

## Human Rights NGOs and the 'Foreign Funding Debate' in Egypt

Nicola Pratt<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The 'foreign funding debate' refers to a set of debates within Egyptian civil society over the advantages and disadvantages of Egyptian NGOs accepting funds from non-Egyptian, particularly 'Western' organizations (nongovernmental and governmental). These debates have become particularly heated with regard to human rights NGOs, due to the more politicized nature of their work and the political activist origins of many human rights advocates.<sup>2</sup> Debates over foreign funding take part among and between NGO activists, members of political parties, journalists, and intellectuals in seminars, informal gatherings, and via the media. In addition, the government adds to the debate by determining the legality of accepting funds from abroad.<sup>3</sup> The topic of 'foreign funding' has become so ubiquitous that it is currently impossible to discuss the subject of human rights NGOs in Egypt without someone mentioning the 'F' word (funding).

The 'foreign funding debate' is not about NGO financial matters but, rather, about the identity of those who provide funds (that is, organizations located in the 'West') and Egypt's relationship with them.<sup>4</sup> The 'foreign funding debate' constitutes a discourse largely promoted by Egyptian civil society for

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'human rights' in its widest sense to cover civil and political rights, social and economic rights, women's rights, the rights of working people and child rights. For an outline of the 'foreign funding debate' with particular regard to Egyptian women's rights NGOs, see Nadjé Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Current legislation (Law 84/2002) states that any private associations conducting work falling within the remit of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) must obtain permission before accepting funds from any source (whether domestic or foreign). Prior to the law change in 2002, most Egyptian human rights organizations were able to bypass this article because they were not registered with MOSA but as civil companies (this loophole has since been closed). Nevertheless, the government resorted to a 1992 military decree (stating that any entity must obtain official permission to accept funds from abroad) in order to harass some human rights activists. In February 2000, Secretary General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights was charged but the case was never pursued. In 2001, the same decree was used to prosecute and indict Saad Eddin Ibrahim and his colleagues from the Ibn Khaldoun Center. They were finally acquitted on appeal and released from prison in 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed El-Sayed Said, "Phantom of the Foreigner Reigns over Debates Concerning Private Associations," *Sawasiah* 23–24, 1998 (newsletter of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies), pp. 6–9.

controlling Egyptian human rights NGOs and regulating their relations with the 'West.' In this sense, the 'foreign funding debate' does not reflect an 'objective reality' about NGOs and foreign funding. It is not based on rigorous, empirical observation of the impact of foreign funding on NGO operations. Rather, it represents a dominant way of thinking about or interpreting Egypt's relations with the 'West.' Nevertheless, this discourse does not only operate in the realm of ideas about Egypt and the 'West,' it also shapes the real practices of the state and civil society towards Egyptian NGOs, thereby illustrating the link between discourse and power.<sup>5</sup>

Representations of and attitudes toward Egypt's relations with the 'West' have been shaped by more than two hundred years of encounters between the 'Occident' and 'Orient,' particularly by the experience of the French and British occupation of Egypt. Anti-colonial resistance in Egypt (and other colonies) was constructed around an identity that celebrated the supposedly inherent cultural and moral differences of the colonized from the colonizers.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the construction of essentialized difference was a tool of empowerment during the struggle against colonialism, today it has become a mechanism of authoritarian politics. The continued desire to maintain the boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them' and to perceive everything Western as a threat leads to a situation in which civil society condemns those who transgress the boundaries in the name of protecting the nation state. Human rights NGOs that have forged links with organizations located in the West have become a target of such condemnation and the 'foreign funding debate' represents a means of disciplining them.

This chapter identifies the principle trends within the 'foreign funding debate' in Egypt. I will demonstrate how, despite the apparent variety of positions, they all adhere to the internal logic of the binary division separating Egypt from the West and the role of Egyptian civil society in maintaining this division in order to resist dangerous Western influences. Even those who seek to defend 'foreign funding,' frame their arguments within this logic. In light of the dangers of reproducing essentialized differences between Egypt and the West, in the final section, I argue for a deconstruction of the binary oppositions that give meaning to the 'foreign funding debate.'

### **The Arguments against 'Foreign Funding'**

There are two principle arguments against 'foreign funding' that can be traced back to the deliberations within the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) in 1991 over whether the organization should accept funds from abroad or not. At this time, the organization was facing a financial crisis that threatened to severely limit its ability to work.<sup>7</sup> The first argument against foreign funding, which has

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<sup>5</sup> As argued by Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the writings of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor of the *négritude* movement. For further development of this argument, see, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Mohamed El-Sayed Said, "The Roots of Turmoil in the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights: Dynamics of Civil Institution-Building in Egypt," in *Human Rights and the Arab World, Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Symposium of the Cairo Papers in Social Science* 17: 3, 1994, p. 73.

been the predominant argument used by former members of the EOHR and some NGO activists, is based on the paradigm of 'dependency' that rejects 'foreign funding' because the West is economically stronger and, therefore, can employ funding to exploit Egyptian NGOs for its own purposes.<sup>8</sup> The second argument, which has been employed principally, although not exclusively, by members of civil society outside the EOHR, is based on a paradigm that rejects 'foreign funding' on the basis of essential moral characteristics of the West, that is, the West is not Egyptian and, therefore, must necessarily be morally dangerous to Egyptian 'national interests.' In practice, these two arguments are often combined and used simultaneously.

The dependency paradigm was originally developed by Latin American scholars to explain the continuing difference between rates of economic development in the West and those in previously colonized countries.<sup>9</sup> This paradigm asserts that due to the structure of the (global) capitalist economy, the West or the core countries develop at the expense of the periphery (that is, the 'Third World' or 'developing world'). This relationship of dependent development, which leads to underdevelopment for the periphery and a global division of labor, is reproduced through the economic transactions between the core and the periphery. Some of the effects of the dependent relationship include the exacerbation of income inequalities in periphery countries; the creation of an elite strata, or 'comprador bourgeoisie,' which is linked to the core through business interests; the establishment of branches of multinational corporations in periphery countries, which expatriate profits and destroy local entrepreneurship; the export of inappropriate technology from the core to the periphery at the expense of self-sustaining development based on domestic technology and local entrepreneurship; the distortion of the local labor market by foreign and multinational companies paying higher wages; and the reliance of national governments on foreign capital, which encourages the maintenance of political stability for the sake of foreign investment at the expense of democracy.

Funding of Egyptian NGOs by Western agencies, it is argued, mirrors the dependent economic relationships between the core and the periphery. Many opponents of foreign funding incorporate the above themes into their arguments. One activist, a member of an NGO working on women's rights, who prefers *not* to call herself an NGO activist because of its association with 'foreign funding,' described to me the 'funding system,' in terms of its prevention of the emergence of a strong democratic movement and its distortion of the existing movement toward the interests of Western donors:

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<sup>8</sup> El-Sayed Said, 1998, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969; Theotonio Dos Santos, "The Structure of Dependence," *American Economic Review* 60, 1970, pp. 231–36; Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979 (originally published in Spanish in 1971).

I am against accepting any foreign funds because to accept foreign funds is to accept the funding system, which is part of the New World Order. Funding, at its best, builds weak and dependent NGOs and mostly it creates organizations that are not controlled by the people who are supposed to receive the support. ...When you are part of a strong movement, you have the power to define your conditions. But we are weak and I do not believe that we can set conditions outside of the agenda of the donors except by being dependent on yourself. Funding does not allow people to become self-reliant. You can only build a strong movement through experience and your own efforts. Funding allows you to bypass experience and to set up your project without any effort. ... Funding is a whole system that is corrupt and it is not true that you can accept funds without accepting the whole system. There are questions of who controls the funding, and how it is spent.<sup>10</sup>

On a similar line, a former member of the EOHR, who resigned in 1993, argues that ‘foreign funding’ boosts the external forces (of globalization) at the expense of building a domestic democratic movement. This is achieved through incorporating Egyptian human rights NGOs into a globalized elite (not unlike a ‘comprador bourgeoisie’), which is divorced from the rest of society:

... public work ‘paid for’ from outside does not activate the democratic movement in any way, rather this trend only activates the movement of ‘globalization’ of NGOs, separating the local membership from the issues of society in an age in which control is imposed through this ‘globalization’  
...<sup>11</sup>

Rather than constructing a model based on structural economic inequalities, the second argument constructs a binary division between Egypt and the West based on essential moral differences. The supporters of this argument consider anything national to be necessarily good, whilst anything Western, including funding agencies located in the geographic West, is necessarily bad and a threat to ‘national interests.’ The existence of these essential moral differences is demonstrated by the history of violations suffered by Egypt and other Arab countries at the hands of Western governments. The West is also extended to include Israel and Zionism—an association that acts to demonize the West further. This argument assumes a continuity of interests of the West over time and a homogeneity of interests within the West. The ultra-nationalist, weekly newspaper, *Al-Ushbu‘a*, has been at the forefront of promoting this type of argument against ‘foreign funding.’

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author in English, August 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Hilmi Sha‘rawi, “Mafahim wa haraka huquq al-insan fi-l-watan al-‘arabi”, in Issa Shivji and Hilmi Sha‘rawi, *Huquq al-insan fi afriqiya w-al-watan al-‘arabi*, Cairo: Arab Research Center, 1994, p. 272.

Finally, I say, have some of our brother activists in the human rights field who have been supplied with dollars, forgotten that they [the Western donors] are an indivisible part of the British occupation that suffocated Egyptians for 72 years; of the tripartite aggression against Egypt in 1956; of those [that is, Israel] that bombed the Bahr Baqr School and the Abu Za'bal factory workers in 1967; of the supporters of Zionism [that is, the US] who provided equipment and arms to attack the Egyptian people in 1973; and that these are the people who have put sanctions on the people of Iraq and Libya for eight years. Where are the human rights here?!<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the binary division of "Egypt/the West: Good/Bad," the proponents of this argument create a binary division between the state and civil society. They argue that the state is solely capable of representing and protecting 'national interests' in interactions with the West, since the state is the expression of public interests. On the other hand, any civil society interactions with the West are dangerous to the 'national interests' of Egypt since civil society is an expression of private interests that are much easier to corrupt. This makes civil society a potential entry point for Western influence.

The easiest way to get rich is to open a center defending human rights or animal rights and equate female circumcision with the slaughtering of sheep. It doesn't matter who or what is persecuted. The important thing is who hunts for the information and gives it to the funding bodies ... to exploit it to harm the nation or weaken its institutions.

... funding bodies, which are controlled by intelligence agencies, have pounced upon Egypt and opened their coffers to the weak of mind [that is, NGO activists] ...<sup>13</sup>

Both arguments (the dependency paradigm and moral essentialism) rely on a set of three assumptions for their self-validation: first, that the West is a homogeneous bloc of interests represented by the actions of Western governments (who are principally, the US and Britain, in addition to France); second, that Egypt is a homogeneous bloc of interests; and third, that the interests of the West are diametrically opposed to the interests of Egypt. Based on these three assumptions, it is argued that civil society links with the West in any form, particularly through 'foreign funding,' provide an opportunity for the West to pursue their interests inside Egypt, which, necessarily, result in weakening the nation.

Since 1991, these arguments have been regularly employed by the government to discredit human rights activists and their work. The 'foreign funding debate' has been extensively employed to justify amending the law governing NGOs to render it more restrictive and to harass NGOs and their activists

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<sup>12</sup> Muhammad al-Dumati, *Al-Ushbu'a*, 11/30/98, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Mustafa Bakri, *Al-Ushbu'a*, 11/23/98, p. 1.

for writing reports on human rights violations in Egypt that are circulated abroad.<sup>14</sup> Most recently, the ‘foreign funding’ issue was the lynchpin in the case against civil society activist, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and his colleagues at the Ibn Khaldoun Center, who were found guilty of accepting funds from abroad without official permission and using these funds to write reports that “tarnish Egypt’s reputation.” They were sentenced to varying prison terms, including seven years for Ibrahim, on May 21, 2001.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Arguments in Defense of ‘Foreign Funding’**

The arguments in defense of ‘foreign funding’ are made not only by those activists who are members of NGOs that accept external financial support but also by other members of civil society, including writers, journalists, and members of political parties. However, those countering the anti-foreign funding trend continue to remain in an unenviable minority. This helps to explain the defensiveness of some of the arguments put forward in justification of ‘foreign funding.’ Nevertheless, even those that defend ‘foreign funding’ on the basis of a critique of the anti-foreign funding arguments remain within the boundaries of the orthodoxy regarding relations between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’ and the existence of ‘national interests.’

At the most defensive end of the continuum, we find a pragmatic approach to funding. This position was found among a significant number of NGO activists with whom I spoke. They see ‘foreign funding’ as an unfortunate necessity in light of the lack of domestic sources of funding. For example, one individual with a history of involvement in leftist politics and now a member of an NGO working with torture victims, said to me:

In Europe, they allocate a part of the state budget for NGOs and that is better. Also, in Europe, businesspeople contribute more to NGOs. However, that does not happen here because capitalists here all have shared interests with the ruling authorities. If they funded an organization that is opposing the government and its policies, then they would be deprived of all the benefits that they currently get. As for ordinary people, their income is small and, anyway, it is difficult to collect donations because of the legal restrictions. Therefore, you only have one choice and that is external

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<sup>14</sup> An example of such harassment includes the charging of the Secretary General of the EOHR in December 1998 and February 2000 with “accepting funds for the purpose of tarnishing Egypt’s reputation abroad” following the EOHR’s publication of a report condemning police brutality against individuals in the predominantly Coptic Christian village of al-Kushah in August 1998 and another report on the causes of civil strife in the same village in January 2000.

<sup>15</sup> This event was widely reported in both the Egyptian and US media. For a selection of some of the newspaper articles written on the subject, see, the “Free Saadeddin Ibrahim” website, [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/free\\_saadeddin\\_ibrahim](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/free_saadeddin_ibrahim). He was released in March 2003.

funding. There are suspicious funding organizations but there are also organizations that are not suspicious.<sup>16</sup>

The categorization of funding organizations into ‘suspicious’ and ‘non-suspicious’ refers to their perceived political objectives. This is usually determined by the national location of the organization and the foreign policies of its government, but can also be established by the status of the organization, that is, governmental or nongovernmental. Based on these categorizations, NGOs lay down conditions for accepting or rejecting external funding. For example, many NGOs refuse funding from any organization, whether governmental or nongovernmental, whose national government policies are regarded as harmful to the ‘Arab people,’ particularly, the Palestinians. Therefore, a large number of NGOs do not accept funding from any US organizations but they do accept funding from Danish, Dutch, and Swedish organizations. Other NGOs differentiate between governmental and nongovernmental donors, so that they reject funding from the US Agency for International Development but accept funds from the Ford Foundation. Finally, a few NGO activists do not accept funding from any organization located in the geographic West but do accept funds from international organizations, namely, the UN, or from Arab sources, such as, businesspeople from Arab countries.

Although some argue that there is a large degree of hypocrisy in these positions—“After all, foreign funding is foreign funding, whatever you try to call it”—the different approaches by different activists demonstrate the significance of negotiating ‘foreign funding’ for negotiating one’s own identity and credibility. These identities range between Egyptian, Arab, non-Western, and non-governmental. In most cases, activists try to bridge these different identities, for example, accepting support from non-governmental organizations abroad on the condition that their country’s foreign policies towards the ‘Arab world’ are not perceived as harmful.

One human rights activist who has been at the forefront of constructing a critique of the anti-foreign funding argument is Mohammed El-Sayed Said. He counters what he regards as three major fallacies concerning the call for restrictions on ‘foreign funding:’ That individual Egyptians are susceptible to becoming agents of external forces; that it is possible to isolate civil society from the outside world; and, that the defense of national identity can be achieved through closing oneself to the outside world.<sup>17</sup> El-Sayed Said argues in favor of international interactions on both the nonofficial/nongovernmental and official/governmental levels as the only way for Egyptian society to thrive. He criticizes the argument that all interactions between Egyptian individuals/nongovernmental associations and non-Egyptian entities should be carefully monitored and even restricted as a direct threat to public freedoms.

In Egypt, and in any society, some individuals are predisposed to treason or penetration. They need not work in NGOs or engage in public action to

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author in Arabic, May 2000.

<sup>17</sup> El-Sayed Said, 1998, pp. 8–9.

become agents. We cannot circumvent NGOs or shrink their margin of free action at the local and international levels because of this exceptional minority. Moreover, we cannot devise a special law to punish this minority because laws are not made for exceptional cases. We have enough laws to protect the security of our nation without any need to restrict private non-governmental activities.<sup>18</sup>

El-Sayed Said identifies the faulty logic of argumentation and illiberal consequences of the anti-foreign funding position. He demonstrates that Egyptian ‘national interests’ are not harmed by interactions with the West but that society avoids “stagnation, erosion, and degradation” through its openness.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in the rest of his article, he neglects to undermine two of the assumptions identified in the previous section that underpin the anti-foreign funding position, that is, that Egypt and the West each represent distinct and indivisible blocs of interests. Below, I will explain why such an omission is dangerous.

Other defenses of ‘foreign funding’ have attempted to address further the issue of what constitutes ‘national interests’ in relation to NGO work. One of the most prominent examples of such a defense has been *Al-Ahram* newspaper daily columnist Salama Ahmad Salama. He has attacked the anti-foreign funding argument on the grounds that many organizations that accept foreign funding are playing a vital role in “renewing the political system,” thereby, bringing Egypt into the twenty-first century.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Salama and other writers reframe ‘national interests’ in terms of a vibrant civil society and respect for human rights.<sup>21</sup> However, Salama does make a distinction between the patriotic activities of certain NGOs and other NGOs who are engaged in ‘suspicious’ activities.

The final arbiter and the first judge [of the acceptability of ‘foreign funding’] is the national conscience, which is able to separate between suspicious objectives and patriotic objectives. In an organization such as the EOHR [Egyptian Organization for Human Rights], which includes on its board the finest men in Egypt, it is not possible to target them with accusations of treason or working to tarnish the reputation of Egypt and turning their sons into a group of mercenaries.<sup>22</sup>

His suggestion for ensuring that NGOs accepting ‘foreign funding’ do not engage in “suspicious objectives” is to give “various parties,” that is, governmental and nongovernmental, a watchdog role in

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<sup>18</sup> El-Sayed Said, 1998, p. 8. This is the original English translation appearing in the English edition of *Sawasih*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Salama Ahmad Salama, *Al-Ahram*, 12/03/98, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Similar arguments have been put forward by other prominent columnists and writers, namely, the late Lutfi al-Khuli (*Al-Ahram*, 12/5/98, p. 10), Husayn ‘Abd al-Raziq (*Al-‘Arabi*, 12/7/98, p. 16), Farida al-Naqqash (*Al-Ahali*, 12/2/98, p.13), and Salah ‘Issa (*Al-‘Arabi*, 12/7/98, p. 6).

<sup>22</sup> Salama Ahmad Salama, 12/03/98, p. 10.

a joint body. This body would be responsible for monitoring 'foreign funding' and dealing with any complaints against organizations accepting 'foreign funding.'<sup>23</sup>

Writers such as Salama oppose one of the principle elements in the argument against 'foreign funding,' that is, that private individuals or organizations do not necessarily risk corruption by the 'West.' Yet, they do accept the proposition that some individuals and organizations are susceptible to this risk and must, therefore, be subject to public scrutiny. The criteria for judging whether organizations that accept funding are 'suspicious' or not is whether their activities serve the 'national interests.' Salama and others define these interests as the promotion of civil society and respect for human rights. This is a more progressive position than that of the 'foreign funding' opponents, who see Egyptian interests as protecting Egyptian civil society from 'foreign penetration.' Yet, this argument, like the anti-foreign funding argument, maintains that there is something out there that we can objectively define as 'national interests' and that civil society and human rights activities should be subordinated to them. In order to ensure this, 'foreign funding' should be subject to public scrutiny.

### **Deconstructing the 'Foreign Funding' Debate**

This section will attempt to deconstruct the arguments on all sides of the 'foreign funding' debate in order to demonstrate the dangers that the current parameters of the debate pose to the future of human rights activism in Egypt and also to clear a space in which a counter-discourse may emerge. As we noted above, there are three principle assumptions underpinning the anti-foreign funding position. These three assumptions are constructed on the basis of two binary divisions: first, that of the 'Orient'/'Occident' or Egypt/the 'West;' and, second, the state/civil society. Each part of the binary division is constructed as a homogenous unit. Historical references are often used to establish the unchanging essence of each of these homogenous units. Each part of the binary opposition is represented as a mirror image of the other part, thereby demonstrating their absolute dichotomy.

These binary divisions are historically rooted within Egypt's encounters with the West, particularly its experience of colonialism. The colonizers constructed the colonized as the opposite of everything they, the colonizers, purported to be. The colonized were ahistorical, irrational, morally inferior, lazy, cunning, weak, feminine, sexually degenerate, traditional and passive.<sup>24</sup> This 'Manicheanism' was constructed as the justification for colonialism and it was at the core of the violence perpetrated against the colonized.<sup>25</sup> As a means of reclaiming their agency to resist the colonizers, nationalist leaders and intellectuals reversed these binary divisions. It was not they who were morally inferior, but the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Similar arguments in favor of public monitoring of 'foreign funding' have been put forward by the late Lutfi al-Khuli and Husayn 'Abd al-Raziq.

<sup>24</sup> Said, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, London: Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 31–33.

colonizers. The 'traditional' was not a negative feature of their culture but a positive thing. They were not feminine and passive, but displayed the traits of masculinity by fighting for their nation.<sup>26</sup>

The debate over 'foreign funding' demonstrates the extent to which these binary oppositions continue to operate within Egyptian civil society. In both the dependency and moral essentialist paradigms, the West (as a homogeneous bloc of interests) is represented as a danger to the Egyptian nation. Within the dependency paradigm, the West seeks to exploit Egypt through the economic structures of the (global) capitalist system. Within the moral essentialist paradigm, the West necessarily seeks to dominate Egypt (and the 'Arab world') because it is morally corrupt and has no respect for the rights of the Arab people. Consequently, it is in Egyptian 'national interests' to rid the country of foreign economic exploitation and/or political domination. Those that have linkages with the West, such as, businesspeople or NGOs that accept funds from abroad, are considered to be aiding the economic exploitation or domination of Egypt by the West and, therefore, they too pose a danger to the Egyptian nation.

The dependency and moral essentialist paradigms, on the surface, appear to differ in their interpretations of the role of Egyptian civil society. Those that adhere to the dependency paradigm argue that it is the role of civil society to resist exploitation by the West by resisting all interactions with it.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, those that adhere to the moral essentialist paradigm believe that civil society represents the nation's weak spot that must be closely monitored and guarded by the state. Yet, if one analyzes the two different representations of civil society in terms of a gendered discourse about the Egyptian nation and its relationship with the West, then we find that both representations constitute two sides of the same coin.

In the dependency paradigm, the representation of civil society as the last line of defense against the West can be seen as similar to the representations, during anticolonial struggles in many countries, of the private sphere (of culture, religion, and family life) as the last line of defense against colonialism. Partha Chatterjee has described how nationalist leaders in India portrayed the private sphere as the "inner domain of national life" over which they could proclaim their sovereignty.<sup>28</sup> Women, who have historically been associated with the private sphere in the majority of countries of the world, were represented in Indian nationalist discourse as the guardians of the national culture.<sup>29</sup> Since women, as guardians of the "inner domain," represent an essential foundation of the nation, therefore, the argument follows that they must be protected from Western corruption.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, see, Fanon, 1990, pp. 170–71; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse*, London: Zed Books, 1986, pp. 73–78.

<sup>27</sup> El-Sayed Said, 1998, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Chatterjee, 1993, p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

The representation of civil society as a weak spot in Egypt's resistance against the West is the other side of the coin of the dependency paradigm's representation of civil society as the last line of defense. Civil society's strength and weakness lies in the fact that it represents the inner essence of the nation. This inner essence is a weapon against the moral corruption of the West. However, because the West is morally corrupt, the inner essence of the nation also becomes a target for Western influence. Therefore, civil society also represents a potential danger to the integrity of the nation. The logic of both sets of arguments is that civil society must resist any links with the West and that the Egyptian nation (state and society) must take measures to protect civil society from the West in order to protect the nation.

As argued above, the construction of a binary opposition between Egypt and the West is rooted in Egypt's experience of colonialism. This binary opposition continues to operate in discourses about Egypt's relations with the West because of the continuing injustices that occur today at the hands of the US, British, French and other Western nations. These injustices range from glaring economic inequalities to Western government's continued support for Israel's oppression of the Palestinians and the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In other words, representations of the West as morally corrupt and dangerous to Egyptian/Arab interests resonate with many people in Egypt because of how they see international political and economic realities. This explains why defenders of 'foreign funding' find it so difficult to put forward their case.<sup>30</sup>

While the reversal of the binary oppositions constructed during the colonial encounter acted as a way of resisting colonialism, it is important that human rights activists and all those seeking to promote democracy stress that the continued existence of these binary oppositions is implicated in the creation and reproduction of domestic mechanisms of authoritarianism that oppress ordinary Egyptian people. The construction of a homogenous bloc of Western interests seeking to dominate Egypt creates a 'siege mentality' where the violation of human rights may be justified in light of protecting Egyptian 'national interests.' A distressingly large number of members of Egyptian civil society believe that Saad Eddin Ibrahim and other human rights activists represent a real danger to Egypt through their insistence on publicizing Egypt's human rights record internationally and, thereby, providing a pretext for Western intervention in Egyptian affairs. However, depriving human rights activists of fundamental political and civil rights sets a precedent and empowers the government to further reduce the public sphere. Indeed, the government has already substantially reduced the public sphere over the last decade on the pretext of protecting Egypt from Islamist terrorism, ranging from the sequestration of the Bar Association in 1994 to the closure of *al-Sha'b* newspaper in 2000.

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<sup>30</sup> For a further examination of the way in which the actions of Western governments undermine the cause of human rights in Egypt, see, Bahey El Din Hassan, "The Unholy Alliance: The Elite's Discourse as an Obstacle to Democratic Transformation," paper presented to the MESA Annual Meeting, Orlando, Florida, November 16–19, 2000.

As Frantz Fanon argued, it is not sufficient to merely replace the colonizers by the colonized once independence comes. The colonial system must be destroyed.<sup>31</sup> If the continued basis for authoritarian politics in the postcolonial era is the reproduction of binary oppositions, then, in order to undermine authoritarianism and clear the way for democracy, it is necessary to destroy, and not merely reverse, the binary oppositions. In order to overturn the binary oppositions it is necessary to directly address the three assumptions underpinning the anti-foreign funding arguments and many of the defenses of 'foreign funding.'

First, the West is not a homogenous bloc of interests. To begin with, there are differences between national governments and their civil societies. Whilst it is true that the US, British, and other Western governments are implicated in many human rights tragedies, not only in the Arab region but throughout the world, including in their own countries, it is even truer that some of the most fervent opposition to their policies has come from their own civil societies. On the other hand, Arab governments have often been the last to act to oppose human rights atrocities against the Iraqi and Palestinian people. For example, Egypt was one of the last countries to break the sanctions on Iraq—four years after *Voices in the Wilderness* mobilized their first sanctions-busting mission.<sup>32</sup>

Second, Egypt is not a homogenous bloc of interests. It is important to stress that Egypt is constituted of a plurality of people with different interests and opinions that cannot be determined on the basis of their nationality. These interests and opinions may be influenced by their class, geographical location, educational background, gender, age, or religion. Therefore, it is impossible to define objectively what constitutes 'national interests.' Any attempt to do so involves the imposition of the interests and opinions of the dominant group in society on the less powerful, usually to the detriment of the latter. Rather, it is more democratic to eschew the terminology of 'national interests' and to create a criteria for evaluating NGO work that is centered upon the dignity of the Egyptian citizen and the standards of human rights. Only in this way can we avoid the practices of exclusion and harassment that befall those individuals who accept funding from abroad for NGO work.

Finally, the process of globalization provides new challenges, such as, multinational corporations, environmental degradation, and human trafficking, that do not subscribe to the paradigm of Western domination over 'Third World' or periphery countries. On the contrary, individuals and organizations in the 'Occident' and the 'Orient' are affected by or implicated in these problems. The cross-border nature of these challenges makes it necessary to build a resistance movement that is also transnational in its nature. Such a movement empowers ordinary people everywhere, rather than subjecting one

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<sup>31</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, New York: Monthly Review and Grove Press, 1967, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> Husayn 'Abd al-Raziq, in the English language weekly newspaper, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, January 21–28, 1999, clearly argues against seeing the West as a "single, monolithic entity." Yet, in the Arabic press, he has implicitly represented Egyptian interests as self-evident and monolithic by stressing the contribution of human rights groups to 'national interests,' in addition to proposing public, albeit nongovernmental, monitoring of 'foreign funding.'

section of people to 'foreign domination.' The universality of human rights provides a framework for creating new solidarities across borders that override the exclusiveness of nationalist paradigms, whilst recognizing that individuals need protection against the excesses of global capital markets and other dangers associated with the processes of globalization.

In personal interviews, almost all the human rights activists that I spoke with criticized the assumptions underpinning the 'foreign funding' argument. Yet many have also simultaneously subscribed to some definition of 'national interests' in justifying their actions. Moreover, in their public writings and conversations, the overwhelming majority of human rights activists fail to deconstruct the dominant representations of the West and Egyptian 'national interests,' stressing instead the contribution of their work to Egyptian 'national interests.' It is important that human rights activists attempt to overturn the binary oppositions that give meaning to the 'foreign funding' debate, rather than reframing these oppositions or avoiding them. It is these binary oppositions that are at the heart of the discrediting of human rights work and the harassment of activists by the authorities.

### **Conclusion**

The 'foreign funding debate' represents Egypt and the West as two diametrically opposed and essentially different entities. The notion of difference and opposition renders the West an enemy that threatens the very existence of the Egyptian nation. This discourse also represents Egyptian civil society as a target for the West in seeking to undermine the Egyptian nation. Based on these assumptions, the existence of Western links with Egyptian civil society in the shape of donations by organizations located in the geographical West to Egyptian human rights NGOs is constructed as a problem that must be dealt with by state/public control and regulation. By advocating for the control of human rights NGOs, participants in the debate contribute to the justification of state harassment of human rights activists and, more significantly, the tightening of the already limited public sphere available to Egyptian civil society actors.

Different positions within the 'foreign funding debate' (both those against and in defense of it) share the same logic of argument and, in that sense, may be considered as being part of the same internally coherent discourse about Egypt's relations with the West. Therefore, even those arguments in defense of 'foreign funding' contribute to the reproduction of the assumptions about the West that form the basis for the arguments against 'foreign funding.' In order to go beyond the 'foreign funding debate,' it is necessary to deconstruct the current discourse concerning Egypt/the West by stressing the heterogeneity of both the West and Egypt. Within the current juncture, where a significant number of human rights activists feel embattled, such a task may seem secondary to the primary task of survival. However, without a systematic and public discrediting of the assumptions underpinning the 'foreign funding debate,' the future of not only human rights NGOs but also of public freedoms in Egypt is endangered.