in Egypt in October, it was only distributed in the Gulf and in some North African countries, not in Egypt. It was still awaiting approval from the Ministry of Information.

Outside the newspaper press, censorship is most obvious in films and videos. Pornography is out, and even kissing is routinely blipped out of film imports. Films made in Egypt, like the $24 million Hollywood production *Ruby Cairo*, which was being shot in Cairo in Autumn 1991, with such screen luminaries as Olympia Dukakis, Liam Neeson and Andie MacDowell, have to carry a government censor like an albatross around their necks. The censor insisted on retakes of scenes in *Ruby Cairo* to present Egypt in a more positive light (no slums or *baksheesh* in Egypt). Other delays imposed by government censors reportedly cost the film makers hundreds of thousands of dollars, and probably cost Egypt much more as the rest of the foreign film industry gets the word and studiously avoids using Egypt for location shooting.

All plays and other theatre performances are censored. Censors must approve every page of a script and if they do not like it, or if performers deviate from the approved script, the censors can stop the play. Plays have been banned for showing a Jew in a sympathetic light or an Egyptian as a homosexual.

Controls are occasionally tightened on popular theatre productions if there are objections to a performer's risqué language or gestures. Some newspaper columnists, keen to ingratiate themselves with their bosses, will use their space to alert the censors to a performance they find offensive.

Books too are censored. No book can be published in Egypt without the censor's imprimatur, and censors can decide what foreign books their countrymen will be able to read. At the American University in Cairo, for instance, censors took 35 books on Islamic studies and contemporary Egyptian politics from the bookstore shelves last year; most were returned eventually, but seven were not. The university library also has new acquisitions reviewed by censors, and, when it pleases the censors, confiscated. The situation has been getting worse, not, as one might expect in a country that proclaims itself a democracy, better.

Any effort to come to grips with censorship, and its effects on the development of democracy, must start with the acknowledgment that it exists. While arguments can be made in favour of a measure of censorship in the volatile religious and political context of the Middle East, in Egypt, the tentative liberalisation of the Egyptian political system is taking place under the widespread illusion that a free system of communication is already in place. It is not. ■

Alaa Hamed gets eight years

The Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) appealed to the Prime Minister, in his capacity as Vice Martial Ruler, at the end of 1991 not to ratify the imprisonment of novelist **Alaa Hamed**, publisher **Mohamed Madbouli**, and printer **Fathi Fadl**.

On 25 December 1991, the Martial State Security Court (Emergency) sentenced Alaa Hamed to eight years' imprisonment and fined him 2,500 Egyptian pounds. The judgement condemned his novel *A Distance in a Man's Mind* as a threat to 'national unity' and 'social peace'.

Defence lawyers said that the trial lacked the minimum legal guarantees as the judge did not allow lawyers to present their case before judgement was issued. The publisher and printer received similar sentences.

EOHR based its appeal on the fact that the sentences constitute a violation of freedom of expression, opinion and artistic innovation and that it is the first time that modern Egypt has experienced the imprisonment of a novelist because of his writings.

There is no appeal against a state security court's judgement, and the Martial Ruler has the authority to ratify or dismiss the judgement.

The case arose out of a letter by the Islamic Research Academy of al-Azhar to the public prosecutor's office. Alaa Hamed, general manager at the Taxation Department and the author of many novels and short stories, was arrested on 12 March 1990. The same day his novel, *A Distance in a Man's Mind* — published in April 1988 and distributed by Al-Ahram — was confiscated. The grounds for the arrest and confiscation were that the novel contained subversive opinions about religion in general, and Islam in particular.

At the same time, a civil service inquiry referred Alaa Hamed's case for disciplinary trial, on the grounds that his novel contradicts the ethics of his job as a state official.

Alaa Hamed's publications include: *The Money and the Bracelet* (novel); *Thief Above Water* (novel); *The Impossible Foot* (short stories); *The Wall of Illusion* (short stories); *A Man Inside a Triangle* (novel); *Two Persons in a Closed Room* (novel); *The Leader's Fez* (short stories); *The Lost Truth* (novel); *On the Wing of a Wounded Bird* (novel); and *A Distance in a Man's Mind* (novel).

The writer was first detained for 15 days pending the completion of an investigation. His imprisonment was then renewed for another 15 days. The publisher and printer of the novel were also detained, but released on payment of bail of five thousand Egyptian pounds.

On 16 May 1990, a court heard the defence plea and decided to recall the general secretary of the Islamic Research Academy, and Major Mohamed Naguib of the 'Department of Police for Censorship on Artistic Works'. The former, however, did not show up at the next two sessions (30 May and 6 June), and judgement in the case was postponed to 11 July 1990.

At the time, Alaa Hamed was freed from Tora remand prison on bail of two thousand Egyptian pounds.

Final judgement was delayed until 25 December 1991, when Alaa Hamed was sentenced to eight years in prison. The author was born in Cairo on 12 December 1939. He is married, and has a daughter, aged 22, and two sons, aged 18 and 16.

The company charged with printing Alaa Hamed's book is the Nile Office for Typewriting Services (Maktab e-Nile li el-Ala e-Katba). The owner of the company is Fathi Fadl. He and Mohamed Madbouli the publisher, faced the same charges as the author because they were considered his accomplices.

Al-Ahram — the distributing company — is the largest organisation for the distribution of books, newspapers, magazines and printed materials in Egypt. It publishes the most widely read daily newspaper — *Al Ahram* — and is owned by the Egyptian government, indirectly, through the Maglis e-Shura.

Alaa Hamed's novel, *A Distance in a Man's Mind*, is his best-known work, largely due to the controversy surrounding it. However, his writings are not widely known, even among Egyptian intellectuals. *(Briefing Paper 375, 31/12/91)*

In the name of God, go!

Early in 1990 Dr Farag Foudah's book *To Be Or Not To Be*, a collection of articles all previously published in newspapers and magazines, was condemned by the Islamic Research Foundation of Al-Azhar University. As a result, the book was withdrawn from circulation and Dr Farag Foudah, author of several books on the relationship between state and religion, was called in for interrogation by the State Security Services. The following is an extract from that interrogation.

Q: Who wrote this book?
FF: I did.
Q: Who is responsible for its editing and publication?
FF: I am responsible for every word in it.
Q: Did you consult with anybody about the contents of this book?

FF: Nobody.
Q: You claim that the Sheikh of Al-Azhar has sinned and deserves to be flogged. Could you explain?
FF: If the rules of Islam are to apply to everybody equally — and the Prophet said of his own daughter, 'If Fatima were to steal I would cut off her hand' — then I say that the Sheikh of Al-Azhar has slandered others and the punishment for that is flogging. He has called some intellectuals, including myself, enemies of Islam and 'flies feeding off the table of Islam'. Hasaan Ibn Thabit, who was the Prophet's companion, was flogged for slander. Is the Sheikh of Al-Azhar better than a companion of the Prophet?
Q: What you have written of some of Islam's scholars is offensive.
FF: What I wrote was about two specific scholars. The first was Sheikh Abdel Latif Hamza, who ruled that to swallow the spittle of another negates the Ramadan fast. And the second was Sheikh Bujari, who was prone to speculate on the hygienic requirements of men with two penises who could therefore penetrate a woman from both her front and her rear at the same time. I think my criticism has everything to do with protecting Islam from bogus scholarship.
Q: You say that all is well with Islam as long as it is defended out of love and not out of self interest. Were you not implying the Sheikh of Al-Azhar?
FF: I am surprised to hear that the Sheikh of Al-Azhar sees himself in this way. Those who accuse me are by implication saying that they believe that the Sheikh defends Islam only because it affords him an income and status.
Q: You say that there is no priesthood in Islam, therefore the Sheikh has no right to frighten people or ban their books. Does this mean that you are accusing the Sheikh of being a priest and threatening people, and of banning books?
FF: There is no legitimacy for a priesthood in Islam. Al-Azhar is a secular institution posing as a religious body. All the major theologians of Islam refused official positions so as to maintain their independence. The Sheikh of Al-Azhar should therefore confine himself to the walls of Al-Azhar and not intrude into the political field with his opinions. If he does so he should expect to be attacked. As for frightening people, that was simply a piece of well-intended advice from me to him. With regard to banning books, that is a self-evident truth. My book was banned by a report from Al-Azhar that stated, 'We command that this book be banned.'
Q: You say that the Sheikh receives his pay from the state, which he has accused of immoral earnings because some of its income is from alcohol and bank interest rates. How is that?
FF: The Sheikh does receive a state salary and he has publicly accused the state of immorality. Al-Azhar has taken legal action against the government for charging interest on loans, which is the clearest indication of what Al-Azhar believes.
Q: You have written that the Sheikh eats and lives very well and that he should thank God that Muslims are so backward. Why?
FF: The proof of this backwardness is Al-Azhar's position as regards family law, family planning, bank interest rates and creative works of fiction, including the novels of Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize for a book banned by them. The proof of the backwardness of Muslims is that they have not challenged Al-Azhar's own backwardness.
Q: You wrote about the Sheikh, 'Do not imagine that we will allow you to stop and search, threaten and ban . . .' Isn't this offensive to him?
FF: Not in the least. I said, 'Do not imagine', meaning that out of respect for his position we cannot allow him to behave in this way. As for the threats and the bannings, they are a fact, as evidenced by what has happened to my book.
Q: Have you anything else to say?
FF: Yes. I was shocked to hear that Al-Azhar objected to my not using the term His Grace when referring to the Sheikh, and that they justify this by comparing him to the Prophet in a Quranic verse. I was also surprised by their objection to my saying that the application of the *Sharia* in current circumstances would itself be a crime. This is, after all, a political opinion and not a religious matter. Either there is to be full freedom of thought and expression or else we are to be condemned to an endless outpouring by various Sheikhs about the private lives of the Genii and other such topics. There can only be freedom without restraint or restraint without freedom.

Translated from *Al-Ahali* newspaper by Karim Alrawi

Cordelia in Cairo

Given the furore raised by Britain's National Theatre productions of Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *King Lear* in Cairo, it was only a matter of time before an Egyptian director decided to give Cairenes the 'real' *King Lear.*

The prevailing view in Cairo, that the National Theatre is nothing more than a branch of the British Foreign Office, tied in conveniently with the censors' view that every serious dramatist is attempting to foist his political line on an unsuspecting audience: every script must be read as a political tract. Dramatic irony or moral complexity is out; realism is seldom a consideration. This has reduced theatre to two types — the vacuous and the propagandist.

So where did that leave *Richard* and *Lear?* Since Shakespeare is a genius, went the arguments in the review columns of the state-owned press, they could not be dismissed as vacuous. *Richard,* being in a sense a piece of Elizabethan propaganda, presented less problems than *Lear* — particularly given the context of the NT visit which was in the months following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

All manner of parallels were drawn: Richard was Saddam and the play was on tour to discredit the latter and muster support for an attack on Iraq, one academic explained. Students from the American University in Cairo elaborated: 'They're not using Shakespeare's text; they've added lots of things'. Though this was not the case, even the literary sophisticates left the theatre complaining about the UK government's lack of subtlety.

The choice of *Lear* could not so easily be explained away. Here was a play about a patriarch who gives away his kingdom to his daughters — having first cast out his youngest and favourite — and then proceeds to go completely mad. Not a happy model to display before a strongly patriarchal society in which its elders have clung onto power for 20, 30 years and more. The production did not fare well at the hands of the reviewers.

Enter the 'real' — Arabic — *King Lear.* 'Though I saw the great Olivier in the part, I do not remember when I was so moved,' gushed one reviewer of the reworked version. 'Only a genius or a lunatic would choose such an irascible, senile character for a tragic hero.' Which was reassuring for many in the audience for whom director Abdel Hadi's version of the play was anything but tragic. *Lear* is reduced from a tragedy about a tyrant brought down by his own folly, to a domestic melodrama in which a ruler is brought low by his children for being a loving father. Cordelia is rightly cast out by him since she is mad and irresponsible; Edmund and Edgar swap lines with an insouciance copied by Kent and Gloucester; the moving finale of the play is cut completely; the Fool becomes both on-stage director and counsellor with all the best lines; the goodies were very good and the bad guys all wore frowning masks to emphasise their badness.

While one reviewer did complain of the 'crude stereotyping,' and another retitled the production 'Six actors in search of a director,' by and large the critics were ecstatic — and no one among the censors or the nation's leaders was offended. The director was credited with being a somewhat better dramatist than

Shakespeare.

Which is what theatre direction in Egypt today, a society mutilated by self-censorship, the official red ink of the censor and the rubber stamp, is largely about. The director 'reworks' the writer's script in an orgy of self-censorship to pre-empt the censor's pen; the reviewer compliments the director's initiative —and the script goes out of the window along with the writer's intention.

The posters that were pasted all over Cairo to advertise the play read: *'King Lear.* A farce by William Shakespeare'. **Karim Alrawi**

The still, small voice within Egypt

There was time, in Egypt, when all the theatres were state-owned, as were virtually all the publishing houses. The only way in the sixties to get a play on or a book published was by going through the official channels to get work approved by the state censor. Once approval had been obtained, the work could see the light of day in some form or other.

During the political clampdown of the late seventies many writers found their works banned. The only way to produce anything that was not highly commercial was outside the country. Publishing houses in Lebanon were supplemented by newer ones in Cyprus, London and Paris. Serious theatre virtually shut down.

The eighties saw a change of style in government and in censorship. The need to loosen the economic grip of the state on business led to calls for greater democracy. This, in turn, included a demand for less censorship. The state has over the last few years sought ways of appearing to loosen its grip while still controlling the free flow of ideas. There are two particular ways in which it has been able to do this.

The first is by Law 102 of 1985 which allows the Islamic Research Foundation of Al-Azhar, the Islamic University, to recommend the banning or censoring of any book that may be judged to be blasphemous. In practice, the limits to the Islamic Research Foundation's role have been allowed to expand alarmingly to cover plays and novels as well as works on theology, philosophy and linguistics.

A recent case has been the imprisonment of **Alaa Hamed** for his novel *A Distance In A Man's Mind*, which had been in circulation since April 1988. The Islamic Research Foundation claimed that the novel contained 'atheism, blasphemy and a denial of all religon' (see page 23).

Another victim of Al-Azhar has been **Dr Hamid Abu Ahman,** who has had to face disciplinary proceedings from his university for translating *Who Killed Molero?* by the Peruvian novelist **Mario Vargas Llosa.** Al-Azhar objected to the book on the grounds it included scenes that offended 'public morality'. And in mid January this year, the Cairo International Bookfair was raided. Censors carried off all copies of five titles.

The extent of Al-Azhar's role has been most clearly confirmed by Farouk Hosni, minister of culture, who stated that, 'Al-Azhar is the supreme authority: when it states an opinion we must all fall silent.'

The second means of censorship is to encourage self-censorship. A recent example of this was at the Festival of Free Theatre that was held from 10 October 1990. This Festival was meant to replace the government-sponsored International Experimental Theatre Festival. The new festival was to be a private initiative by a number of individuals with an interest in theatre, and the inclusion of the word Free in the title indicated that there would be no censorship.

The committee then decided to check out the various plays on offer. Immediately after seeing a rehearsal of my play *City of Peace,* the committee appeared to be seized by a fit of panic. The subject matter of the play is undeniably controversial as it is about religious censorship, with a passing reference to *Satanic Verses.* The next morning, without any prior warning, the committee announced at a press conference that our company would be performing on a day on which one of our actors would not be available, in a theatre that we had specified was completely unsuitable and as a matinee performance that would have denied us an audience. When we objected, we were subjected to everything from emotional blackmail to public abuse.

The play was eventually presented, though not at the festival, but as a private, unpublicised performance. Almost 1,000 people saw the play and we avoided the problem of obtaining a censor's permit. The censor would almost certainly have referred the play to Al-Azhar.

With the 1991 Festival of Free Theatre (held in December), it would seem that the word Free is taking on the meaning of freedom to self-censor. As if to underline this, the Director General of Censorship, **Hamdy Sorour,** recently stated that it is the duty of every writer to 'carry within him a censor who perceives at every moment what benefits and what harms his country'. If he does not, there is always Law 102 of 1985, or Article 78 of the Penal Code, or Law 430 of 1954. **Karim Alrawi**

Kind regards: you're banned

Ministry of Culture
General Administration for Surveillance of Artistic Products,
Administration of Theatre Surveillance.

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Head of the Theatre Department at The American University in Cairo

Kind Regards, etc:

As regards your letter to us concerning your request for agreement to permit the theatre script *Autumn Quail* by Karim Alrawi to be produced at the end of the summer season 1990. We formally notify you that the permit to produce this play has been refused as it conflicts with the high interests of the state, because of what it contains of offence to Egypt's people, its leaders, its history and its civilization. This is according to Law 430 of the year 1954.

Please accept our deepest respect,

Head of Theatre Surveillance, **Ahmed Haddad**
17/6

Director General, **Hamdy Surror**

