

ROUNDTABLE

Observations on the Egyptian Independent Music Scene and Political Dynamics in a Post-Revolutionary Context

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For almost a decade, Egypt's independent music scene has been witnessing fundamental changes in relation to the rampant political dynamics. The post "Arab Spring" political rollercoaster has had a dramatic impact on the local cultural and artistic scenes, resulting in a wider aggression against civil society at large. As an Egyptian musician and NGO worker, I provide my observations about the changes that have affected artistic freedom in Egypt in light of the major political reforms in 2011 and 2013. My testimony is based on personal experience. In mid-2018, I suddenly found myself in arbitrary detention in one of Cairo's notorious prisons, facing terrorism-related charges for alleged participation in producing a satirical song released by an Egyptian singer in exile – a song that I did not participate in by any means.

Although this may imply that I had been actively producing music that is regarded as offensive by the authorities, this has never been the case. My musical upbringing and later work as an instrumentalist have always been focused on genres that I am musically interested in rather than the political or social messages involved. Most of the elements that appealed to me, gave me the drive to learn, and motivated me to become a professional musician were, in fact, technical, such as particular solos, riffs, tones, grooves, etc. Accordingly, my attention to non-Western music was very limited. The genres I was attracted to through the years were mostly along the lines of rock, blues, soul, and jazz. It was a specific instrumental solo in one of Scorpions' songs that led me to pick up my instrument, and artists like Stevie Ray Vaughan, Mark Knopfler, David Gilmour and Van Halen were my idols.

After a relatively intense self-taught phase, I started joining underground rock bands between 2002 and 2007. At the time, there were a few rehearsal studios in Cairo and Alexandria that acted as de facto hubs for musicians and provided some space for networking and interaction. Bands would often be spontaneously created prior to random jams or discussions, and I was jumping between bands playing covers and original music. With a fairly entrepreneurial approach, a few people organized underground rock concerts in both cities with audiences that ranged between 300 and 800 people. Before al-Sawi Culture Wheel (*Saqiyat al-Sawi*) became a hub of underground music performance, music events were usually held in relatively remote areas and often without satisfying all the bureaucratic requirements, resulting in occasional police raids that were also inspired by a historic crackdown against rock and metal music in 1996.

I moved on later to a professional career as a session musician, which started by forming function bands to perform in corporate and touristic events mainly in Hurgada, El Gouna, and Sharm El Sheikh, as well as Cairo and Alexandria. This move was, quite expectedly, driven by the desire to broaden my practical experience and generate income. I got involved with a number of independent bands as a performing and recording artist, where we took festivals such as the SOS Music Festival as our main musical hub. I later began to perform and record with mainstream producers and pop singers, as well as for TV shows and advertisements. I also became more acquainted with non-Western music for professional reasons. My attention was generally focused on developing my sound and career as an instrumentalist rather than releasing my own music.

On the other hand, my career in development began after receiving a social entrepreneurship diploma in Europe and was sustained by work with NGOs until the completion of my international relations master's degree in another European country. I initially took an interest in social and political sciences during my bachelor's studies in economics. My passion for music and interest in politics have always been somewhat unconnected. I often used to fulfill the former at night and the latter during the day, while always seeking to bridge both worlds.

¹The writer has chosen to remain anonymous due to being under legal probation. They are thus unable to name any of the projects or bands in which they were involved.

Post-2011

I was already working for an NGO abroad when the “Arab Spring” broke out. I returned to Cairo the same month as soon as my project came to an end. I was never a frequent protest-goer, although I did some occasional visits. I mostly worked with a number of local and international NGOs on democratization and human rights projects. I used to refrain from political commentary on social media platforms as I never have been an avid user. It took some time until I revived my music career after my two-year absence from the local scene. Most importantly, however, there was a vibrancy and rapid surge of independent artists after a brief period of turbulence.

These changes were observable within a vast change in civil life itself. The emergence of political plurality and the decline of the longstanding patriarchal structures created an unprecedented space for expression and civil participation in various “non-political” aspects. Numerous civil initiatives were mushrooming towards urgent social issues such as poverty, corruption, violence against women, and the lack of public services. NGOs were rapidly increasing in numbers as funding institutions and programs focusing on Egypt were mounting. Alongside political development and democratization programs, foreign and international organizations were working freely on a cultural level, which eventually triggered the growth of local NGOs in numbers and capacity. The growth of funds allocated for cultural development programs stimulated cultural entrepreneurship and grassroots artistic initiatives.

Correspondingly, the local music scene saw a remarkable proliferation of independent artists, genres, venues, and festivals. The independent music wave that had started prior to 2011 with bands such as Wust El Balad, Nagham Masry, Black Theama and others, instantly penetrated the mainstream industry following the uprising, pushing established commercial pop stars aside. Multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Vodafone, and Red Bull signed advertisement deals with some of the wave’s second-generation bands like Cairokee, Massar Egbari, and Sharmoofers. Street festivals were organized in Cairo’s most securitized districts, such as Al-Fann Midan (Abdin square and the downtown area), Al-Korba Festival (Heliopolis district), 100 Copies Music Festival (downtown), D-CAF Festival (downtown), and Street Music Revolution (Heliopolis district), among others. Many of them were funded or supported by NGOs and cultural programs. Organizing music events, at the time, involved negligible security restrictions and the state was unhostile to large gatherings. Artistic freedom rose to unprecedented levels as a result of political openness, allowing for independent artists to express and network freely. The trendiness of political content contributed to the success of many of this wave’s artists, several of whom were motivated to engage in social and political issues due to the increasing awareness of their role in society. The environment created by the success of “Sout El Horreya” (The Voice of Freedom) is likely to have encouraged attempts like “El Zabaleen” (The Garbage Collectors), a band that used trash bins as percussive instruments to raise environmental awareness. Aesthetic changes, such as attention to social causes, unpaid street performances, and the use of graffiti and contemporary performance arts as visual elements, indicated a core shift in the social perception of artists towards a unanimous feeling of ownership and belonging toward society. This environment has triggered a vast space for musical experimentation, as observed in the music of Maryam Saleh, Dina El Wedidi, Tamer Abu Ghazaleh, Kairo Is Koming, and others. Moreover, it witnessed the emergence of one of Egypt’s most organic genres, electronic *mahragānāt* (known abroad as the electro-chaabi/*sh’abi*) and local rap.

These changes inspired me to explore diverse genres and push my musical boundaries as a performing and recording artist. I worked with a number of artists in this independent music wave, some of whom adopted political undertones. The growth of the independent music scene provided a vast opportunity for networking, collaboration, as well as income generation. In my other career, the surging abundance of jobs in NGOs allowed me to navigate between various local and international organizations in complete freedom. Both careers were still unconnected at this point, as I was self-developing in both separately.

Post-2013

The transition of power in mid-2013 gave rise to an utter shift in the political context. Although the state crackdown against the foreign funding of NGOs had begun as early as July 2011, it was not until late 2013 that circumstances started to return to what had been normal. My work in an international NGO quickly

came to an end as soon as the local program was terminated and all our local partners, including youth clubs and universities, suspended their projects. The sudden lack of opportunities drove me to pursue my master's studies abroad with the hope of resuming my career in development in a safe environment.

Upon my return to Egypt due to visa-related issues almost two years later, the situation was clearly far more volatile. Numerous organizations had shut down and others had their offices or projects officially relocated abroad. The cultural scene witnessed such incidents as the termination of Al-Fann Midan festival (along with most of the other aforementioned festivals), the security raid on Townhouse Gallery, and al-Mawred a-Thaqafy (Cultural Resource) organization's declaration to shut down its Cairo office and move to Beirut. The local Musicians' Syndicate regained its de facto power to raid concerts, and al-Sawi Cultural Wheel – one of the most active local art venues that contributed to shaping the independent music wave – started imposing new regulations, such as prior approval of lyrical content in cooperation with the syndicate and the authorities. Bureaucratic procedures required to organize musical events were extended to include additional taxes and approvals mostly by security entities. Artists who were relatively politicized or who do not exercise self-censorship were banned by the Musicians' Syndicate and some, such as Hamza Namira, forced to pursue their music in exile.

With the sharp decline of artistic freedom, artists were gradually cornered into a position where they were required to explicitly express support for the political leadership either through artistic production, open statements, or mere gestures. Even some of those affiliated with the independent music wave, such as Black Theama, Massar Egbari, and others were indirectly pushed to join the state-backed musical race to produce songs supporting the political leadership. I personally performed with one of the famous local bands in a concert organized by the state, where we were requested to say a few words about our support for the political leadership during our performance. Mainstream pop singers who represent traditionally conservative norms have restored their initial privileged position in the music industry and were given particular attention in the local media. Songs like "Tislam al-Ayadi" (Many Thanks) and "Bushrat Khayr" (Good News) marked the beginning of such a trend in the music scene, celebrating reform procedures and political victories of the incumbent regime. On the other hand, the electronic *mahragānāt* and local rap scenes were swiftly gaining momentum and popularity, while also getting less politicized in terms of content in order to adapt to the new context. In most cases, independent artists can only afford the high cost of music production by securing enough live bookings. The persistence of *mahragānāt* is likely to be a result of the artists' reliance on weddings as live venues, rather than the shrinking concerts and music festivals. It is also due to the fact that electronic music production is less expensive than other genres in the independent music wave because it involves minimal use of acoustic instruments.

The attack on cultural development programs and affiliated NGOs undermined several music festivals and art hubs, leaving less space for rising talents, initiatives, as well as the opportunity for experimentation. As the ceiling of artistic freedom was being lowered, artists gradually and intentionally refrained from addressing political issues, not only due to the fear of persecution, but also the diminishing trendiness of politically critical content. Even if DIY (do-it-yourself) music has the potential of being organically viral without mainstream industry support, adopting such content is likely to result in detention or at least being ignored by the local music industry. Ultimately, the lack of free expression discouraged artists from engaging in social and political issues and reduced their sense of ownership towards society. Fewer artists believed in the role of music in social change and aesthetics were steered more toward self-gain and individualism. The narratives promoting positive social change have widely been replaced by narratives focusing on self-motivation and development.

At this point, I had to concentrate on restoring and maintaining my music career. Despite the decline of opportunities and my having been away for another two years, I started returning actively to the local music scene. I engaged with various music projects and joined a number of independent bands, including one of the aforementioned popular bands – one that has nothing "political" on its track record. In my career in development, the lack of local opportunities drove me to co-found an art space with a few other fellow musicians in an attempt to use my artistic background to engage in broader cultural activities. We hosted exhibitions, talks, and small-scale performances by underground artists. The increasing entertainment taxes, required licenses, and lack of funding opportunities, however, led to insufficient income generation, pushing us to start renting out rooms for music

producers and teachers.² This was potentially the first attempt to bridge the gap between both of my careers. Even during my master's studies in Europe one year earlier, I refused to work on music and politics despite my supervisor's encouragement. I believed this might push me to work on the non-musical elements deemed politically relevant rather than the technical aspects of the music itself. I also favored focusing my studies strictly on civil society because I initially pursued a graduate degree to boost my career in development.

However, my interest in politics was falling rapidly due to the growing political stagnation that I encountered upon returning to Egypt. It was quite obvious to me how the deeply securitized political conditions were affecting both of my careers. It was ultimately not possible to return to Europe for reasons related to the residence permit. I was then determined to live a completely non-politicized life and pursue my development career only through running the art space. During the same period, I was enhancing my music production skills and I started a project with one of my old bandmates with the aim of experimenting with electro elements in a rock-based sound. We produced a five-track EP, released two of these tracks, and won a competition to perform our debut show abroad in a Middle Eastern country. This project was my main focus at the time along with performing with the other popular independent band, my work as a session musician with some mainstream pop artists, occasional music production, and maintaining the art space. In such a context, it is inevitable for session musicians to work in events organized by the state, which I did with a heavy heart.

Incarceration

Although politics was no longer critically addressed by artists in such context, one of the singers I briefly worked with back in 2012 released a politically satirical song six years later while in exile in Europe. This coincided with a presidential election amidst the accumulated impact of escalating securitization in the music industry. Two months after the song's release, I was arrested at the Cairo airport on my way back from my band's debut performance abroad, before even reaching the passport control checkpoint. At first, I was clueless about the reason, since my last contact with the singer was years before and I was not even aware of the song's existence. During these two months, I pursued my daily life normally, working and moving between different cities without any knowledge of the imaginary link being constructed by the authorities between myself and the song. By the time I got arrested, three of the most popular independent bands – including the one I had lately joined – were being successively banned from performing for periods ranging from between five to seven months. I had a concert cancelled two hours before its start only two weeks before my arrest. Almost in the same week, a well-known alternative music festival in Alexandria was cancelled mid-performance, all for no declared reasons.

A few years after the political transition in 2013, political cases – whether or not they involve violence – became operated by a state security agency that is responsible for fighting terrorism and insurgency rather than the ordinary policing and prosecution. The official charge in my case is belonging to an undisclosed terrorist organization, which is the same for all political cases. There is no trial involved, which indicates that the detention period is not based on a judicial verdict but is instead random and indefinite. The entire legal framework governing this procedure is linked to legislative reforms guided by the martial law decreed in 2013 and the state of emergency of 2017, allowing for constitutional rights and freedoms to be undermined by policing and judicial institutions. I initially went through a short period of incommunicado detention, then twelve months of pre-trial incarceration. During my detention, there was no chance of getting to know any evidence against me or to communicate with my lawyer.

I was finally released from prison with probationary security measures – also for an indefinite period. This includes a six-hour weekly detention, a renewal “court” session every forty-five days, frequent security interviews, and an unofficial indefinite travel ban. My release came with no declared or clear reasons; however, it was possibly encouraged by active campaigning. Even while several media outlets had participated in the campaign for my release, none was local.

²The entertainment tax (*darbiyat al-malāhī*) is in addition to income tax and to taxes collected by the Musicians Syndicate for each performer. Many independent and *mahragānāt* musicians are not members (and are not allowed to be members) of the Syndicate, which requires that they pay bribes to the Syndicate in order to perform.

With less equipment, a year of no guitar practice, and indefinite probation, I had plenty to worry about in order to get back to my music career. Regardless of the trauma and psychological consequences of my imprisonment, all my professional – and in some cases friendly – work contacts were lost due to a prevailing environment of fear. My weekly six hours of probationary detention were scheduled for weekend nights, leaving me almost no chance to perform live. The art space I had co-founded had shut down immediately following my arrest. It became obvious to me that I had been essentially blacklisted.

Overall, the changes in content, aesthetics, and structure in the Egyptian music industry following 2011 suggest its strong connection to political dynamics. Despite the powerful momentum gained by the independent music wave prior to and throughout the “Arab Spring,” the post-2013 securitization measures formed a sizeable barrier. A few genres, such as *mahragānāt* and rap, have shown remarkable resilience, however, the local music scene in general has been exposed to a thorough process of political screening, leaving little space for networking, expression, and even musical experimentation. Lowering the ceiling of artistic freedom does not only affect “politicized” artists (those who overtly express political ideas in their lyrics), but rather the resulting discursive authority has had the broader effect of inexplicitly inflicting self-governance among all citizens, most poignantly realized in artists’ own increasing self-censorship. The steady downturn of artistic freedom has triggered dramatic shifts in the arts scene, pushing individual artists and industry stakeholders towards less social engagement, solidarity, and attention to the role of arts in society. In sum, the crackdown against political opposition took its toll broadly on civil life in a hostile fashion, restoring pre-“Arab Spring” patterns of authority and patriarchal structures even more strictly.

To me, the coercive side of such authority is signified by my incarceration, in which I was possibly used as a political scapegoat, sending a strong message among the society of musicians that redefined their expanding restrictions. My experience let me observe a strong direct correlation between political freedom and the growth of artistic movements, even those that lack an overtly political nature. Active security crackdowns outside the music scene, such as on social media influencers, atheists and LGBT+ activists, suggest a strong patriarchal element alongside the political. Although my musicianship has always been focused on the technical aspects of music, I am finding it difficult to rebuild my music career and adapt to the securitized music scene with its new aesthetics and red lines. What I maintained as two separate aspects of my life have been ultimately forced together, however coercively.