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The Egyptian TikTok Girls

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Amidst a new wave of authoritarianism and repression in Egypt, the Internet remains one of the only platforms of alternative expression, although perhaps, not for long.

Aside from Covid-19, the water crisis of the Rival Nile Dam, and the ongoing economic challenge, Egyptian news also dealt with the visible arrest of two young “TikTok stars.” Haneen Hossam, aged 20, was sentenced in absentia by a Cairo court to ten years in prison while Mawada al-Adham, aged 23, who appeared before the court, was sentenced to six.¹

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[@maitelsadany](#), *Twitter*, 20 June 2021; accessed 6 July 2021

The two girls were accused of “attacking society’s values,” “breaching public morals,” and “exploiting girls through video-sharing.” The verdict came five months after another court overturned prison sentences for “violating family values” with videos they posted on TikTok.

Hossam, a college student in archaeology who was posting with her head covered, was arrested last April after she posted a 3-minute video on TikTok telling her over one million followers that girls could make money by broadcasting videos on the app. The authorities interpreted this as a promotion of incitement to prostitution.² Adham, with

¹ BBC News, “[Egypt detains female TikTok star after human trafficking conviction](#)”, *BBC*, 22 June 2021; accessed 5 July 2021.

² Tamar Lapin, “[Five social media influencers sentenced to jail in Egypt over ‘indecent’ videos](#)”, *New York Post*, 27 July 2021; accessed 5 July 2021.

over 2 million followers on TikTok and Instagram, was charged with posting indecent photos and videos on social media.³

Like elsewhere in the Middle East, the Internet in Egypt became a reality as well a challenge to an autocratic government determined to control the discourse among its youth. Internet penetration stood at 57.3% at the beginning of the year, or close to 60 million users out of Egypt's 103 million population.⁴ The youth in Egypt make up the bulk of this number with 49 million users. Social networks have played an important role in shaping political and revolutionary awareness to large sectors of the Egyptian population before and even after the *January 25th Revolution* (which brought down President Hosni Mubarak).

The social networks have served as important platforms for a number of political movements that have used the social networking sites to promote their ideas and acquire supporters.⁵ This reality has not escaped the eyes of the Egyptian government, under which Internet freedom continued to deteriorate because of increased website blocking, restrictive legislation, and censorship.⁶

In 2018, Egypt passed a new Cybercrime Law that would treat social media accounts and blogs with more than 5,000 followers as media outlets, which subsequently made them vulnerable to the more ridged prosecution mechanism of the state. The law further prohibits the establishment of websites without obtaining a license from the Supreme Council and allows it to suspend or block existing websites, or impose fines on editors. Under article 7 of the law, Egypt's authorities can now legally block access to any website that is deemed to constitute "a threat to national security" or to the "national economy." Moreover, even visiting a banned website is now punishable with

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Simon Kemp, "[Digital 2021: Egypt](#)", *Datareportal*, 11 February 2021; accessed 5 July 2021.

⁵ Islam Zaabal, "[Revolution and Social Media: Restoration of Role](#)", *Egyptian Institute for Studies*, 12 February 2019; accessed 5 July 2021.

⁶ "[Freedom on the Net 2020 - Egypt](#)", *Freedom House*, 2020; accessed 10 July 2021.

imprisonment, up to a year. Those who create or manage a banned website could be sentenced up to two years in prison.⁷

Censorship continues to impact freedom of speech in Egypt, as the government issued reporting directives to journalists in an attempt to limit reporting about street protests as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

Hossam and Adham, unfortunately, are not alone. In June 2020, Egyptian authorities arrested seven additional women for “indecent, immorality, and inciting prostitution through social media accounts.”⁹ The list of the most famous TikTok girls now includes Sherry Hanim and her daughter Zumroda; Renad Emad (sentenced to 3 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 pounds); Manar Sami (sentenced of 3 years with hard labor); Menna Abdelaziz (who released a video appearing in tears after she was beaten and raped by a young man);¹⁰ belly dancer Sama El-Masry (sentenced to three years);¹¹ Menna Abdel Aziz and Moka Hijazi (accused of incitement to immorality).¹²

Amidst silence from the National Center for Women in Egypt, some Egyptian human rights and feminists activists began using the hashtags #Egyptian_Families_Permit on Twitter and Facebook to campaign for the release of these women.¹³ Some Egyptian activists commented on the discrepancies in the dealing with accusations and legal treatment due to social class.¹⁴ Egyptian MP John Talaat on the other hand, suggested the censorship of the Instagram and TikTok apps, or at least the enforcement of “stricter

⁷ Reporters Without Borders, “[Egypt’s new cybercrime law legalizes Internet censorship](#)”, *RSF*, 21 August 2018, accessed 17 July 2021.

⁸ Khalil Al-Anani, “[Politics of COVID-19 in Egypt: between repression and opportunism](#)”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 17 May 2020; accessed 15 July 2021.

⁹ Egyptian Streets, “[Two TikTok influencers sentenced to two years in prison for violating family principles](#)”, *Egyptian Streets*, 27 July 2020; accessed 5 July 2021.

¹⁰ “[Tales of 7 girls on Tik Tok... It started by collecting money and practicing vice and ended with women’s imprisonment](#)”, *EG24News*, 23 June 2021; accessed 15 July 2021.

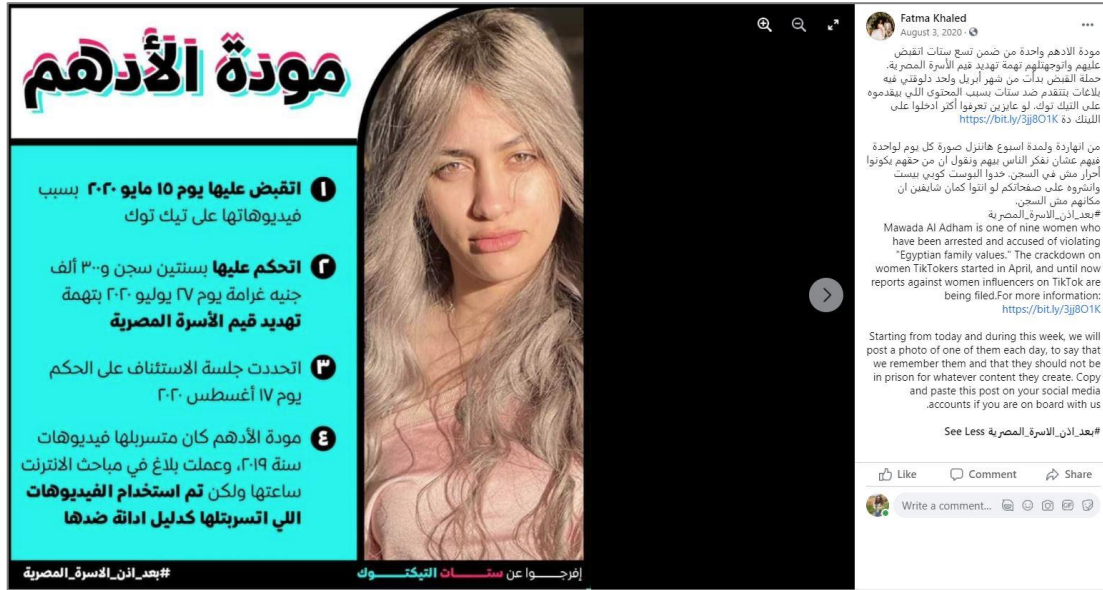
¹¹ Reuters, “[Egyptian belly-dancer given three-year jail term for ‘inciting debauchery’](#)”, *The Guardian*, 27 June 2020; accessed 7 July 2021.

¹² “[She confessed to everything... ‘Tik Tok girl’ in the grip of the Egyptian authorities](#)”, *Archyde*, 9 July 2021; accessed on 5 July 2021.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Declan Walsh, “[Egypt Sentences Women to 2 Years in Prison for TikTok Videos](#)”, *NY Times*, 6 July 2020; accessed 13 July 2021.

surveillance of women on video sharing apps,” so that young people will not post “unethical” or “inappropriate” videos.¹⁵



Campaign to release Mawada al-Adham; [Fatma Khaled](#), Facebook, 3 August 2020; accessed 6 July 2021.

Despite some international criticism by human rights groups,¹⁶ it appears that few are interested in issues pertaining to internet freedom or even women’s rights in Egypt. These Egyptian policies might be perceived as a needed step in a broader effort to curtail the voices of more radical Islamist groups, although in reality, it appears that these policies are mainly taking away the voices of women and progressive activists. What remains certain is the TikTok girls will remain silent for a while.

¹⁵ Ban Barkawi, “[Calls in Egypt for censored social media after arrests of TikTok star, belly dancer](#)”, *Reuters*, 28 April 2020, accessed on 5 July 2021.

¹⁶ “[Human rights organizations call on Egyptian authorities to stop trials of TikTok content creators and to guarantee freedom of expression](#)”, *Freedom of Thought and Expression Law Firm*, 17 May 2021; accessed 15 July 2021.

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