Escape into Time: A Virilian Analysis of The Politics of Digital Transformation in Egypt

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Abstract

How can one understand Egypt's major shift towards digitalization from a political point of view? As one feature the paper discerns, in the post-spring Egyptian politics, is the keenness of the state apparatus to shift the medium of discipline from space to time. That is to focus more on speeds, movements, digital transactions, watch and control them rather than the traditional method of sufficing with imposing physical discipline in geography. By going into the depth of this shift-to-time one can see the escapist nature it shows, as it tries to avoid any physical friction with citizens .What could be the political implications of this shift and how could they be seen in line with the studies on digital technology and its role in dematerializing and de-territorializing the processes of discipline, and how they might pose immense challenges for politics. Using Paul Virilio's theory on real-time politics that explores interlinkages between speed, war, technology and their impacts on politics, this paper argues that the Egyptian case of digitalization bases its consolidation of authority heavily on a policy of shifting discipline from space to time, a process that amounts to an 'escape into time' so as to avoid risks and friction between authority and subjects. Using document analysis, the paper explores this 'escapism into time', situates it within the scholarship on political digitalization and explain its impacts on politics. This is to be done by studying the three pillars of the Egyptian digital transformation policy (from 2016-2024: digitalization of services, financial inclusion, and digital media regulation.

Keywords: Virilio, Egypt, digital transformation, financial inclusion, internet, real-time.

الهروب في الزمن: تحليل فيريلي سياسي لآليات التحول الرقمي في مصر

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الملخص

كيف يمكن فهم التحول الكبير في مصر نحو الرقمنة من منظور سياسي؟ تحاجج الورقة بأن ملمح رئيسي لذلك التحول (الحادث بعد أزمات الربيع العربي) هو حرص آلة الدولة لتحويل وسيط الضبط السياسي ليكون في الزمن أكثر من المكان. حيث صار التركيز على السرعات وإدارة الحركة- وليس الثبات - وتسيير المعاملات الرقمية ومراقبتها والتحكم فيها أكثر من الطريقة التقليدية المكتفية بفرض الضبط المادي في الجغرافيا المكانية. وبدراسة معمقة في عمليات هذا التحول السياسي نحو تفضيل الزمن كوسيط للضبط أكثر من المكان، يمكن ملاحظة أن طبيعة هذا التحول أشبه بحالة هروب او اختباء في الزمن، حيث يحرك عملية التحول نحو الرقمنة ميل واضح لتجب أي احتكاك أو احتمالية مواجهة مع المواطنين بما ينطويه ذلك من تحاشي الاسئلة السياسية وقضايا التنسيق والمناقشة إبان تأطير سياسة الرقمنة وخلال تنفيذها. ما هي الآثار السياسية لهذا التحول وطبيعته الاختبائية/الهروبية وكيف يمكن رؤيتها في إطار الدراسات حول التكنولوجيا الرقمية ودورها في فهم التحول نحو نزع الطابع المادي ونزع الطابع الأرضي/الترابي من عمليات الضبط والمراقبة، وكيف يمكن أن تشكل تلك التحولات تحديات كبيرة للسياسة وأولوية التواصل والتنسيق. وتستخدم الورقة نظرية بول فيريليو حول السياسة في الوقت الحقيقي real time politics وحول سياسة السرعة (الدروموقراطية Dromocracy) التي تستكشف الروابط المتبادلة بين السرعة والحرب والتكنولوجيا وتأثيراتها على السياسة والمدينة والحرية. وترى هذه الورقة بأن تجربة الرقمنة المصرية تنطوي علي تأسيس شكل للسلطة السياسية تؤطر نفسها بناءا علي تحويل الضبط السياسي من المكان للزمن، ولكنها عملية تأسيس سلطة ذات طبيعة ترقى لأن تكون "هروبا او اختباءا في الزمن" وذلك لتجنب المخاطر أو اي احتمالات احتكاك بين السلطة والذوات الخاضعة لها. وباستخدام تحليل الوثائق، تستكشف الورقة هذا "الاختباء/الهروب في الزمن"، وتضعه في إطار أدبيات دراسة الرقمنة من منظور سياسي وتقدم الورقة حجتها عبر تحليل الركائز الثلاث لسياسة التحول الرقمي في مصر (٢٠١٦-٢٠٢٤) وهي: رقمنة الخدمات والشمول المالي وتنظيم الإعلام الرقمي.

كلمات مفتاحية: فيريليو، مصر، تحول رقمي، شمول مالي، إنترنت، وقت حقيقي، سياسة، ضبط سياسي.

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Technology, Discipline and Surveillance: Developments and Intersections

With the rise of modernity, the trilogy of discipline, control and surveillance conglomerated and became a more persistent and established practice in modern societies. Scholars documented significant increase in surveillance processes within the major institutional dimensions of modern societies (Brayne, 2017; Lyon, 1994; Ball & Webster, 2007; Giddens, 1990). Such a landscape of control, discipline and surveillance was the site of debated developments. Michel Foucault, widely credited to have explained Bentham's panopticon, focused primarily on the inspection house (prison panopticon) upon which he believed that modern societies are magnified models of that panopticon.For this reason, surveillance is important as visibility is required to shape the subjects' behaviour and remould them before the less visible conductors of surveillance.

This dematerialisation/deterritorialization duality witnessed new changes with the rise of digital systems. As a result, Foucault shifted his focus from 'disciplinary societies' to 'control societies'. In control societies, later analysed in detail by Deleuze, the focus of surveillance and discipline will not be the individual body as such, but its 'data' representations. The formal institutions imposing settings for discipline will be later overshadowed by informal networks handling the representations of the individuals (i.e. their Data) (Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017).

Unlike the visibility of surveillance points in Foucault's disciplinary society, control surveillance became operated via technical networks invisible to the individual (Deleuze, 1992). Also the focus is no longer on the individual body as such and making it docile, rather surveillance handles the abstract representations of the body, i.e. data transactions. Such a shift represents what Deleuze terms as the divided individual (the

dividual) and his/her (data body). For this reason, the language of discipline and surveillance changed from watchwords to passwords, with the aim to control access not to administer life (or bio-power) (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). As result, the places of interest for disciplinary power are no longer the prison, school or hospital, but places of mobility and access like airports, borders and certainly checkpoints of data flows (Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017, p. 20). It is more of a new world resulting from digitizing human transactions under capitalism.

Consequently, Hier argued that the data double became an additional self that passes through the scrutiny of scattered centers of surveillance and control (Hier, 2002). Behind all these shifts lies the capitalistic profit motive, or what Bellamy and McChesney , and latter Zubbof named as 'surveillance capitalism' (Bellamy & McChesney, 2014; Zuboff, 2015; Zuboff, 2016). In surveillance capitalism profits are made from unilateral surveillance and from the modification of human behaviors so as to produce revenue and control markets. And while this occurs in a profit-oriented capitalist milieu, this process is not politically neutral, and its forms are not rigid or standard. Different theorists studied the variety of formulations of this panoptic digital world of escalating threats, ranging from Lyon's 'panopticommodity' (Lyon, 2007), Whitaker's participatory Panopticon' (Whitaker, 1999), Bruno Latour's Oligopticon (Latour, 2005) and Bigo's BANopticon (Bigo, 2006). Politically, these varying formulations, scattered, dematerialised and deterritorialized as they are, pose great challenges to individual freedoms. But how can one theorize for these shifts within the current Egyptian shift towards digitalisation? The work of the speed philosopher Paul Virilio is the pass-word towards this shifting world.

Theoretical Framework: Virilio in Egypt

Political dilemmas of freedom and truth under modern technology made thinkers question the veracity of our current world and our perception of it. Approaching these complexities on a theoretical level requires exploring a variety of theoretical

insights across the wide spectrums of media studies, political science, cultural studies and philosophy. Yet one important thinker who was able to address these intersections together is Paul Virilio, which justifies choosing him as the focal point for the paper's theory.

Paul Virilio (1932-2018), a French architect, philosopher and cultural theorist, offered important critiques about the impact of real-time technologies on politics. Virilio, whose theories of real-time and "dromocracy" are employed in this paper, argues that politics has been always a matter of speed disparity, the faster dominates the slower (Brügger, 2001, p. 86).Such an asymmetry conglomerates by the ownership and operation of means of speed, whether they are vehicles, weapons or means of communication. The more you own or control these means, the faster and the more politically powerful you become. For this reason, the world we live in, almost totally run by digital communications, suffers from a gigantic power disparity, between MIME-NET (Military, industrial, media, entertainment networks) who are the grand owners of speed versus the rest (Derian, 2000, p. 218).

The state, the landmark entity of politics, is radically influenced by this transformation. Sovereignty of the state is no longer based on popular support but on its ability to administer and operate data flows within its domain (Virilio, 2001, p. 195; Gray, 2013, p. 96). States became nodal within the network of communications, and not territorial as they used to be (Smith, 2013, p. 51). The deterritorialization of human interactions and their rupture form place in favour of time, as they now occur largely via real-time communication, made politics hostage to technological hegemons (James, 2007, p. 95). Democracy, the rule of the Demos, became dromocracy the rule of Dromos (i.e speed race) (Virilio, 2006). This threatens freedom in many ways, democratic bodies are now exposed to the enticements and pressures of MIME-NET corporations worldwide (MIME-NET stands for military, industrial, media and entertainment network) (Virilio & Lotringer, 2002, p. 161). For Virilio, the intertwinement

of the technologies of speed and the linkages between the interests of their corporations put these different entities in a strong alliance for the sake of maximising their speed and power.

High speed technology is continually updating and thus renders itself too difficult to be supervised by democratic representative bodies. Even if peoples and individuals managed to some extent enhance their supervision of MIME-NET entities, the asymmetry of power will remain and will continue to pressure and direct democratic bodies via the MIME-NET outstanding financial, technological, surveillant and propagandic potentials. This makes disparities of power exist not only within advanced democracy, but between technological metropoles and technological peripheries. And within these peripheries between the haves and the have-nots of the means of speed (Virilio, 1996, p. 63).

How would Virilio be beneficial in understanding the Egyptian case? Virilio's analysis starts with seeing the city as military consequence. In other words, the need of social groups to defend themselves in a better way than the ad-hoc tactics of frequent skirmishes inspired them to build cities and siege themselves with walls. The city emerged as a dromocratic tool used to control the vectors of speed, that is to ease the speed of attacking the enemies and to obstruct or slow down their invasion of the city (Virilio, 2006, pp. 32-35). And to handle these vectors of speed efficiently, the state as a dromocratic manager seeks to flatten its internal space, maintain its transparency, administer the movements of its subjects and their 'habitable circulation'. This required controlling streets, re-structuring neighbourhoods, building highways and administering traffic. On the other hand, such an administration of speed tends gradually to empty the street, the heart of the city, from less-privileged social elements who are not party of the elite. In other words, the state controls the street via the two roles of traffic control and social displacement (Magdy, 2022). This control is done by the three means of speed (weapons, transportations, and communications), they are employed together as to maintain the transparency of subjects and their smooth circulation away from the street as to avoid any block in the "speed" of nation. A block in

the speed of nation can be in forms of 'strikes', 'resistance', 'illegal crowds', and 'traffic jams'.

But how would Virilio be beneficial for understanding the Egyptian case? And why to study the Egyptian case in the first place? The Egyptian case merits attention for different reasons. Egypt since 2014 undertakes a mega-project of transformation that not only seeks to consolidate security and order, but also endeavours to block all possibilities of another 2011 tragic fall-out. In 2011, dissidents went to the streets occupying major squares in different governorates (Tahrir Square of downtown Cairo was major among them) blocking the normal circulation of businesses and forestalling bureaucracy, so as to oblige authorities to leave, which eventually happened.

After that and for 16 months, a manipulative power-share occurred between Muslim brotherhood (MB) government, and the military dominating the vital spheres of police, defence, economy and foreign affairs. Such a manipulative accord ended up with the removing MB in July 2013. From that moment on, plans for reinforcing authority and order in politics, economy, media and infrastructure were underway. However, this paper argues that a distinct feature for this restoration/overall transformation of society is that it typically fulfils Virilio's assumptions about transferring the sphere of authority and discipline from space to time (or what Virilio calls the shift from the 'state of siege' to the 'state of emergency') (Virilio, 2006, p. 156). As one crucial feature persistent in the diverse instances of the transformation mega project is its 'escapism into time'. In the paper case, it seems that the government, I argue, seems to be escaping from any possibility of friction with subjects by over capitalising on the medium of time. Such an escape into time makes the Egyptian case unique due to the near absence of a similar example. As no previous experience of restored systems combined a similar plethora of elements that allows it a total escape in time. And another reason for that uniqueness is its reflection of how transferring discipline from space to real-time allows speed operators unmatched powers and reveal the impotence of representative bodies in supervising

these processes. Not to mention that such escapism, largely motivated by fear of friction witn citizens, entails negligence of reciprocity and eventually politics.

Yet how does the Egyptian transformation project represent an 'escapism into time 'and shows a transfer of the medium of discipline from space to time? The paper argues here that the transformation project in Egypt is composed of two main parts, one architectural and the other (which is the focus of the paper) digital. The architectural part aims at redrawing space so as to control time and speed better. During 2011, the ability of dissidents to block the veins of the state and obstruct traffic represented a challenge to the penetration and deployment of the state authority across Egypt, as the masses outpaced authorities whose deployment was seen to be taking longer than necessary. That's why speeding-up state bodies, like government, police, security and services to avoid a similar speed failure became a priority for the post-2014 restoration (Classic, 2016). This entails that the speed-up plan, innately linked with architecture, is intended to pre-empt the recurrence of past events. This shows plans to re-draw space so as to facilitate speed-up of the authority which was translated into huge construction projects all over the country focussing mainly on building bridges and highways so as to ease circulation and deployment of security and order (Menshawy, 2021; Adam, 2022).

This according to Virilio requires evacuating the streets and making them transparent. the street here is the vital street that controls authority and challenges government. The problem for the Egyptian authorities is that the traditional seat of government in the overcrowded downtown-Cairo where the administrative branches of the governments exist near to each other became no longer manageable in a manner that can prevent another 2011 crisis. The solution was to change the capital as such, and transfer it to another place, the New Administrative Capital (NAC). However, that 'new place' is protected by 'Time' for being far, some 50 kms from eastern Cairo, deep in the desert, administered by strong physical and digital security protocols (EL-Hakeh, 2021). This makes access to the new center a lengthy and time-consuming enterprise,

surrounded by a network of highways where the speed of circulation can be controlled by state and where blockades are unimaginable in the middle of the desert. The government now occupying the desert, making any chase against it costly in both time and money.

The other part is digital, which is the focus of this paper. The policy of digital transformation is built over three main pillars that serve three main political aims. The first pillar is the digitization of services which gathers the big data of Egyptians, monitors them and assure minimal friction between citizens and bureaucracy. The second pillar is financial inclusion that controls money in real time to avoid this same friction around money. And the third is certainly the internet and digital media control where public opinion is mobilised and directed in a pseudo-public sphere. The operation of these three pillars is done in real time- via state-owned servers and via telecommunication infrastructures largely owned and run by the state. The formula of this digital transformation is made to guarantee a safe distance between the state and the citizen, where the state can control with low possibilities of friction.

Paul Virilio is pivotal here as he shows the implications of such a combination of the means of speed. As the Egyptian case typically practices the two roles of the dromocratic state. It practices the traffic circulatory role of the dromocratic state via its mega projects of architectural construction/re-construction. It also does the social role of evacuating the streets not only by digitalizing services, but also by evacuating the government itself and moving it to the New Administrative Capital (NAC). This paralleled an Egyptian digital setting that is problematic. Although the structure upon which digital media is framed in a top-down framework is strictly governed by the state (Badr & Leihs, 2021), The approach of its governance is bipolar, mixing a multi-lateralist approach sensitive about state sovereignty with a multi-stakeholderist approach considerate of private businesses (Shea, 2020). The manner in which digitalization is regulated is not less ambiguous as digital media and digital transactions are regulated via a a diversity of contradictory if not uncoordinated set of laws

(Badr, 2020). As a result, Hanan Badr claimed that this scene produced three types of journalists; leading journalists who produced pro-state loyalist practices, bureaucratic civil servants benefiting from media patrimonialism, and activitist watchdogs yet with diverse ideals (Badr & Leihs, 2021). This diversity of ideals allows the state to employ journalists themselves as a gatekeeping force controlling digital media (Ayish & Mellor, 2015).

Method

In this paper document analysis is employed. It is chosen to explore the political implications of the Egyptian digital transformation policy. The paper analyses the main laws shaping the content and rules of digital transformation in Egypt. These laws are : Telecommunication Regulation Law of 2003 (10/2003), , Cybercrime Law of 2018 (175/2018), Law Regulating the Press, Media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation of 2018 (180/2018), The Egyptian Data Protection and Privacy Law (151/2020), relevant articles from the Egyptian Penal Code and relevant articles from the Egyptian constitution of 2014 . In addition, official statements from the Egyptian government and officials, relevant news items issued from state-owned media, and reports tackling an instance or another of the digital transformation policy were also analysed. Document analysis studied these sources to understand the content of the digital transformation policy, and its political implications. To do this, the paper followed a directed-document-analysis method, starting with gathering the relevant legal instruments and statements, deciding whether these documents are "setting rules" for surveillance, or influence the tactics of control and discipline (but does not shape them) , then these texts were read and analysed manually line by line so as to infer from them the policy of digitalisation, its disciplinary nature, a its political implication and the impact of the measures they impose. Among limitations of this method is not only its reliance on the personal viewpoints of authors, but to tackle documents in a poorly digitized context (not to say nascent) and trace their repercussions in reality is not a simple task. This makes the data

space available for researchers very irregular and requires from them bigger efforts of personal analysis, inference and fact-checking.

Table (1) List of analysed documents

No.	law	language	source	Last accessed	nature
1.	Telecommunication Regulation Law of 2003 (10/2003)	English	https://www.tra.gov.eg/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Law-No-10-of-2003.pdf	28 October 2024	Rule-setting
2.	Cybercrime Law of 2018 (175/2018)	English	https://cybercrime-fr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Egyptian-cybercrime-law-.pdf	28 October 2024	Rule-setting
3.	Law Regulating the Press, Media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation of 2018 (180/2018)	Original (Arabic)	https://hrightsstudies.sis.gov.eg/media/1826/180_4.pdf		Rule-setting
4.	The Egyptian Data Protection and Privacy Law (151/2020)	English	https://www.acc.com/sites/default/files/program-materials/upload/Data%20Protection%20Law%20-%20Egypt%20-%20EN%20-%20MBH.PDF	28 October 2024	Rule-setting
5.	the Egyptian Penal Code	English	http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/Egypt/criminal-code.pdf	28 October 2024	

| 6. | The Egyptian constitution | English | https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/egy127542e.pdf | 28 October 2024 | influential |
| 7. | Official statements from the Egyptian government and officials, relevant news items issued from state-owned media, and reports tackling any dimension of the digital transformation policy. | English and Arabic | Cited in text | Dates mentioned per reference | influential |

Digital Transformation in Egypt: Ruling from The Bunkers of Time

(1) Background and Legal Settings

Digital transformation in Egypt is undoubtedly one of the government main priorities. Not only for the powers of control that digitization offers, but also for its economic benefits that encourage local and foreign investment. This prioritisation is reflected in the number of investments digital transformation receives from the government and the growth of the sector itself. From 2016 to October 2022, the government invested 50 billion EGP (1BN $) in digital transformation according to the Minister of ICT (Ahramonline, 2022). The sector budget increased by 22.6% in 2022-2023 than the previous fiscal year, putting the sector as the highest growing in the Egyptian market. the ICT sector provided around 90BN EGP (1.8 BN $) to the Egyptian GDP (approximately 4% of the total GDP), rising with 14% than 2018 figures (Administration, 2022).

However, such a promising environment is regulated via an ambiguous legal variety that allows authorities to maintain an image of the rule of law and also allow a flexible room for action

in this phase of digital take-off against any possible friction or threat. An arsenal of six main laws maintains for authorities the needed room of action against any digital threat. These laws are: The Egyptian Penal Code, Telecommunication Regulation Law of 2003 (10/2003), Cybercrime Law of 2018 (175/2018), Law Regulating the Press, Media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation of 2018 (180/2018) and The Egyptian Data Protection and Privacy Law (151/2020).   Telecommunication Regulation Law of 2003 (10/2003) allows state security to have complete control over communications in any condition perceived as of concern to national security (article 67). It also criminalises the 'illegitimate' use of telecommunications, which is frequently interpreted as 'misuse of social media' (article 76) (Egypt, 2003; Fund, 2019). The Cybercrime law of 2018 (175/2018) offers to authorities open access to all cyber transactions, as (article 2) requires from ISPs to collect personal user data, store it at least for 180 and hand it 'upon request'. It also allows authorities to access all available data, infrastructure, devices, and to inspect computers, databases and any information system using temporary judicial orders (article 6). The law also grants authorities the ability to censor and block websites threatening economy or security upon a judicial request. However, in urgent matters, authorities can order the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) to temporarily block the concerned outlet till a judicial request is issued (article 7). Using information technology in manner seen by authorities as against 'public morality' or via fake accounts are criminalised also in articles 24 and 14 (Egypt, 2018; Fund, 2019).

The Law Regulating the Press, Media, and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation of 2018 (180/2018) requires any media website to submit personal data of its owner so as to register his/her website (article 6, article 40). It allows the state to block websites without any court order if it was deemed threatening to national security (article 19), and it heavily fines any website deemed to spread false news (reaching 250,000 EGP fine) and blocks it (article 19) (Egypt, 2018; Fund, 2019).

A plethora of actors are allowed via these laws to practice monitoring, filtering, data access and content blocking. This includes the traditional security agencies of the Military Intelligence, The General Intelligence Department, The Homeland Security. In addition to these, other actors became recently active in intercepting content or conducting digital monitoring, they include The Administrative Oversight Authority (AOA) and the mysterious TRD (Technical Research Department) (International, 2019). It is debatable to whom exactly TRD belongs as some reports TRD to be affiliated to the Ministry of Interior, some relate it to the National Centre for Research, while others claim it to be directly reporting to presidency. This is in addition to the Supreme Media Regulatory Council (SMRC); the National Press Authority (NPA); and the National Broadcasting Authority which are granted by the law to regulate media, print and broadcasting, with jurisdictions to block content and fine outlets (International, 2019). This melange of laws, security and/or regulatory bodies allows the state to practice its brand of legal pluaralism where friction is avoided not by brute force but by a set of laws and a web regulatory bodies so as to maintain an image of the rule of law. Yet if these were the investments, laws and active agents, what is the content of the digital transformation policy and its political implications?

(2) Pillars of the Digital Transformation Policy

Basically, the digital transformation policy is part of a more general agenda called Egypt vision for 2030. It is an 8 goals agenda that seeks sustainable development economically, socially and environmentally (Presidency, 2021) . Yet the mention of digital transformation was not under the social causes or the barely mentioned political causes of the agenda, rather it was part of an economic cause for progress and increased competitiveness. Such a depoliticized approach towards technology reflects the reluctance of policy makers to slow down their assumed race with time by going into the time-consuming dilemmas of politics, And, on the

other hand, confirms Virilio's claims about technology enticing neglect of politics.

Three main pillars of this policy are to be studied in this section, digitizing services (digital transformation in the narrow sense), financial inclusion and digital media.

(a) Digitizing services: Big Data as Vital Shield

As for digitizing services, Egypt launched its project of 'Digital Egypt' that represents its overall transformation policy via 6 platforms: data platform, automation and e-service platform, payments platform, modern employee platform, geographic data platform, state assets management platform and content & portals platforms (MCIT, Digital Transformation, 2021). These platforms handle all the data of Egyptians and seeks to offer them the digitalized services of subsidized supply, formal documentation, vehicles services, license services and courts services (Digital-Egypt, 2021). MCIT believes these efforts foster the ambitions of digital transformations, digital innovation and enhances digital skills and job creation (MCIT, 2021). Ironically, when MCIT mentioned the legal framework of this process it enumerated a set of laws known for their economic motives and politically-lacking nature, among them is the Law for Personal Data Protection and the previously mentioned Cybercrime Law.. A brief statement on the services platform says "all personal data are protected and no one, unless authorized, is able to access them" (Digital-Egypt, 2021). This takes us to question who are authorised to access the users' data?

The Law for Personal Data Protection (151/2020) outlines explicitly the fate of personal data under this policy. The law, first and foremost, exempts national security entities, police, justice entities and the Central Bank from the obligations of the law (article 3) (Egypt, 2020). It does not give clear time spans for notifying individuals about the change in the aims of using their data. They are notified once in the beginning and are informed only about the initial aim. There is no clear procedure for reporting data theft or piracy. No clear mechanism for reporting violations on the

part of a foreign data partner (Masaar, 2020). And the board of the data protection centre consists largely of security entities (4 out of 9) although they are exempted from the obligations of the law and the rest of members are nominated by bureaucratic entities (article 20) (Egypt, 2020; Masaar, 2020). This clearly shows that the concern for securitization where avoidance of any friction with citizens is prioritized over politics and social dialogue.

(b) Financial Inclusion: Discipline from Afar

The fear for securitizing private data under vague laws is one side of the story. The other side is exposing individual earnings to this gigantic securitized drive. As one major pillar of the digital policy is financial inclusion. It is a process that seeks to digitize financial transactions as to make them under official scrutiny, and combat the informal economy run away from taxation. This certainly is a very positive endeavour for an economy widely seen to be faring well under pressures. However, the focus on the economic motive of the policy overshadows the political potentials it might entail. The story starts in 2013 when a non-specialized administrative court (The Summary Court), supposed to handle urgent matters, issued a verdict to ban the Muslim Brotherhood activities and confiscate their money for being a terrorist entity. Accordingly, the Egyptian PM issued an order to form a committee responsible for banning the activities and appropriating the money of terrorist MB (Hamama, 2016) .

Later, other courts turned down the application of the verdict due to the lack of jurisdiction of the court. The court is supposed to be administrative, and confiscation of funds is a judicial role. This made the parliament, under presidential guidance, amend the law so as to give the committee responsible for confiscation a judicial role, and later the president will amend the law in order to allow the committee powers to issue decisions depending solely on police and the general prosecution investigations and not on the basis of a final judicial verdicts (Egypt, 2018). What can one learn from this saga? regardless of the debatable nature of its legality, these incident shows the insistence of concerned authorities to ease

the digital control of earnings, whether for security reasons or not, so as to reduce any need for any physical friction with citizens. It is like discipline from afar, it is a discipline via the medium of time using a state-run centralized system operating in real time. This centralization, inspired by economic reasons more than political ones, with low or no social dialogue, shows how digitalization pushes state bodies to avoid politics as much as possible. This, certainly warrants caution when reading any digital transformation policy.

By choosing real-time as the medium for governmental services and financial transactions the state aims at quicker and smoother ways to enforce its discipline, yet in an escapist manner that does not include reciprocity or dialogue with the subjects of authority. It is rather a top-down/one-way practice of discipline that allows authorities to control everything with the least possibility of receiving an opposing or obstructing feedback.

(c) Digital Media Control: Explicit Discipline and Chilling Effects

A third, and more explicit, final layer of this policy is internet, communication, and media control, and for brevity it will be called 'digital media control'. Inspired by security and political risks in a fragile regional setting, digital media control is conducted via a two-tiered system that determines the form of control depending on the cost and the profile of the controlled subject. low-cost tactics are employed against normal individuals. Yet when it comes to high profile controversial and risky dissidents, costly high-tech methods are employed. Cheap tactics include an array of unsophisticated methods like devices seizures and searches, targeting individuals via informant networks, and monitoring publicly available content over digital media. Traditional methods like using licenses and registration procedures are applied to maintain conformity. An atypical method recently employed was when the Egyptian General Prosecution encouraged Egyptians to report rumours and fake news on social media using a WhatsApp number (Shea, 2020).

Another level of control operates using high-tech methods of monitoring, interception and blocking. Such a level enables authorities a comprehensive control over digital flows and allows it to monitor controversial and risky high-profile dissidents. To explain this level, it is important to show deals, companies, software and impacts of the general digital control policy. The state contracted companies from five countries so as to be equipped with technologies and software used for these purposes. France stands with five French companies selling digital control technologies for military and security bodies. They include AMESYS/NEXA/AM Systems (individual surveillance), SUNERIS/ERCOM (mass interception), IDEMIA (personal data collection), Safran (crowd control and drones) and AIRBUS/THALES (surveillance satellite). The AMESYS/NEXA right after the MB ouster installed CEREBRO monitoring system with a version more updated than the one operated earlier by the late Libyan President Gaddafi (International, 2019). The French deals were among a general increase in arms deliveries from France to Egypt jumping from an approximate for 40 M.€ in 2010 to 1.3 billion € in 2019, a figure later tripled to reach an approximate 4 bn. € after the Rafale Deal in 2021. A deal widely seen to be made to guarantee leniency from Macron against Egypt (Reuters & Irish, 2021).

UK was also part of another deal selling 70 M£ (85.5M $) surveillance equipment to Egypt, KSA and Bahrain in 2018. Another controversial trading was happening before 2016 with the Italian Hacking Team Surveillance Company, which was reported to sell surveillance technologies to the mysterious Egyptian TRD. A relationship to be cut later after an Italian activist group pressured the government to stop licensing the company exports outside EU in general (International, 2019). Americans US-CERT also trains EG-CERT, a team responsible for protecting Egypt's cyber security (Shea, 2020). Lastly, the Israeli NSO, widely scandalised after the Pegasus affair, received 16 M.€ for tapping and destroying the data of 400 phones via spywares like Pegasus and Cytrox. Traces of these software were found on phones of

major dissidents in different middle eastern countries (Yousef, 2022; AlAshry, 2023).

Discussion

A question arises here, if digital mediums are heavily monitored like this, what are the available means for voicing authentic political expression? The COVID 19 crises worldwide boasted the shift to the digital methods of work and expression. However, in a situation like the current case study, where digital agendas are done with an open neglect of politics and an over-focus on security, this led gradually to throwing political expression from the physical public sphere to the cyber medium. which signals the disappearance of public sphere into a heavily restrained and overly suspicious cyber realm. This affirms Jonathan Crary's concept of 'digital kittling' and sits in line with Zayani's arguments about the substitution of digital media for politics in Egypt (Crary, 2013; Zayani, 2014) .

However, one can not take these arguments at face value, without putting them in the wider context in a region where politics, rights and opposition can shift- overnight- into civil wars and political secession. Certainly, there is an exaggerated drive for securitization in Egypt, long before 2011, but the escalating regional threats offers some milieu to digest part of this exaggerated securitization drive

The huge amount of big data collected through these mega-projects of digital transformation is to be centralized in one data mind put some 14 metres underground (Show, 2019). This data mind occupies a certain centre run by the state armed forces. However, can this extremely centralized accumulation of power inspired by security fears consider the demands for politics one day? in the current circumstances this is not possible for four main reasons. First, the perilous situation in the region. Second, the current legal structure, which is widely disparate, incoherent and not so much inspired by the need for any political vividity. Third, the technical nature of this accumulation of power, undertaken using cutting edge technology, which makes it harder for an

already poorly informed citizenry to scrutinize this drive. Fourth, the very combination of political, technological, media, and financial power all accumulated together makes it too huge to be inspected appropriately (House, 2022).

Geographically, this combination of power is shielded from socio-political concerns by their very being not in space but in time, and by physically occupying not the city but 'the desert', in Virilio's terms. The data centre occupying 'the Octagon' in a newly established capital, far away from the classic city of citizens and largely poised to be the new capital of well to do Egyptians, seems to be replicating and over-stressing security over the need for politics and social dialogue (Rogoway, 2019; EL-Hakeh, 2021). This makes the Egypt of digital transformation a perfect example of the 'overexposed' city that Virilio, and similar critics of the apolitical digitalization warned against. A city deeply connected yet poorly social or political. The Virilian "machine god of technology" that empowers the owners, operators and benefactors of these technologies prompts one to recite with Martin Heidegger "only a God can save us", a true God for sure.

Conclusion

The paper aimed at exploring the question of how can one understand the political implications of the current digital transformation occurring in Egypt? Using document analysis of all relevant laws, policy statements and new items, the paper explained how such a transformation largely inspired by security than politics pushes authorities to 'escape into time'. Digital transformation in Egypt transfers the medium of discipline and control from physical space to real-time. Such a shift, reminiscent and averse of the 2011 crisis, is instituted so as to allow authorities total regulation of digital services, financial transaction and digital expression with no recognition of reciprocity or dialogue. This temporal transfer, associated with a physical transfer of the seat of government to the NAC location far in the desert, removes authority, afraid enough of insecurity, from the city to the desert, with all the consequent detachment from politics and society. As

conducting major services via real time and increasing the distance, cost and needed time to reach the new site of government complete the authorities' escape into time so as to avoid any friction with citizens. In light of Paul Virilio's theorisation, it can be argued that the digitalisation policy occurring in Egypt transforms it into an overexposed city, deeply connected but poorly social. This state was perfected by the assistance of a global class of tech corporations that are blind to the causes of politics and are keener to sell data and monitoring equipment to Egypt so as to open markets for their insatiable war machine. All these transformations occurring in the absence of efficient political coordination make digital technology the booster of a novel real-time desert in the Arab world. A desert of control and order escaping in the bunkers of time from an already exhausted and poorly informed Egyptian citizenry.

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