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Egyptian press fear rollback of reforms ; Journalists protested proposed press law Sunday and reporter arrests for criticizing the president.

Joseph Mayton and Dan Murphy

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In recent years Egypt's press has been allowed more room. A feisty independent newspaper began publishing last year and politically partisan weekly papers have launched one broadside after another against President Hosni Mubarak.

But Egyptian journalists allege a government backlash is under way and they're pushing back. Sunday, at least 24 daily and weekly papers withheld publication, and a rowdy demonstration of about 500 journalists and supporters was held at the parliament building in downtown Cairo, with one banner sarcastically declaring "Viva corruption. Down with freedom of the press."

The press boycott follows the recent sentencing of two journalists to a year in prison for the crime of defaming Mubarak and his family. It comes as lawmakers prepared to vote on a proposed new press law Sunday that would double libel fines and also allow the continued use of libel laws against critics of the president and journalists who write in detail about the finances of public officials.

In 2004, Mubarak had promised to do away with prison sentences for libel. "Nobody in Egypt will be imprisoned again for their opinions," Press Syndicate Chairman Galal Aref said at the time. But Ibrahim Eissa, editor of the independent weekly Al Dustour, and colleague Sahar Zaki are evidence that promise hasn't been kept. They were sentenced for an April article that outlined a lawsuit against Mubarak and his family charging the president- his wife Suzanne and his son Gamal, presumed by many here to be Mubarak's heir apparent - of "wasting the government's resources," "squandering foreign aid," and turning "Egypt into a monarchy."

The two journalists were also fined \$1,750. The lawyer who filed the lawsuit, Mohammed Sulaiman, received an identical sentence. Two other journalists have been sentenced on un-related charges this year, and a number of pro-democracy bloggers have also been detained without charges or trial.

"In terms of reform, the genie is out of the bottle," says Hugh Miles, a Cairo-based journalist and author of "Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World." "It is clear journalists are getting cracked down upon. Old scores are being settled by the government and, as we see with Eissa, this is the way they are going after them."

The government says the new press law will stop the publication of baseless allegations and protect the public's rights.

To be sure, local television and radio news - which reach millions more Egyptians than newspapers - have always remained tightly controlled, and the Egyptian government has also brought suits against pan-Arab broadcasters like Al Jazeera. The station's bureau chief, Hussein Abdel Ghani, is currently facing a charge of "propagating false news" which threatened "national security."

While the demonstrations Sunday were largely peaceful, riot soldiers and plainclothes security forces surrounded protesters as they marched through downtown Cairo and punched some when they arrived at the press syndicate building.

"I was hit by a guy in plainclothes as I was standing near the entrance to the press syndicate," says democracy activist Bassem Khalifa.

The moves against the press are among a series of measures pursued by the government recently that appear to limit democratic outlets and criticism. Ayman Nour, Mubarak's most popular challenger in last year's presidential election, was sentenced to five years in prison in December on a charge he forged documents when he registered his political party.

Dozens of prodemocracy demonstrators have been arrested this year under the government's sweeping security law, as have hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the most powerful opposition bloc in parliament. The Egyptian government said Sunday 27 members of the group were arrested for meeting to prepare for an upcoming teachers association election.

Even the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute - two US-funded agencies that lead American efforts to promote democracy abroad - were banned from work in the country in June because the foreign ministry said their paperwork wasn't in order. It was a slap in the face to the US government, which provides Egypt with about \$2 billion in aid each year.

Mr. Miles believes the Egyptian press could well end up winning this fight. "The reform movement has a lot of momentum as we have seen over the past few months through the support for judicial freedom and journalists," he adds. Others aren't so sure.

"Taken together with President Mubarak's empty promise, the continuing prosecutions of outspoken journalists demonstrate this government's hostility toward independent journalism," Ann Cooper, executive director of the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), said in a June 26 press release. Jano Charbel, an Egyptian journalist with the German Press Agency, worries that the draft press law and recent convictions are steps toward limits on freedom. "If they ban people from writing about corruption, what is

next? Maybe they will ban people from writing all together," he said Sunday.

Though journalists are still clamoring for reform, the press bill before parliament appears to be a step backward. The bill includes six-month jail terms and hefty fines for journalists convicted of libel. The independent newspaper, Sawt Al Omma, wrote that the law "defends corrupt people and punishes journalists instead."(c) Copyright 2006. The Christian Science Monitor

