

DAMANAT

PRESS AND THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN YEMEN

AHMED AL-ARAMI



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Ahmed Al-arami

A journalist, and cultural policies writer and researcher

About Press and the freedom of expression

For more than a century, press has been one of the most important aspects of cultural, political and intellectual life in Yemen. Press beginnings in Yemen, and other regional Arab countries, date back to the 2nd half of 19th century during the British occupation of the southern part of the country and the 2nd presence of Ottoman Empire in Yemen (1872– 1918). The different beginnings, some of which were local like that of Hadhramout at the beginning of the 20th century, were all efforts that have paved the way for the emergence of a local press. Many reasons were behind the different forms and beginnings of press in Yemen like; access to printing and its techniques, the massive political and cultural transitions, in addition to the constant change of press forms, worldwide, due to the developments in telecommunication and printing technologies. Thus, the different forms of press beginnings in Yemen were an echo of the political, intellectual and cultural interactions and a reflection of the disturbance in the socio-political life. But, the steady state of the country, after the independence of the southern part against the British occupation in 1967 and the revolution in northern part against Imamate in 1962, has led to the legal organization and overall prosperity of press in Yemen. The press work in the southern part of Yemen was governed by the issuance of Law no (27) dated 3rd July 1939 which was known as the law of press and publications, and the law of 1953 concerning the press in what was called the “Qaeiti- Hadrami State”. Those two laws remain effective until the date of independence on 30 November 1967, after which the press work, in the southern part of Yemen, had no governing law until the issuance

of “Press and publishing Law” no. (7) in March 1990, the law that remained effective until the date of Yemeni unification. In the northern part of Yemen, the press work was governed by the “Republican Era Publishing Law”, No. (24) issued on 18th November 1968 that has ruled the press work, and the law (No. 42) issued in 1982 concerning the journalistic planning, which remained effective until the date of unification in 1990. After the announcement of the “Republic of Yemen” in 1990, the law (No. 25 of 1990) was issued to abolish all previous press-related laws. This law has organized the press work and gave the opportunity, of issuing journals and publications, for everyone (individuals, institutions or parties), which has contributed to the press prosperity and led to the diversity and renovation of more factual press work. A republican decree (No. 49) was also issued, on 25 April 1993, concerning the regulation of “Press and Publication Law” in press field. Since the early beginnings, press in Yemen has led an important role in applying the freedom of expression, for many journalistic publications have represented the voice of people and revolutions, formed the principles of political changes and incorporated a lot ideas and experiences; it was an arena for disputations and a record of events, with a part of it for the authority and the occupation like any other media platform with a rostrum for both the authority and opponents. The press in Yemen has caused emergence of many ideas, authors, writers, books and different currents of thought, meanwhile some journals and media platforms were representing the authority, and reflecting an aspect of its domination. However, despite of everything said about it, the press in Yemen, during the republican era or after has recorded an advance stage and, with no doubts,

was qualified for openness and for leading an educational, intellectual and informational role, with further cultural and political developments, due to the prosperity of the information sector in a steadily progressing world. Then, came the events that affected the Arab world, including Yemen, to obstruct this development process and to become the most prominent obstacle in the way of improving the media and the freedom of opinion and expression in Yemen. Many journals and journalists have anchored a lot of freedom principles, embodied the values of freedom of expression, confronted the political and religious authorities that have repressed this kind of freedom, and led a never-ending struggle. No doubt, that the security and stability of a country is the most suitable climate for journalists to strive for the freedom of expression, and that explains the inability of press and journalists, in Yemen, to stand for the oppression during the current state of disturbance, war and fragmentation of the country, in addition to the weak role of a free and independent opinion, and the weakness of both independent journalists and intellectuals against major plans and superpowers with their media frontlines. The press in Yemen, due to the political unrest and the state of disturbance, fragmentation and war, is living the darkest period of their history. The period of 2011- now, was not only a period of disturbance for the prospected development, owed to the emergence of many independent journals and diverse cultural press and to the prosperity of the information sector, but also a period of more violence and hostility against the press and journals, with a torrent of violations committed against the reporters, photographers and dozens of journals, websites, broadcasting headquarters and properties of journalists. These violations have

varied in forms of abductions, detentions, blocking websites and social media platforms, threats, incitement campaigns, killing attempts, confiscating and looting the properties of journalist and media institutions. In addition to the violations of prosecution, detention, enforced disappearance, and torture in detention, work suspension, suspension of salaries, visit prohibition, media outlets closure and cases of killings and issuance of oppressive rules and regulations, all are violation committed by all parties to the conflict in Yemen, in different ratios, to result in making Yemen one of the most dangerous countries for the press work. The press diversity, being one of the Yemeni press features, since the seventies of last century, with its accumulations, was likely to lead major transitions in the Yemeni press and its role of activating the freedom of expression as well, especially with the increasing span of freedom and potentials of the modern telecommunication technologies, related to this field. But despite of this all, the recent transitions in Yemen, having started in 2011, will take back the Yemeni press to square one. Aside from the repression of the freedom of expression and the unlimited violations against the press and journalists, the disturbance in country has firstly eradicated the diversity of press, and subsequently the chances of prosperity in cultural press, as an example, which resulted in clear homogeneity. Being known, the functions of press known as (news, opinion, education, amusement and entertainment), then it is clear that the cultural press, after 2011, has been severely hit by the disappearance of many cultural supplements (the cultural supplements of Al-Thawra, Afkar, Afnan and Al-Thaqafia Newspapers), and some cultural pages were even abandoned. Generally, we can say that news function has madly

overwhelmed the Yemeni press, with a considerable space for articles that discuss the accelerating events and recent developments in the political field, along with the Arab Spring movement. The afterward state disorder, in addition to the war and regional conflict that have affected the country, have all contributed to the exacerbating situation of this field, through the emergence of long and illogical list of TV channels, journals and websites, which has reflected the socio-political rupture and the ideological regional conflict. No doubt that this situation would abolish the independent political press, or those who were, to some extent, obliged to an independent discourse, and expose journals and journalists to torture and unlimited violations. The political parties and institutions were able to resume or re-initiate their journals, or the media platform that was closed, confiscated or stopped, but the independent press entities, being established by young independent journalists, were not able to resist the disaster or re-initiate their platforms, among of which were Al-Neda, Hadith Al-Madina, Al-Sharae (the street), Alola, Al-Nas and Al-Masdar Newspapers. All these newspapers were of distinctive importance in the Yemenipress, and ended up closed or looted, while the journalists and founders have been obliged fled their own country.

Concluding Recommendations:

- ✓ To join efforts of activists, institutions, trade unions and concerned organizations, and work collectively and apply pressure on political stakeholders and parties to the conflict in order to stop committing violations against press and journalists.
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- ✓ To urge political stakeholders and countries sponsoring the national dialogue and political settlement, for including the principle of “freedom of press and expression” as a basic point of any dialogue for future settlement. And to ensure more room for freedom on issuing or discussing any law in future.
- ✓ To support the projects concerning with the freedom of expression in Yemen or the press and journalists or the media outlets, to raise the awareness about the press reality in Yemen for obtaining new ideas, studies and visions that might help in the restoration of press leading role and provide alternate climate for the freedom of expression provided by press.
- ✓ To support the projects and ideas concerning with the cultural, social and independent press in Yemen, including the websites and the safe and alternate media outlets, or even the outlets that could provide or contain this kind of press, such as social media platforms and the internet.

Footnotes:

- ✓ Al-Gabr, Ameen (2011), *The press and authority in contemporary Yemen: Intellectual and political trends*, History Dept., College of Arts, Dhamar University.
 - ✓ Al-Arami, Ahmed (2012), *The Official Press: Vision for the Solution*, Al-Masdar Online, <http://almasdaronline.com/article/print/30285> (Thu. 29 March 2012).
 - ✓ Wikipedia.
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