

21 May 1999

His Excellency Husni Mubarak  
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt  
Cairo, Egypt

Your Excellency,

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America is writing to urge you to make a public commitment to defend academic freedom in Egypt and the free flow of information and ideas. We take this step in response to reports of increasing censorship and book-banning by the Ministry of Information. Officials such as yourself should play a leading role in promoting tolerance and respect for basic rights. In the face of recent challenges in the media and elsewhere to the fundamental right to receive and to impart information, the government has failed to meet this responsibility and has in fact acted to abridge this right.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

The most recent instance of book-banning by the Ministry of Information, to our knowledge, is the notice dated April 26, 1999, in which the director of the Office of the Censor in the ministry informed the American University in Cairo that Muhammad Choukri's novel, *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, a book that has been legally available in Egypt for many years, was henceforth banned from sale and circulation on the grounds that it "contains extreme pornographic scenes which do not fit with our social and religious traditions." Subsequently, we understand, this ban was applied to the sale and circulation of this book in Egypt generally.

Choukri's semi-autobiographical novel, which appeared in 1971 and is widely regarded a major work of modern Arabic literature, had come to public attention in December and January, after parents of some AUC students complained to the university regarding the book's assignment in an Arabic literature class. During the ensuing controversy, in response to a comment from Dr. Moufid Mahmoud Shehab, the Minister of Higher Education, that he would look into the matter, the university administration wrote to the minister assuring him that the matter would be resolved within the university, in a manner that affirmed the right of university faculty to select their course material without outside

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interference. On March 2, Dr. Shehab, speaking before the education committee of the People's Assembly and citing assurances from AUC, asserted that the university would not include this or other offensive material in future curricula and then added: "I will prevent the study of the [Choukri] book in any educational curriculum, in order to protect the values and traditions of Egyptian society...."

The April 26 letter from the censor's office formally added this renowned novel to the scores of books which the ministry has banned in the past year alone. We had written you previously, on 16 June 1998, following a similar incident in which the government banned the sale and classroom or library use of Maxime Rodinson's classic biography of the Prophet, Muhammad. In November 1998, Alifa Rifa'at's *Distant View of a Minaret* was banned without explanation, after having been taught as part of the university's core curricula for many years without objection or incident.

In addition to banning these three books from use in AUC classrooms, between May 1998 and April 1999 the censorship office has reportedly reviewed some 450 titles, and ruled that some 89 of them may not be sold in the AUC bookstore. The list includes one of the works of Egypt's Nobel Prize-winning writer Naguib Mahfouz. Typically, a decision by the Office of the Censor to forbid the sale of a particular book is followed by the withdrawal of the banned text from bookstores, and often the removal of all available copies from libraries as well.

We recognize that the AUC is an institution that must operate in accordance with Egyptian laws and in response to administrative decrees such as that of 26 April. On this basis we strongly deplore the role your government has played in abridging the rights of AUC students and faculty, and those of Egyptian citizens generally, to free expression and the right to receive and impart information. These are rights that are guaranteed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a state party, and that can be restricted only for sound reasons of national security, public order, or public health and morals. The banning of these books, particularly in a university setting, clearly exceeds these permissible grounds for restriction. The Office of the Censor has reportedly refused to provide the university with a list of banned books, and it is not at all clear that such a list exists, adding to the sense that many of these decisions are capricious and arbitrary as well as violations of academic freedom and the right to freedom of expression.

Your excellency, book-banning and similar acts of official censorship help to sustain a climate of intolerance that is debilitating to society in general and to intellectual life in particular. The effects, moreover, are not limited to those cases of direct government intervention, for they add measurably to a sense of vulnerability and siege among academic institutions, faculty and students.

Governments and universities share an obligation to society to work together in promoting tolerance and a diversity of viewpoints. The government of Egypt recently issued a commemorative stamp to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We ask you to make

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operational the commitment contained in the preamble to the Declaration, in which member states pledge themselves that "every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms."

This cannot occur when educators and students are denied the right to receive and impart information, and when the government capitulates to intolerant elements in society and itself participates in silencing competing ideas. We ask you to take steps now to end official and state-sanctioned book-banning in Egypt, and thereby to affirm publicly your government's commitment to the rights of free expression and the free flow of ideas that are fundamental to a civilized society.

Respectfully,

Anne H. Betteridge  
Executor Director

cc: Dr. Moufid Mahmoud Shehab, Minister of Higher Education  
His Excellency Mohamed Safwat al-Sharif, Minister of Information  
Dr. John Gerhart, AUC