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The Egyptian Authorities' Grip on Local Culture: The Example of Mahraganat Music

→ Egyptian student



Egyptian actor and singer Mohamed Ramadan performs during a concert at a resort in the North Coast, Egypt, August 2019. © EPA-EFE/MAHMOUD AHMED



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On 16 February 2020, the Egyptian Musicians Syndicate issued a decree banning *Mahraganat* musicians from performing in touristic areas, Nile cruises, night clubs and cafes, threatening that whoever fails to comply would face legal consequences. This ban is to be enforced by the Egyptian Tourism Police.¹

The term *Mahraganat* translates to “festivals” and is used to encompass the Egyptian electronic music scene of Sha’abi popular inspiration. *Mahraganat* music had already been banned, since July 2019, from playing at the upscale resorts of the North Coast due to the Syndicate considering the genre a threat to national security and disapproving of the artists’ performances.² The Syndicate’s Secretary-General, renowned Egyptian singer Hany Shaker, initiated the decision following musician Hassan Shakosh’s Valentine’s Day concert, during which he performed his hit-song *Bent El-Gueran* (The Neighbours’ Daughter) at the Cairo Stadium. The song, as of June 2020, had garnered more than 340 million views on YouTube. In the track, the young artist expresses his love for a woman who is also his neighbour, claiming that if rejected, he would hate his life, lose all sense of purpose, the heartbreak eventually leading to alcohol and hash consumption.³ Shaker along with the syndicate’s council members deemed the content of the song immoral and decided to ban the genre altogether, despite its popularity online.

Shaker justified the ban during an appearance on Amr Adib’s talk show and claimed that content garnering an important amount of views online is not necessarily of good quality, drawing a parallel with pornography, which, according to him, generates more views than what he deems to be of good taste.⁴ Shaker also added during the live phone-call interview that the genre is too reliant on sexual innuendos and explicit content, and that Egypt needed what he considers “respectful and pleasant musicians”, *Mahraganat* culture being unworthy of the country’s artistic productions. He was categorical in refusing to issue any further performance licences to *Mahraganat* artists, including Mohamed Ramadan, a famous actor and *Mahraganat* musician, who has several successful hits.⁵

To grasp the controversy behind Shaker’s decision, one needs to understand the impact *Mahraganat* culture has had on Egyptian pop culture and how it escapes the control mechanisms put forth by the State to regulate cultural productions. Indeed, not only has the genre challenged the national vernacular eulogized by the



State while simultaneously neglecting the classist musical trope so deeply cherished by it, but *Mahraganat* performers have also managed to emancipate themselves financially through the online interest garnered by the genre, thus freeing themselves from the Syndicate's burdensome rules and regulations and at the same time heavily impacting Egyptian youth and pop culture, which has historically shaped society as a whole.

Mahraganat music in context

Egyptian pop culture, according to Walter Armbrust, a cultural anthropologist whose research interests focus on culture and mass media in the Middle East, has been important in establishing national identity, more so than official discourse. Put in context, pop culture reveals a lot on the current social and cultural state of Egypt. The country is indeed confronted to what Armbrust labels “two national vernaculars”:⁶ one is valued and rooted in classicism yet inaccessible to most Egyptians, and another colloquial, practical and widely understood, yet not nearly as prestigious. *Mahraganat* culture can thus be situated in the latter category. Armbrust underlines the fact that popular mass culture has served as a site of expression through which alternative views of modernism (which in Egypt has dually revolved around a hegemonic nationalist narrative focused on Egyptian cultural authenticity and Westernization) can be expressed. *Mahraganat* music consequently inscribes itself in the stream of contemporary popular culture that opposes itself to the State's mass media schooling. These discords are often visible in the usages of Arabic, with the State encouraging the utilisation of a literal form of Arabic while those rejecting this statist approach put forth a vulgarisation of the language,⁷ which the *Mahraganat* genre has done since its creation.

The *Mahraganat* genre is often inaccurately labelled electro-sha'abi, an alternative name used in Europe but disliked by *Mahraganat* artists. *Mahraganat* music first appeared between 2006 and 2007 in Cairo's poorer neighbourhoods, mainly in *Madinat Al-Salam* and slums (known as '*ashwa'iyyat*'), when wedding DJs started mixing popular sha'abi music with electronic pulses. The birth of *Mahraganat* music is thus deeply tied to the digitalization of music production. However, while *Mahraganat* musicians did not initially produce music in studios, Mahmoud Refaat, who is behind the music label 100COPIES Music, represented



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some artists in the early days of the genre. The *Mahraganat* community remains tight-knit and artists are well-acquainted with each other, often collaborating through workshops and local gatherings.⁸

The lyrics of *Mahraganat* songs treat issues of disloyal friends, unfaithful lovers, financial difficulties, how one's success is judged by others and the current scarcity of good people. More cheerful themes are rarely ever discussed. Lyrics often use street slang and offer an honest look into the lives and perspectives of impoverished youth: the difficulties of having intimate relationships with women, unemployment, drug consumption, etc. While the content of *Mahraganat* music is currently apolitical and mainly expresses the musician's inner turmoil, this has not always been the case.

Initiated in 2006, the genre fully took off following the 2011 revolution. After Hosni Mubarak's ouster, it left Salam City and spread to other low-income neighbourhoods of Cairo. Although the music popularized during the revolution was solemn and paid homage to Egypt's repertoire of revolutionary and patriotic music, *Mahraganat* songs were openly sarcastic and did not refrain from using profanity to poke fun at the regime and denounce police brutality. Consequently, in the aftermath of the revolution, with the increased interactions between different social classes the genre spread all over the country, boosted by the growth in internet access. The regime media and the Ministry of Culture could not control its popularity.⁹

Indeed, *Mahraganat* music is mainly disseminated online, through streaming platforms, such as YouTube and SoundCloud, from which artists also perceive an important part of their revenues. Initially, *Mahraganat* artists used to make a living through DJing and concerts. Though live touring remained a significant revenue source up until the recent ban, streaming platforms are increasingly becoming the main source of income.¹⁰ Through YouTube alone, Hassan Shakosh is estimated to have made around USD739,600 in March 2020 alone, according to socialblade.com.¹¹ An artist such as Hamo Bika is estimated to make up to \$1.9M a year through YouTube too;¹² these numbers go up to an estimated annual revenue of between \$268,000 and \$4.5M for Mohamed Ramadan.¹³ In a country in which the GDP per capita was of \$2,549 in 2018,¹⁴ *Mahraganat* musicians are thus financially well-off and are an example of upward social mobility in an extremely classist



society.

One could hence argue the ban might be partially due to the Syndicate inability to capture any funds from the revenues of *Mahraganat* artists, as they are not Syndicate members. According to its internal rulebook (clause 8 of Article 58), the Syndicate is partially funded by the royalties members perceive from any contracts they have signed, their musical revenues and any income they might be receiving from a musical activity.¹⁵ Additionally, the Syndicate has no power over online streaming platforms, although Hany Shaker said he had asked the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to increase its control over online content. The main power the Syndicate has over *Mahraganat* artists is whether or not it decides to issue singer performance licences. Under the licence, artists are required to comply with the terms agreed with the Syndicate regarding the musical content to be performed. In Shakosh's case, which incited the ban, the artist sang lyrics during his concert that had not been approved by the Syndicate.¹⁶

One may thus wonder what the official function of the Syndicate might be. Founded in the mid-1940s, the Syndicate's role has been to "build a musical society, ensure its development and conserve traditional art forms of importance to the Egyptian and Arab identity".¹⁷ It was officially recognized by Law No. 35 of 1978 on the creation of professional syndicates. It seeks to offer musicians educational workshops, protect its members locally and abroad and ensure they find employment. However, Article 65 of the Syndicate's rulebook states that if any members are confronted to works that have "lacked respect towards the artform's dignity or the Syndicate",¹⁸ it reserves the right to write a report to the General Union detailing why such works were deemed offensive. As of November 2015, one could consider the Syndicate an extension of the regime's sprawling interventionism in civil society. Then Minister of Justice Ahmed al-Zend granted powers of the judicial police to the Syndicate, which henceforth has the permission to issue warrants against those who do not respect the Syndicate's law, conduct searches, arrest people and send reports directly to the prosecution. With the Syndicate stating in its rules and regulations that "no person is to work in the musical arts unless they are a working member of the Syndicate",¹⁹ *Mahraganat* artists are left with no options: unable to join the Syndicate because



it does not value their art form, they are thus unable to perform.

Yet, the decision to ban the genre all-together is not a trivial one as *Mahraganat* culture has become deeply embedded in Egyptian pop culture despite its underground origins. Indeed, *Mahraganat* music's appeal is not limited to the working-class, youth from wealthier neighbourhoods have been keen listeners of the genre, which they perceive as energetic and expressive.²⁰ It is a major vehicle for self-expression, often putting its audience into a trance as one can tell from the way the audience engages with the performers.²¹ In the words of a *Mahraganat* artist that I have interviewed for this article: "*Mahraganat* music is music that comes from within, from the soul, it comes from a deep human yearning for self-expression". It is out of self-expression combined with a need to vent out daily struggles that the genre saw the light of day. However, Egyptian official media has often portrayed *Mahraganat* artists as ignorant, which shows their lack of understanding of the current youth culture, as one can deduct from Hany Shaker's discourse. Additionally, artists from Shaker's generation do not get as much attention as other younger artists, with Shaker's recently posted videos on YouTube rarely scoring more than 50,000 views.²²

Widening the scope of cultural control

The Egyptian authorities' meddling with local cultural preferences is not new and has been heavily anchored in the establishment's attempts to control the country's cultural productions.²³ Indeed, if one takes the example of the propagation of pirated cassette tapes in the 1980s, the content on these recordings was considered vulgar and the work of amateurs by the official media.²⁴ As with the digitalization of music and the subsequent birth of the *Mahraganat* genre, audio-cassettes had also permitted the spread of popular music and enabled anyone to become a cultural producer. They had consequently, according to critics associated with the regime, "lowered artistic standards and tarnished public taste".²⁵

Indeed, along with the democratization of musical recording and President Anwar Sadat's *infitah* (economic liberalization policy), working-class Egyptians were able to produce audio-cassettes only to face the critics' wrath, who claimed the music



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was unworthy of broadcast and that it only brought forth untalented artists. However, in parallel, culture was to be “refined art” and not an “amusement” nor an “empty diversion”²⁶ as asserted by Ahmad Haykal, the former minister of culture (1985-1987). Thus came about the figures of the “imposter artist” and the “unqualified producer”,²⁷ which have been widely used by Shaker and his colleagues to disqualify *Mahraganat* productions. Additionally, much like Hassan Shakosh’s current situation, in the 1970s and 1980s, the official media had scorned popular musician Ahmad ‘Adawiya’s work as vulgar. Moreover, ‘Adawiya was rarely given airtime on radio and television. *Mahraganat* artists have been heavily influenced by Adawiya’s music, along with other Sha’abi singers such as Hakim and Shaaban “Sha'bola” Abdel Rahim. These musicians have eventually become intrinsically linked to Egyptian mainstream culture due to their popularity across all social classes.

Yet, music of sha’abi inspiration is not the only genre the authorities have been increasingly censoring. Following the 2013 coup, the Egyptian Musicians Syndicate has been intensively cracking down on independent musicians and established pop artists, to a lesser extent. Egyptian rock band Cairokee’s concerts were cancelled on multiple occasions in 2017 following the release of their 5th album, *No'ta Beida* (Blank Point) which explicitly criticized and condemned the regime. The cancellations were not accompanied by any official notices and no one claimed responsibility, the band was informed of the cancellation through the managers of the venue. The *Ashkal Music Festival*, which boasted many well-known African and Arab headliners, was also cancelled in 2017 due to the musicians not being able to obtain permits from the Censorship Board. A plethora of other artists such as Maryam Saleh, Shyma and Laila Amer, also faced warnings from the Syndicate, pushing some of them to release their music online, free and accessible to all, to avoid the Censorship Board, who would have required the artists to censor the content of their songs.²⁸

Perhaps the most significant controversy was initiated by the Mashrou' Leila concert which was held on 22 September 2017 in Cairo. During the band’s performance, some members of the audience raised the rainbow flag in solidarity with members of the Egyptian LGBTQ community. This act created a media frenzy and, consequently, over 50 individuals were arrested by security forces and



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charged with inciting debauchery. Following the concert, the Syndicate banned Mashrou' Leila from performing in Egypt, claiming it stood against “all abnormal art”.²⁹ However, Jennifer Lopez was able to perform in 2019 at the North Coast and did not face any criticism, though one could argue her live concerts tend to be sexually charged.³⁰ Whether or not an artist is allowed to perform depends on the whims of the Syndicate, along with the Censorship Board and what they consider artistically and morally appropriate.

Moreover, in July 2018, a prime ministerial decree imposed strict restrictions on the organization of festivals and artistic events in Egypt. All events have to be approved by the Ministry of Culture and “relevant state entities” which consist of the “representatives of the foreign affairs, interior, finance, tourism, antiquities, civil aviation, youth and sports, and local development ministries, whom will be chosen by their respective ministers, on the condition that they hold a senior civil service ranking.”³¹ The committee also includes other culture professionals. The decree makes it more difficult for non-governmental actors to apply for a licence to perform or organize cultural activities: applicants must have a working capital of at least LE500,000 (approx. USD31,000) and 51% of it must be owned by an Egyptian national.³²

In light of recent legislation, the ban on *Mahraganat* music seems to have been the next logical step for a regime that seeks to have a stronghold over the country's cultural productions. The Syndicate's crackdown on *Mahraganat* music and other musical genres is part of a wider repression conducted by the Egyptian regime on all forms of culture in an attempt to suppress any dissidence. Such control has resulted in an important drop in the quality of Egypt's cultural productions following the 2013 coup. Moreover, many artists have had to either exile themselves or censor their artworks.³³ The long-term effects of such tightening control over cultural productions and the future of *Mahraganat* music are yet to be seen. But in the words of a local Egyptian *Mahraganat* connoisseur: “*Mahraganat* music is perhaps the most authentic musical genre to have seen the day in Egypt in the past decade”.



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