—to stay within the boundaries of what is considered proper and acceptable. If they don’t, the consequences can be tragic and Mansour Mohamed’s The Game, which was chosen to open the festival in 1991, is a case in point (Selaiha 2003a:427–30).

The Game had been running for a year to huge popular and critical acclaim, which, of course, is why it was chosen to grace the opening ceremony. However, behind the back of the Egyptian selection committee, the director/choreographer sneaked a new scene into the performance. It featured a construction that, on one side represented a holy shrine that resembled Al-Ka’ba (the Islamic holy shrine in Mecca) and, on the other, an oil barrel. At first we saw the shrine with pilgrims, holding censers, whirling around it in a kind of daze. Slowly, the object began to revolve, becoming half shrine, half oil barrel—with an inscription clearly reading “Oil” in English—while a belly dancer climbed on top and started dancing. In these few seconds, you could feel the tension building in the auditorium and at the sight of the belly dancer on top of
the still visible shrine, there was a loud gasp. Some people applauded and others stamped out of the theatre in high dudgeon. The scene stirred up a hornet’s nest and the consequences of this satire, intended as a dig against religious hypocrisy rather than Islam per se, were tragic for Mohamed.

That night, the people who were there talked of nothing else. The following morning, the minister of culture received strongly worded diplomatic complaints from some oil-producing Arab countries, led by the head of the Kuwaiti artistic delegation, that demanded swift retribution and threatened to sever diplomatic relations. As a result, the show was banned and Mohamed found himself suspended from his job as theatre instructor at the Academy of Arts pending an investigation. In the following weeks, he was ferociously hounded by the press, cursed in the mosques near his house and elsewhere in the Friday sermons and received anonymous death threats. The critics were divided: the conservative camp launched a vicious attack on Mohamed accusing him of insulting Muslims. One such attack (by Safinaz Kazem published in Al-Musawwar weekly magazine) sported the title: “Pissing into the Mouths of Muslims” (1991). Some religious writers and preachers picked up the trail, accusing him of blasphemy and howling for his blood. He was overwhelmed by the virulence of the attack. Responses from his union and its members ranged from indifference to feigned ignorance to tacit condemnation, and many of the supposedly progressive, enlightened critics remained silent. The few who dared stand up for him in public were bullied, vilified, and ultimately helpless. Six months later, his heart gave out under the strain and he died at the age of 32.

A year later, Intisar Abdel-Fattah almost met with a similar fate when his Book of Exiles was misinterpreted by some as Zionist propaganda. As if Jews were the only exiles in the world! And in 1997, another young director, Hani Ghanem, came close to disaster over a scene in his show, The Journey, featuring two nude males hip-deep in mud. He was ordered to provide them with linen underwear, and despite his compliance, the show was widely considered outrageous and drew vicious abuse on moral grounds (Selaiha 2003a:289–94).

Another play that suffered heavily at the hands of censorship was Sameh Mahran’s The Boatman (in 2004 — this seems to have been a good year for censorship). Before the Public Censor’s Office allowed it into the festival (after two months of shilly-shallying), much of its plain, earthy language, deemed too offensive and obscene, was removed. Another bone of contention was the bisexual identity of the boatman. Mahran had to fight very hard to save it even at the cost of having the play performed only twice. As he said bitterly, “There wouldn’t be a play otherwise.” In one of the grueling sessions he endured at the censor’s office, he was told by a female assistant that she found the boatman’s desire to have sex with a man “abnormal, loathsome, and disgusting.” In vain he tried to explain to her the mythological dimension of the character and the symbolic meaning of his behavior. At the end of his tether, he suddenly asked her why she did not find the projected rape of the woman objectionable. “That was natural sex at least,” she smugly replied. When he finally gave up and walked out declaring that he would change nothing and that they might as well ban the play, he was punished with a hypocritically ambivalent verdict that allowed the ruthlessly truncated and bowdlerized version of the play two performances during the festival but banned it afterwards in the interest of public morality. I was very angry at the time and described this verdict as

a silly, costly ruse that fools nobody and can only serve to further isolate the festival from the general public and consign it to a marginal place in the life of society, reducing it, like the old carnivals of the past, to a frivolous, escapist, self-indulgent seasonal activity, tolerated because it helps to stave off change and entrench the status quo. (Selaiha 2003a:350)

I further explained:

The Boatman’s two performances will prove the most expensive ever in the history of the Egyptian state-theatre — both in terms of money and human effort. A production budget that runs into several tens of thousands of pounds (paid out of the tax-payer’s money)
and months of painstaking planning and hard work will be sacrificed to maintain the illusion that censorship does not meddle with the festival. The pundits at the censor’s office had not of course bargained for this; they had naturally hoped that dawdling over giving a clear yes or no would automatically discourage the actors and disrupt the rehearsals and the production process. [...] But the censorial contingent could not dawdle forever. One of the laws governing the work of the censor’s office clearly stipulates that applicants should be notified of the censor’s decision within a month of submitting the text; otherwise, they can go ahead with the work and present it publicly after filing a legal complaint. In controversial cases, such as The Boatman, when the author refuses to cooperate by removing all the offensive bits and where a straightforward ban could embarrass the ministry of culture which organizes the festival, decisions are usually withheld until a couple of days before the end of the legally specified deadline, then the applicant is sent a short official note curtly stating that his or her work is still under consideration. This lets the censor off the hook, allowing him to play for time and put off the danger of legal action for a while. Unhappily for Mahran, the producer of The Boatman is the state-theatre organization which is notoriously reluctant to fall foul of censors. Predictably, he got precious little help from that quarter. (351)

But it is not only in the CIFET and mainstream theatre that censorship is active; young, independent artists working on the fringe are having a hard time too and I would like to cite here two examples I have seen. The first is a production of Brian Friel’s Freedom of the City by the Al-Ghagar troupe, performed at Al-Handar Cultural Center from 5 to 12 June 2009. Instead of following Friel’s script and having the three demonstrators seek refuge at the Guildhall of Derry in Belfast, the troupe had them hide out in the People’s Assembly, indicating this with a backdrop of a drawing of its famous dome. This simple maneuver, which identified the civil rights demonstrations in Belfast in the 1970s with recent bread riots in Cairo—among other things—was not lost on the censors. They had approved the script, but had not seen the set and were extremely shocked when they came to see the show in the flesh, so to speak. By way of a compromise the place was given a different name though the dome at the back was kept, and since the surname of the Speaker of the People’s Assembly at that time was Sorour, which is an Arabic word that translates as “gladness,” the play was carefully scanned for any expressions of “gladness” and these were promptly banned and replaced with others.

My second example is Ana wi Enta wi Baba fil Balala (You and I and Papa are in Cuckoo Land), a political satire by the Al-Amwag (Waves) independent troupe, also performed at Al-Handar, on 20 February 2009. The interesting thing about this satire is that it was both funded and banned by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP).

The story goes like this: the Waves troupe became involved with the NDP about a year prior to the Al-Handar production, through the Cultural Activities Commission of its youth branch. They successfully staged a series of celebratory performances at a number of Young NDP congresses. Although the Waves troupe, through those performances, automatically

7. I am often asked why my strong criticisms of the festival and other governmental events are not censored and whether I was ever censored. My answer to the first question is that I write in English in a national newspaper aimed at foreigners and it is in the interest of the government to show that writers in Egypt have freedom of expression. I know I am being used, but I try to make the most of it and, like what many young artists do at the CIFET, embarrass the institution by taking it at its word. As for the second question, the answer is yes, once, and, ironically, not over anything I said about Egypt, but over a remark I made about how a woman I felt insulted every time I was invited to watch an all-male Saudi play and that Saudi theatre — something that does not exist except in festivals outside Saudi Arabia—should not be allowed to participate in the CIFET until it admits women into the profession (Selaiha 2001a:23). The censored section of this article, however, which I had sent to Julia Varley, was subsequently published in The Open Page Journal (Selaiha 2002:151–52).

8. For a full description of the play, see Selaiha (2009a).
[Societal censorship] is exercised by individuals, movements, and social and political NGOs that adopt a hostile attitude towards some artistic or cultural product, demanding that it be banned or that certain parts be suppressed, often harassing its creators, taking the issue to the press and the People’s Assembly and sometimes filing legal actions on the basis of potential social harm.

Became members of the Young NDP, they nevertheless sought to preserve their artistic and political integrity by asking to be allowed to work uncensored, persuading the party, or, at least, the Young NDP secretariat, that self-criticism was not only a virtue, but also a political asset. Rather than have outsiders point out our mistakes to us, we should be the first to voice them, was the troupe’s argument.

But, how much self-criticism can authority brook? At the first real test, the cultural commission of the Young NDP secretariat got so terribly jittery that they not only banned *fil Balala*, but also said they would penalize any theatre under the authority of the Ministry of Culture that hosted the show. (Nevertheless, *fil Balala* was performed one night at a hired private venue, collectively paid for by the group members.) As a branch of the ruling party, the Young NDP secretariat could easily rope in the state security agency to harass the show, which is exactly what happened at the Hanager performance. Originally, the show had featured a personification of President Mubarak as the hoped-for savior to free the hero and the inmates of the figurative lunatic asylum representing Egypt. When it turned out that representing the head of state onstage was taboo—in the same way as representing sacred Islamic figures, from the Prophet down, is banned—the scene was altered and, rather than a dialogue, it was rewritten as an impassioned harangue addressed to the absent savior.

In the above examples, more often than not, it was unofficial censors—journalists, writers, preachers, and intellectuals—who clamored to have the festival censored.

**Unofficial/Societal Censorship**

**When Intellectuals, Theatremakers, and Critics Turn Censors**

Apart from the official structures of censorship, another, more worrisome form of censorship emerged in the 1970s and has been gaining strength ever since—namely “societal censorship” (Bora’e 2004:396–97). This is exercised by individuals, movements, and social and political NGOs that adopt a hostile attitude towards some artistic or cultural product, demanding that it be banned or that certain parts be suppressed, often harassing its creators, taking the issue to the press and the People’s Assembly and sometimes filing legal actions on the basis of potential social harm.

This type of unofficial censorship is inevitably conservative, repressive, and religiously oriented; it has infiltrated legislative institutions, cultural circles, schools, unions, and NGOs, insidiously inspiring a strict form of self-censorship that has affected decisions concerning the publication of books, the funding and sponsorship of plays, permissions to use performance venues or take part in theatre festivals, and influencing critical reception in the media.

**Some Random Examples**

In July 1998, the French Cultural Center, known for supporting young Egyptian artists, suddenly canceled Ahmed El-Attar’s play *Al-Lajnah* (The Interview) after one performance because they got an unofficial complaint from some official quarter. Even the American University in Cairo itself, in the late 1990s, cowered before the threat of censorship and suppressed a project to stage a production of Mahmoud El-Lozy’s English-language play *Bay the Moon*. 
I was present when the owner and director of Sakiet el-Sawy, a well-known nongovernmental cultural center in Cairo, strode onto the stage in 2005 and interrupted a performance midstream, screaming that he would not allow such smut to be voiced in his center and ordered out the actors and Effat Yehia, the founder of Al-Qafila (Caravan), a prestigious independent theatre troupe, who had written and directed the play. (Effat Yehia won the Best Rising Director Award at the official Egyptian National Theatre Festival in 2007.) Mohamed el-Sawy, the director who kicked her out, was no doubt one of the champions of “respectable theatre,” a phrase that has become a popular slogan in recent years, advocating “clean” plays that can be “safely” watched by the whole family.

It is shocking that incidents of this kind are sometimes approved and even defended by people in cultural circles and the theatrical profession. Both the state and civil society in Egypt today partake of the same conservative, religion-based and authoritarian ideology. This legitimately raises the question: Why didn’t unofficial/societal censorship of the arts cut a high profile in Egypt until the 1970s? The reason is not because society prior to that point was fundamentally more enlightened than it is today; it is because before the 1952 coup d’etat, people’s attention was totally focused on the struggle for independence. Then, when independence was achieved, Nasser’s reign coercively imposed a secular/socialist ideology, ruthlessly suppressing all dissenters in the name of the people, and adopting a form of totalitarian government that completely abolished civil society and civil rights. No fundamental change in our inherently patriarchal, authoritarian culture was achieved during Nasser’s reign, despite its secular, progressive veneer, and this explains why when his nationalist/socialist project collapsed, Egyptians fell easy prey to Islamic fundamentalists and extremists who simply echoed in an exaggerated form the basic values and attitudes embedded in the culture, which had never been really questioned or challenged.

In recent years, most of the institutions of civil society in Egypt have been displaying a marked authoritarian tendency, drawing red lines limiting how far free-thinking and expression can go. Not only have the majority of government schools and nongovernmental charitable institutions unofficially imposed the veil on female students, inmates, and beneficiaries, even those who are still little girls, MPs have given themselves the right to interfere in the curricula of universities (objecting at one time to teaching “obscene” novels, like El-Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North, among others, at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University), but the Writers’ Union and Actors’ Union too have on occasion sought to suppress the right of individual members to go against the general consensus. In the notorious case of writer and dramatist Ali Salem, the members of both unions, who are supposed to champion freedom of thought and expression, voted unanimously to cancel his membership after his unofficial visit to Israel in 1994 on the grounds that he acted against the antinormalization stand adopted by both unions towards Israel, despite the official peace treaty. In another, less notorious case, the Actors’ Union for a long time was unwilling to grant membership and the right to legally practice to Mohamed Abul Su’ood, an independent theatre director who has, over the span of 20 years, produced more than 12 prestigious works, two of which represented Egypt in the CIFET, simply because the Union’s secretary general does not approve of his untraditional and un-bourgeois lifestyle.

What is it that makes certain cultural forms predominate over others and become more influential in certain societies? Does the predominance of “certain cultural forms” over others, even in a nontotalitarian society, automatically legitimate them as ethically “right”? And what happens if some individuals go against the general consensus?
by what Gramsci calls consent” such that “certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others” and produce a “form of [...] cultural leadership” that “Gramsci has identified as **hegemony**” (Said [1978] 1995:7), then the crucial questions become: What is it that makes certain cultural forms predominate over others and become more influential in certain societies? Does the predominance of “certain cultural forms” over others, even in a nontotalitarian society, automatically legitimate them as ethically “right”? And what happens if some individuals go against the general consensus?

Edward Said was, of course, using Gramsci’s above-quoted ideas to build up his argument about Orientalism. Here I am trying to use the same ideas and the way Said developed them to elucidate the complex issue of censorship and the present mood in the so-called Islamic world. The key notion in this respect is **hegemony**. Explaining how the dominance of certain cultural forms and ideas (for whatever reasons and by whatever means) eventually created “a collective notion identifying ‘Europeans’ as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans,” Said goes on to say that such a “collective notion” is what has made European “culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (7). If you replace the word “European” with “Islamic” you get a clear idea of the kind of ideology that is currently passionately peddled in my part of the world. We are witnessing a revival of the old collective notion identifying “us” Muslims as against all “those” non-Muslims. The historical reasons for the resurgence of this old notion, which had subsided during the enlightenment era in the 20th century, giving way to the notion of national identity, are many. These are inextricably bound up with the rise of religious fundamentalism as a response to a series of political defeats and economic crises, the collapse of socialism, and the advent of globalization.

Underlying the predominance of certain cultural forms over others in Egypt and the Arab world is a reactionary mentality and a conservative mindset that matches the repressive, totalitarian nature of most political regimes there, and their often arbitrary intervention in the lives of citizens on one pretext or another.9 Summing up the influence of Egyptian history and Arab culture on freedom of expression in Egypt, Bora’e argues that up until 1952 the history of Egypt was made up of successive waves of foreign invasions — by the Hyksos, the Greeks, the Persians, the Romans, the Arabs, the Mamelukes, the Turks (Ottomans), the French, and the British. Even Mohamed Ali, who came to power with the support of the Egyptian people and their ‘ulemas after popular uprisings, was an Albanian soldier. These many invasions have had a profound effect on the collective mind, making Egyptians wary of expressing themselves freely. Rather, they tend to draw on the rich resources of their colloquial language to express themselves through humor, puns, metaphors, and verbal equivocation. Then, there is also the influence of Arab culture in general which manifests itself in:

1) an ingrained valorization of maleness and age, regarding both as symbols of wisdom;

2) the suppression of any form of dialogue within the family and in educational institutions in favor of a mode of instruction that encourages total obedience and passive, unquestioning reception and memorization, and suppresses creativity;

3) a body of traditions and customs that regard free expression as impudence, a sign of bad manners and lack of breeding, and a violation of traditions. (Bora’e 2008:15)

In **Al-Takhaluf Al-Igtima’i: Sykologiyat Al-Insan Al-Maqhoor** (Social backwardness: the psychology of the oppressed), Mustafa Higazi draws attention to the existence in backward societies of a rigid, unidirectional pattern of domination/submission that characterizes all rela-

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9. I am generalizing here about the Arab world on the strength of the many symposiums on censorship I have attended over the years, the latest of which was held in Kuwait at the 10th biennial Gulf Theatre Festival, 31 March–8 April 2009. See my article “Theatre in the Gulf” (Selaibha 2009b).
tionships within the family, in the school, and the workplace, as well as throughout political, religious, and social spheres, permeating all activities including mental and intellectual ones (1986:238). In this relationship, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire points out in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

almost always, [...] the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of “adhesion” to the oppressor. Under these circumstances they cannot “consider” him clearly to objectivize him — to discover him “outside” themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression. At this level, their perception of themselves as opposites of the oppressor does not yet signify engagement in a struggle to overcome the contradiction; the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole. ([1970] 2000:45–46)

As this pattern of domination/submission gains in force in human and social relationships, the mentality of the people loses its flexibility, resilience, and dialectical powers and becomes rigid and categorical. This results in a cultural valorization of blind obedience as a supreme virtue, making any questioning of the authority of fathers, husbands, teachers, rulers, bosses, and/or religious leaders a mortal sin. Such valorization of obedience was eloquently summed up and consecrated by Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi in a line of poetry that has been taught to children since it was written in the 1920s. It orders them:

To thy teacher stand up in full veneration
Like God’s messenger he should be in your estimation.

Freire further elucidates this educational policy and the banking concept of education:

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship [...] reveals its fundamentally narrative character. [...] [The teacher’s] task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration [...]. [I]t turns them into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. [...] In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. *Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.* (71–72; emphasis added)

**Feminism vs. the Scramble for “Respectable” Theatre**

Fatima Al-Marneesi too has considered this domination/submission pattern but from a feminist perspective, relating it to religion. In a paper provocatively entitled “Democracy as Moral Dissolution: The Contradiction between the Female-believer and the Female-citizen as an Expression of the Historical Absence of Independent Arab Subjectivity,” she argues that religion is often manipulated in Arab societies as a weapon against change and progress. The main obstacle “that freezes all liberation initiative,” she claims, “is the existence of a discourse that brands such initiatives as atheistic and heretical. Women’s liberation is described as moral
Indeed, it is often the case that artists and intellectuals who fight for the right to freedom of thought and expression, often suffering harsh penalties, are loath to allow women the same right, often falling back, even against their publicly voiced beliefs, on a conservative interpretation of the teachings of Islam and quoting Koranic verses at them.

vamp, the meek daughter, the obedient wife, and the selfless, saintly mother. Whatever the part, women actors have had a rough deal and either have been made to confirm the male conception of them vocally or have been exploited physically as commercial attractions. At one point, as more and more women were wearing the extreme form of the veil that hides them completely, one wondered if we were going to end up with mostly stereotypical images of women on the stage while real women disappeared completely from view in real life! Indeed, it is often the case that artists and intellectuals who fight for the right to freedom of thought and expression, often suffering harsh penalties, are loath to allow women the same right, often falling back, even against their publicly voiced beliefs, on a conservative interpretation of the teachings of Islam and quoting Koranic verses at them.

Barring a number of plays that attempted to expose female oppression, satirize the view of women’s bodies as sexual objects and/or commodities, and condemn the double moral standards used by society for males and females — plays like Lenin El-Ramli’s *Welcome Gentlemen* (1988) and *Off with the Masks* (2007), Tawfiq El-Hakim’s *The Sultan’s Dilemma* (1960), Rashad Rushdi’s *The Game of Love* (1960), Saadallah Wannus’s *The Rites of Signs and Transformations* (1994), Mohamed Enani’s *The Crows* (1967), and Samir Sarhan’s *Rode Al-Farag* (1982), among others — theatre, as we know it in Egypt and the Arab world, has always been a male-constructed and dominated patriarchal establishment. Until recently, no woman in mainstream theatre dared to go against its conventions and moral orientation. Indeed, the development of the Egyptian and Arab theatre can be roughly described as an invincible march and holy campaign to gain “respectability” and vindicate its existence on political and moral bases — to prove that it is *useful*, rather than liberating or pleasurable. Pleasure is sinful; the only way to sanction and redeem it is by disguising it as edification and instruction. It was on this basis that the famous Arab leader Salah El-Din is reported to have praised a performance of a shadow play he watched in Cairo in 1171 (Hamada 1963:39–40), and the famous reformer, Sheikh Rifa’ah Rafi’ At-Tahtawi, defended theatre in his account of his trip to Paris in the 19th century (in At-Tahtawi 1993:208).

The demon of respectability, entailing conformity and apology for the physicality of performance, has haunted us ever since the profession was formalized and institutionalized on the Western model in the 19th century. With the Western model, we have also imported all the authority of the Western ideological patriarchal (Aristotelian) trappings. These were necessary to accommodate theatre in an inveterately antirepresentation, antiphysical culture. In the 1960s, political commitment (to the dominant ideology of course, which demanded blind obedience to its propagators, manipulators, and power figures) was one way of gaining respectability as a serious artist, especially for women. In many cases, those renowned, politically committed, serious female artists were shamelessly exploited by the “ideolords,” both physically and politically, and had no power to object — perhaps not even the desire to do so. For these female art-
ists “respectability” and the continuous protection of their powerful male mentors were bought at a huge cost: brainwashing and the integrity of body and mind (see Selaiha 2001b).

Even now, though this period has passed, the idea of “respectability” in mass culture today seems to boil down to the relentless covering of the female body and a very narrow interpretation of chastity. A dismal adaptation of Carmen comes to mind. Written and directed by popular comedian Mohamed Sobhi in the late 1990s, it professed to celebrate female liberation but took great pains to reiterate endlessly its own “respectability,” the criterion for this moral high ground being that the female legs were all decently clothed in tights and that there was no physical contact onstage. This attitude in theatre has a chicken-and-egg relationship with the “clean cinema” view espoused by most big commercial film production houses today. “Clean cinema,” as they explain, is one without kissing onscreen. “How does that kind of actress feel while she is being kissed onscreen?” famous comedian Mohamed Heneidy asked on a talk show some years ago—the implication being, of course, that she is making something only marginally better than a pornographic movie—to say nothing of the fact that it is assumed that she only has the option to be a passive receiver rather than an initiator.

The prospect brightened a bit when Fathiya El-Assal, one of the very few Arab women who has attempted writing for the theatre, invaded this male-dominated world, writing a series of

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Fathiya El-Assal

The following is extracted from my article “Blood Wedding,” published in Al-Ahram Weekly.10

As woman and writer, Fathiya El-Assal has always been actively political. A longstanding member of Al-Tagamo’ party (Alliance or Coalition) she fought two election campaigns as the party’s candidate to the People’s Assembly for the constituency of El-Sayeda Zeinab (a low-income, densely populated popular quarter of Cairo) and is known all over the Arab world for her many public stands and passionate tirades in defence of the poor and downtrodden. She never made it to the People’s Assembly (losing both times to playwright Sadeddin Wahba, the late spouse of actress and National theatre star and former artistic director Samiha Ayoub); her writing, however, has provided her with an effective public forum from which to disseminate her political ideals and fight “the twin devils of capitalism and patriarchy” as she professes. For over half a century, in scores of radio and theatre plays and television serials and dramas, El-Assal has indefatigably opposed the dominant structures of power and oppression, ruthlessly baring and questioning their underpinning values and assumptions. Her integrity and life-long struggle have been finally internationally recognised this year when she was chosen by the International Theatre Institute (ITI) to address the world on International Theatre Day. As usual, her words were simple, passionate and from the heart. Though her theme was grand—theatre as a force of liberation—her style was homely, plain and confiding. Denied a regular education, coercively kept at home on reaching puberty and constantly watched and rigorously coached in the rituals of female obedience, El-Assal experienced oppression at a very tender age and her spontaneous rebellion against gender-specific roles and attitudes gained force and political direction when, at 17, she married journalist and novelist Abdalla El-Toukhi who helped her educate herself and schooled her in left-wing politics and Marxist theory. The bulk of El-Assal’s creative work is in radio and television. For theatre she only contributed half a dozen plays, most of them written after the children (she has five) had grown up. (Selaiha 2004)

10. See also Selaiha (2005) for more on El-Assal’s latest play, Al-Kharsaa (The mute), as well as her dramaturgy in general.—Ed.
plays that depicted the personal as profoundly political. For the first time since theatre appeared in the Arab world, she aired such taboo subjects as female sexuality, the psychological trauma and disastrous long-term effects of female genital mutilation, legitimized rape within marriage, and wife battering. In her plays, El-Assal also lashed out against the idea of physical beauty sold to women by the male-dominated media and beauty industries, Arab society’s moral hypocrisy regarding sexual matters, silencing of women’s voices and brainwashing them into adopting the patriarchal attitudes toward their own sex and their relations to other women. In the 1980s and ’90s, other women dramatists emerged and some of them (who also could act, direct, choreograph, and design) formed their own independent theatre groups. These women have proved to be truly experimental, not only in the kind of work they do, but, more importantly, in their untraditional modes of work and production. Rather than the traditional hierarchical system and strict division of labor followed by mainstream theatre companies, many have opted for a collaborative, cooperative style of working that allows for exchange of roles, multiple functions, and shared decision-making, on the model of the early stages of Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil and many feminist theatre groups. A couple of prominent examples are Effat Yehia’s Caravan Theater Company, and Abeer Ali’s Al-Mesahharati (The Wake-Up Call) Troupe.

That these women writers and theatre makers — like Effat Yehia, Nora Amin, Abeer Ali, and Rasha Abdel Mon’im, among others — have to fight the same battles that El-Assal fought against official and unofficial censorship all over again and have to put up with the kind of traditional, conservative criticism that misreads their work and takes them to task for not following the male-imposed rules, is as depressing as the return of the veil decades after our grandmothers fought to abolish it and thought they had done so once and for all. No battle can ever be said to have been finally won. Each battle has to be fought by every generation, which is proof that so long as the values embedded in Arab culture and the pattern of domination/submission permeating Arab societies remain unquestioned and unchallenged, any gains in the direction of democracy and freedom of expression remain precarious and can be easily revoked whenever the climate of public opinion changes under one pressure or another.

“Who Am I to Judge?”

Censorship, in some form or other, is an ineluctable fact of life. It is part and parcel of the cultural and social life of any community and ranges from religious taboos and ethics to the regulations imposed by institutions of government and social traditions that dictate accepted norms of behavior in daily practices. It is always to some degree a conditional prerequisite in any process of education and social conditioning, and all processes of communal and social formation.

In such processes, the severity of suppressing or correcting — that is, censoring — what are deemed harmful, disruptive, or inappropriate impulses, ideas, or behaviors will depend upon the nature of the political system adopted by or imposed upon society. Whether the society is democratic or autocratic, secular or theocratic, or somewhere in between, the degree of censorship also depends upon the degree of liberalism or conservatism that characterizes the views and workings of the civil institutions in matters of religious beliefs, public morality, and social conduct. Invariably, it is the official and nonofficial, material and moral, visible and invisible structures of power and authority in the state (the government, the army, the police, the secret intelligence service, the central bureaucracy, etc.) and civil society (schools, families, unions and NGOs, etc.) that determine the extent to which individuals and small groups are allowed to split away from the general consensus, embrace different religious beliefs, ethical values, social ideas, political opinions, and modes of life.

The Arab world in general and Egypt in particular present a very curious and confused picture, riddled with ridiculous contradictions: Whereas most systems of government in this part of the world, be they monarchies or republics, are severely authoritarian and repressive, and extend so far as to penetrate all aspect of life — informing the structures of thought, social relations, and government — and rigidly restrict freedom of expression in any pub-
lic (and sometimes private) form, they all try without exception to put on a façade of liberalism. One way they do this is by launching official, international cultural events, like the Cairo International Book Fair, or the CIFET, that invariably have an air of crude political machination. Because theatre in the Arab world has always had an irreducible political dimension and continues to be inextricably bound up with a critique of domination, official theatre festivals are often viewed by governments as an effective means to divert attention from the many arrant human rights abuses in this region and to project a spurious façade of democracy, freedom of speech, and conscience. What I said in 1999 is still true today:

The partisan political base of such events, however well camouflaged, is hardly a secret. Over the years, Arab artists, critics and cultural activists have had to learn how to manipulate it in their interests without compromising their visions or artistic integrity. In this respect, bluffing has proved invaluable. By taking the establishment at its word, pretending to believe its glossy slogans and threatening to embarrass it by calling its bluff if necessary, artists have been able, in some cases, to secure subsidies, spaces, media coverage and a bigger margin of freedom.

Foreign participants face a different challenge, particularly if they belong to formerly colonialist nations. Burdened with a sense of guilt, and a heritage they feel they have to apologize and make up for, they find themselves in the position of having to suspend all judgment and exercise the virtues of tolerance and respect for difference to a fault. This makes them deliciously easy prey to autocratic regimes whose internationally acknowledged legitimacy is mere pretense. Caught in the guilt trap, they are rendered largely passive. Unwilling to interfere with what they regard as hallowed “internal affairs” and burdened with an exaggerated and overrated respect for “otherness” and “cultural specificity,” they are forced into a position that is the reverse side of the superiority coin.

Instead of holding up their culture as the norm and only model as their ancestors once did, Westerners, particularly Western artists, now go to the other, equally reprehensible extreme: uncritically accepting repressive practices and human rights abuses in formerly colonized countries that are passed off as part of the cultural heritage. Admittedly, they are in an unenviable position: if they object, both East and West will brand them as ethnocentric, interfering busybodies. In any case, the same cultural sanctity plea will be trotted out to defend the indefensible against foreign interference or even observation. (2003a:435)

However, this plea, based on the concept of an “Arab culture,” is itself unconsciously Orientalist and ethnocentric in its facile, comforting assumption (egged on by stakeholders and authorities who know a good thing when they see it) that deep down all Arabs are basically the same and all possess a single, homogeneous, stable, and unchanging Arab cultural identity. This is the trap of generalization, which Edward Said has warned against in the opening chapter of Orientalism. Yes, one can credibly speak of an Arab world — meaning a group of geographically neighboring, multiethnic, predominantly (but by no means exclusively) Muslim states where the population in each speaks a local version of classical Arabic, thickly interlaced with words, echoes, and rhythms that belong to earlier languages, cultures, and historical periods. But for the term “Arab culture” to make any sense at all, it has to be viewed as a plural entity — Arab
cultures with plurality even within the same country. It must be understood as an ongoing, developing, dialogic historical process, a rich composite of heterogeneous elements, shaped and held together by historical forces and pressures and constantly redefined by its internal tensions and geographical relations to other cultural conglomerates — the cultures of Turkey and Europe to the north; Iran, India, etc., to the east; Africa to the south; and the US to the west — diverse and multiple cultural influences from all neighbors constantly modifying the so-called Arab identity, which is not monolithic but is in a perpetual state of flux. Without recognizing this diversity, it becomes difficult to establish an authentic dialogue with other cultures. Indeed, within each Arab society there are diverse cultural groupings or subcultures that the dominant, official culture needs to acknowledge, engage with in dialogue, and accommodate.

Of course, the official culture does no such thing, having as it does a vested interest in supporting the status quo, while the vast majority of the populace is lulled into the same comforting fantasy by the proponents — the pushers — of the idea of an unassailable, inviolable Islamic homogeneity, a “cultural identity” in defense of which all opposition must be ruthlessly quashed. If Arabs have fallen into this trap, one can hardly blame Europeans and Americans who retreat when attacked and accused of ethnocentrism. And it is having an impact. Alternative views are being suppressed to the extent that “If people like it, who am I to judge” about sums up the position of foreign artists when faced with the glaring evidence of repression on such occasions. They may discuss these cases among themselves, but that is as far as most of them will go. Never mind if what the “people” (read the “natives”) like is media-imposed, enforced, and popularized. Never mind if the free souls in these doubly oppressed countries (both politically and culturally) do not go along with the agenda of the new internal form of oppression.

What the intelligentsia of the West have not yet realized is that many of the ruling establishments in previous colonies have decided to play on their sense of guilt to wrangle a form of tacit validation for their new, improved brand of oppression — all the more lethal because it comes from inside. One is asked, in the name of respect for “otherness,” to condone dominant discourses that are held like an axe over the necks of the people, discouraging independent thought and leading to a herd mentality, as well as repressive laws that restrict people’s freedom of action and sometimes physically mutilate them in the bargain.

Postscript

When I began to write this article in 2009, two years before the 25 January revolution that toppled Mubarak’s regime in February 2011, I never thought that the situation could get worse, or that I would live to see the day when Egypt’s liberal intellectuals and artists, and even its Copts, would anxiously appeal to a conservative religious institution like Al-Azhar (notorious for its hostility to the arts and personal freedom, as I detail above) to protect them from the tyranny of the Muslim Brotherhood and their more extremist allies, the Salafis. The confederacy of oppressive political, religious, and societal institutions that characterized Mubarak’s reign and was responsible for the suppression of freedoms of belief, thought, expression, and creativity has not only survived the 25 January 2011 revolution, but has taken a new, more dangerous shape. Rather than separate, sometimes rival institutions that could be played against each other to find loopholes to avoid censorship, these forces have coalesced into one monolithic power that controls everything, from foreign relations, domestic affairs, the economy, the law, education, and the media, to the private lives and thoughts of citizens, their personal and family relations, their beliefs and leisure pursuits, and even their attire.

Within just one month of the fall of Mubarak’s regime, the Islamists managed to hijack the revolution, and — with the assistance or connivance of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), delegated by Mubarak to rule the country for an interim period until parliamentary and presidential elections were held in 2011 and 2012, with more elections scheduled.
for 2013 — eventually took over as the new ruling power. Those who have read the history of the Brotherhood since the 1930s know very well that however devout they may seem, or claim to be, they are wily and prevaricating and not above giving promises they never mean to fulfill. Indeed, where politics are concerned they can be quite Machiavellian, committed to the belief that all means are justified in serving their “holy cause.” When the secular, liberal, and socialist opposition movements called for demonstrations against Mubarak’s plans to institute his younger son, Gamal, as president (following the example of Hafiz Al-Asad in Syria), both the Brotherhood and Salafi movements declared they would not participate. However, as soon as they saw the massive popular support the demonstrations drew on the first day, they quickly jumped on the bandwagon, put their massive logistical resources in the service of the demonstrators and fought shoulder to shoulder with the other movements against Mubarak’s despised security forces, which had long persecuted, tortured, and incarcerated them. Playing down the religious element and vocally espousing the revolutionaries’ call for a civil, democratic state that respects freedom and human rights regardless of sex, creed, or ethnic origin, they fooled almost everybody. However, as soon as Mubarak stepped down, all the masks fell and the scramble for power began, yielding many shocking revelations.

With their real aims well camouflaged and their popularity at its highest, the Muslim Brothers and the Salafis pressed for immediate parliamentary elections. They opposed the revolutionary call for a new constitution that would lay the foundations for a free, civil, and democratic society, and sided with SCAF in proposing only a few feeble amendments to the old one. SCAF’s ominous constitutional declaration, which guaranteed it would remain in control while promising the Islamists a share in the power should they win a majority in the parliamentary elections, was put to the vote on 19 March 2011 and won a majority vote. How did this happen? It was thanks to the rich resources of the Islamists who could offer irresistible bribes, ranging from edibles and money to promises of paradise, and their far-reaching influence among the poor and ignorant. The combination of military might and religious bigotry carried the day. Two days later, one leading Salafi preacher, Sheikh Mohamed Hussein Ya’qoub, jubilantly compared the battle over the referendum between the Islamists and the “infidel liberals and secularists” to a ghazwa — a religiously charged word historically used to describe the battles of the prophet Mohamed against the infidels in the Arabian Peninsula in the 6th century. Calling the referendum in his Friday sermon Ghazwat Al-Sanadeeq (the Battle of the Ballot Boxes), he interpreted its result as a clear majority vote and popular mandate for the institution of an Islamic theocracy. To those who declare “they cannot live in such a country and under such a rule,” he could only retort: “As you like [...]. God speed [...]. What’s that to us? You can seek visas to America and Canada. [...] We [meaning the Islamists] have won the battle of the ‘boxes’ [...] this country is ours and anyone who does not like it is most welcome to emigrate” (Al-Badil 2011; see also www.facebook.com/shaabobapril).

On Thursday, 14 April 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood, in turn, held a rally in Imbaba, west of Cairo, a district notorious in the 1980s and ’90s as a hotbed of militant, fundamentalist Islamists who called themselves Gama’aat Al-Jihad (the Jihadists). At this conference, Sa’d Al-Husseini — a leading member of the Brotherhood’s General Guidance Bureau — plainly said that “the Brotherhood presently aims to lead society towards achieving its Islamic identity in preparation for establishing Islamic rule”; and while he invited all Islamic factions — “the Salafis, Sunnis, and Sufis” — to put aside their differences and “work together towards empowering religion,” urging them to become politically active “everywhere, in mosques, factories and universities” (in Noqta Wa Awal Al Satr 2011), Mahmoud Izzat, the deputy of the Brotherhood’s General Guide, stoutly announced that “the Brotherhood will impose Islamic penalties when it has possessed the land” (in Noqta Wa Awal Al Satr 2011). The true intentions of the Islamic wing of the revolution were at last spelled out in plain words.
Though these statements provoked angry and shocked reactions from many Tahrir Square revolutionaries they did not surprise those acquainted with the history of the Brotherhood. “They are typical of the Movement’s strategies and tactics as laid out by its founder, Hassan Al-Banna,” Salah ‘Isa, a prominent historian and socialist intellectual noted in Al-Ahram (2011:11). He went on to explain that the policy pursued by the Brotherhood since 25 January 2011 typically has been one of “stooping to conquer,” of apparent “participation” (musharakah) only to be followed by an attempt to win sole control of the situation (mughal-abah)—in other words, they pretend to go along with the revolutionaries in their call for a civil, democratic state, but then, when the moment is right, turn against them and pursue their own agenda.

That these two leading Islamists, in the face of unquestionable evidence in the form of video recordings of the conference, did not scruple to shamelessly deny what they said was again a familiar tactic intended to defuse the crisis and pacify their critics in order to go on duping them. Had the different political factions that staged the Tahrir Square demonstrations heeded the evident warnings that an Islamic state has always been the sole and ultimate goal of the Brotherhood since it was founded, Salah ‘Isa ruefully concluded, they would not have fallen so easily into the trap it set for them and would not have been so shocked by what was blatantly stated in the Imbaba conference.

Equally enlightening and disturbing as that conference was the Friday sermon delivered by the Salafi Imam of Dar Ibn Al-Arqam mosque in Madinat Nasr, a suburb north of Cairo, on 15 April 2011. According to Magdi Al-Afeefi’s report in Akhbar Al-Yom, the Imam divided Egyptian society into “goodies” (Al-Akhyar) and “others” (Al-Aghyar), meaning “baddies,” with the former category embracing only the Salahis and their followers and supporters. On the same Friday, Afeefi went on to say in the same report, a gang of Salaphis gate-crashed the Al-Noor mosque in the Abassiya district of Cairo, pulled its moderate Imam off the pulpit by his beard, kicked out the mosque’s attendants, and delegated one of their own to deliver a fire-and-brimstone sermon in which he shouted at the congregation that their mosque had been no better than “a dance floor,” “a nightclub,” or “a singers’ hall” (Afeefi [2011] 2012:20).

The euphoria and utopian dreams that dominated the Tahrir Square scene during the 18-day sit-ins and demonstrations were thus rudely dispelled, giving way to a sense of doom and nightmare visions of the future. In Egypt, no less than in neighboring Tunisia, the so-called “Arab Spring” turned out to be a harsh season of scorching, blinding sandstorms and thick clouds of poisonous vapors blowing upon green valleys from the arid wastelands of nearby benighted deserts, smothering both countries with oppressive Islamic regimes. In Tunisia, religious extremists mobbed actors celebrating World Theatre Day outside the national theatre in the capital, and vandalized and burned galleries and historical mausoleums. The Observatoire Tunisien de la Culture et de la Citoyennete—a independent watchdog organization established in September 2011 to safeguard the rights of citizens and the freedom of cultural and artistic practice against any transgressions by religious or political forces—regarded these attacks as part of a methodical, systematic plan to erode civil rights and the cultural achievements of the Tunisian people. It called upon all true Tunisians, all artistic organizations, and all civil and cultural societies to stand together against religious terrorism and protect the Tunisian open cultural model and way of life. Nations blighted by religious extremism, it concludes, are invariably doomed to civil strife, chaos, and destruction. On 7 April 2012, the Arab Society of Theatre Critics, based in Cairo, issued a statement protesting the exclusion of intellectuals and artists from all national decision-making groups, particularly the constitution-drafting assembly, and warned agains the marginalization of culture and the arts under the Islamists.

In the two years following the Egyptian revolution, Islamic extremists frequently brought legal actions against liberal writers, actors, caricaturists, and media personages for deriding religion, criticizing the president, or insulting the Islamists. Morsi’s Islamist government
banned at least one independent newspaper and one independent TV channel, and displaced personnel in the national press and media, supplanting liberal leadership and workforces with Islamists. Islamist sheikhs launched rabid smear campaigns against famous female performers, and were condoned and given free play by the authorities in control. Islamist extremists publicly denounced Egypt’s sculptural heritage and pharaonic monuments as pagan and threatened to destroy them without one official voice rising in their defense. The film industry has almost totally collapsed and the majority of the state-owned theatre venues remained closed for the better part of 2012 for no convincing reason — budget cuts, the frequent changing of top officials including the minister of culture (with the resulting bureaucratic confusion as to which month’s budget should be allotted where, having been previously set out by theatre managers who are then replaced), and unrest in the capital city are some of the main culprits, not to mention theatres literally falling apart due to lack of routine maintenance.

Within a few months of winning the notoriously rigged presidential elections by a 50 percent majority in July 2012, Morsi, who had immediately dismantled SCAF and installed his men in key positions in the armed forces, issued a presidential decree by which he gave himself unprecedented sweeping powers and exempted all his decisions from legal challenge in order to consolidate his rule and preempt expected court rulings against the legality of the predominantly Islamist constitutional assembly and Shura Council (the Upper House of the Egyptian People’s Assembly; the Lower House had earlier been dissolved by a legal verdict he was unable to controvert). This was followed by a rushed referendum on a half-baked and deeply flawed draft constitution, cooked overnight by a nonrepresentative assembly from which artists and intellectuals were excluded and all the liberal, secular, and socialist revolutionary forces, as well as the Coptic Church, had withdrawn in protest in the preceding months. Before the referendum took place, militant Islamists supporting the president besieged the Supreme Constitutional Court and the City of Media Production in an ugly show of force intended not only to intimidate the judiciary and opposing TV channels and obstruct their work, but also to warn dissenting Egyptians. The same Islamist militants brutally assaulted peaceful protestors outside the presidential palace, torturing, maiming, and killing many—all in the name of “democracy.”

Though such acts and attitudes on the part of the new Islamist regime in Egypt are incontrovertible proof that the Egyptian people have replaced one form of totalitarianism with a worse and more rigid one, and do not augur well for the future of the arts and culture in Egypt, it must be admitted that as of December 2012, official censorship has been prominent by its absence. But no credit should be given to the Public Censor for this. The fact is that in the raging battles between the different political forces and factions over the past two years, culture and the arts have been almost totally ignored, forming no part of the agenda of most of them. Add to this that the ministry of culture, the official guardian and funder of the arts and culture in Egypt, has had no less than five successive ministers over these past two years—each staying only a few months, and in one instance, only a few days—and therefore had no time to either promote or censor any artistic products. Indeed, most of the artistic and cultural events during these two years were staged by independent groups and artists on the fringe and, consequently, out of the reach of the censor. However, since Morsi’s presidential declaration that brought in the new constitution, the Islamists have been assured of their power and have set about forcing their convictions on everybody. This has meant the resumption of official censorship in defense of the regime and its ideology. The first proof of this was an email I received while on a trip to Baghdad in November 2012. It was from Ashraf Sewailam, a superb baritone in the Cairo Opera Company who led an unconventional life and consequently was so harassed, persecuted, threatened, and vilified by petty officials at the opera house and sordid paparazzi (acting as the guardians of the kind of morality embraced by societal censorship and the ignorant, conservative masses that brought the Islamists to power), that he finally chose self-imposed exile in the United States. In this email he said:
In a dangerous turn of events that bodes ill for the future of Egyptian theatre, an Egyptian performance by the name of Aashkeen Torabek (We Love this Land) is facing serious trouble with the censor because of its criticism of the current Islamist regime. The censor demanded cuts and changes much more draconian than anything known during the Mubarak era. Islamist theocracy is out there to get the whiff of any opposition. In an act of defiance, the director of the performance, Mohamed El-Sharkawy has vowed to present his performance today without any of the required cuts and many artists will flock to the theatre tonight in a bid of support and solidarity. The war for artistic freedom in Egypt is apparently reaching new heights. (2012)

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