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Cartoonist Is Arrested as Egypt Cracks Down on Critics

By DECLAN WALSH

CAIRO — A popular Egyptian cartoonist was arrested Sunday on charges of running a website without a license, the Interior Ministry said, in the latest escalation of a campaign to silence the government’s online critics.

The cartoonist, [Islam Gawish](#), 26, who has 1.6 million Facebook followers, was arrested during a police raid on the offices of a news website based in Cairo. Although his satirical cartoons have been published online, Mr. Gawish was not seen as an especially vehement critic of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

It was the most prominent arrest since the Jan. 25 anniversary of the 2011 uprising that ultimately [toppled President Hosni Mubarak](#), which had been preceded by a wave of arrests and closures that focused on democracy activists and well-known cultural spaces in downtown Cairo.

Although Mr. Sisi’s government has silenced many critical voices in [Egypt’s](#) major news media, either by arresting journalists or forcing them into exile, it has struggled to contain free speech on the Internet, which is one of the few forums for open dissent at a time when public protest has been all but outlawed.

Facebook and other social media sites, which played a role in organizing the 2011 uprising, are popular with millions of Egyptians, but a few high-profile prosecutions have sent a warning to users about the limits of tolerance for political discussion.

In October a military court handed down a [three-year jail sentence to Amr Nohan](#), a 22-year-old law graduate who had posted to his Facebook page an image that depicted Mr. Sisi with Mickey Mouse-style cartoon ears.

In recent weeks, the authorities arrested five people who are accused of administering hundreds of Facebook pages that were sympathetic to the banned Muslim Brotherhood and that had sought to encourage public protest on Jan. 25.

The circumstances of Mr. Gawish’s arrest, which follows the recent closing of the Townhouse Gallery arts space in central Cairo and a raid on the offices of a book publisher, seemed to signal that the government is seeking new ways to silence even moderate forms of dissent.

In a recent cartoon, Mr. Gawish satirized Mortada Mansour, a progovernment lawmaker known for [foul language and intemperate outbursts](#). Mr. Mansour, who heads Parliament’s human rights committee, is shown in the caricature standing next to a torturer, advising him to lash his victim “gently.”

The Sunday raid on the [Egypt News Network](#), where Mr. Gawish worked, was carried out because the website was operating without an official permit, said Maj. Gen. Ayman Helmy, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry.

In an interview, Mohamed Elzyiat, a co-worker of Mr. Gawish, said the police raided the office without a search warrant and seemed to be mostly interested in Mr. Gawish. “They were looking for Islam because of his cartoons that are critical of the regime,” Mr. Elzyiat said.

The Interior Ministry said Mr. Gawish was being charged with possessing pirated software and running an unauthorized personal website. It was not clear whether the website in question was his Facebook page.



Mr. Gawish's lawyer, Mahmoud Othman, said his client was being held overnight at a police station, and was expected to face formal charges on Monday.

"The regime is worried about any creative work," Mr. Othman said. "They have shut down art venues, and now they are arresting innovators. The state must be very fragile if it is afraid of cartoonists."

Mr. Othman also said, "The only creative work which is permitted is that which favors the state."

The government's intolerance of free expression on the Internet has extended beyond antigovernment criticism.

Four Coptic teenagers from Minya, 140 miles south of Cairo, are scheduled to stand trial later this week on charges of insulting religion because they had made a video, which was posted online, that mocked the Islamic State, the newspaper Mada Masr [reported on Sunday](#).

Correction: January 31, 2016

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to those arrested on charges of administering Facebook pages that were sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood. Five people were arrested, not five men; two of them are women.