The media' role in constructing the real estate problem in Egypt and its impacts on policymakers' decision, case study (Madinaty and Palm Hills)

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“The media’s role in constructing the real estate problem in Egypt and its impacts on policymakers’ decision, case study (Madinaty and Palm Hills)”
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I. Introduction

The media plays a crucial role in defining and constructing the social problems (Parsons, 1995); if there is an agreement among the policymakers and the stakeholders on a certain problem, policies should be taken to resolve this problem. Although most of the literature acknowledged the role of the media in constructing the problems, there has been no agreement among them on its particular functions or role, its determinants and the ways of influence and impacts on making policies. Some scholars maximized the role of the media, other minimized it to the lower level and the rest put some determinants and constraints on that role, so according to these various visions concerning the role then the influence and impacts wouldn’t be the same.

The aim of this paper is to address the role of the media in general and the press specifically in the construction of the problem of the real estate in Egypt by focusing in the case of Madinaty and Palm Hills. The paper consists of two parts; each part consists of three sections. The first part constructs the problem theoretically by presenting the different literature tackling the role of the media in constructing the problems and the ways of influence. The second part of the paper will give an introduction on the current situation of the real estate sector and housing policies to highlight the seriousness of the problem. Furthermore, the media’ role in constructing the problem in the case of Madinaty and Palm Hills by presenting newspapers’ coverage to the issue and the aspects of influencing the policymakers’ decisions.
II. The media role in making policies (Conceptual framework)

Parsons (1995) addressed the notion that there might be an agreement on what the issue is although it is not the case in defining the problem. In the definition of the public policy, he added that if a certain problem affects other groups in the society, then it is a public issue. Furthermore, he stressed the idea that our approach in dealing with a certain issue as problem or not depends on our defining or constructing to the problem. Owing to the fact that we may have the same data, values, beliefs, ideologies influenced our perceptions in a different way. Parsons concluded that analyzing a certain problem requires not only observing the problem, but also participating in it.

The media is one of the main participating forces in making policies especially with the construction of the problem, so it is crucial to review the literature of that topic to answer the questions of (what is the role of the media?, what are the determinants of that role in making policies? and how that role could influence or has impacts on policymakers’ decisions?). By and large, it is really critical to define the media’ role in making policies to answer the questions of the determinants and the ways of influence.

The literature review on media and policy making have showed that media have significant role in public policy formation and public opinion as well. Cohen (1972) argued that media have an essential role in defining the problem, so for him the press or media in general can shape the context within which policy responses take place. In addition, media is thought to be involved in the production of problems, so they can influence the public opinion.
a- The role of the media in constructing the problems and making policy:

There were no agreement among the scholars in defining the media’ role in constructing the problems. First, some scholars argued that the role of the media is to spot the lights on the various problems to the public attention, so it makes the problems more visible (Parsons, 1995). Second, StroKmberg (2001) stressed that mass media may influence policy in a number of ways. Firstly, mass media may influence electoral competition because it is the channel through which politicians convey campaigns looking for electorates. Secondly, media may be of the seriousness for policy because it informs voters about actions taken by the politicians and are not observable. Cobb and Elder refer to the media role as “purveyors and interpreters of the public record “and they added also “popular reactions to policy actions and actors are thus likely to hinge on what media choose to report and how”.

Third, the media is argued to be the link between the public and policy makers as policy maker can use the media to measure the salience of a certain issue or problem to discover the general mood of the public about that issue (Kelly Blidook, 2003). Forth, Fay Lomax Cook et al. (1983) thought that the media takes part in shaping the policy agenda of the decision makers. Agenda settings refer to the process by which problems become salient as political issues getting the attention of the political system. Media influenced the policy agenda of the public by making the problem described a more important one in their eyes and by causing them to shift their listing of issue priorities.

Fifth, Stuart N. Soroka (2002) has developed a model for the relationship among the agendas of the media, the public, and the policy. The three primary agendas are shown in the graph, and causal arrows run in both directions between most of these agendas. Soroka’ model makes few assumptions about directions of causality, emphasizing the possibility of multidirectional agenda-setting and suggesting a structure for empirical investigation.
Finally, Popescuy addressed three functions of the press and media in general which are “watchdog function” (encouraging officials to be more responsive to social needs), a civic forum function (facilitating the diversity of voices in public debate) an agenda setting function (transferring importance of items from their mass agendas to the public agendas). The various literature, in answering the question of what is the role of the media in constructing problems and the policy making process, have tackled many aspects of the issue. It is critical issue to understand the role to be able to work out the various determinants of the role that media has in the policy making process.

b- The main determinants of the media’ role in constructing problems and making policies

First, The nature of the issue either easy or hard and that related to the complexity of the issue. The more complex is the issue, the more influencing will be the media to the policy makers. (Blidook, 2003) Moreover, Blidook highlighted that the lack of the public involvement enhancing the influence of the media on policy making than within the public opinion. Second, the impact of long coverage or the new coverage on the change in policies as it affects not only the public, but policy makers as well. The long the coverage is the more attention it will grasp to it either by the public or the policy makers.

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2 - Bogdan G. Popescuy, Press Freedom in Non-Democratic Regimes, Paper prepared for delivery at the ECPR Graduate Conference, Dublin City University, 30th August 2010
Third, the degree of freedom that media generally and the press specifically enjoyed especially within the non-democratic countries. Popescuy (2010) highlighted Whitten-Woodring’s notion concerning the media’s functions in all regimes and the fact that they differ from state to another depending on the presence of the democratic institutions.

The media in the non-democratic regimes aren’t allowed to do three functions that have been mentioned in the first section, watchdog function, a civic forum function, and agenda setting function. These regimes are usually different in the level of allowed freedom to the media according to the policymakers’ cost benefit analysis equation. If the policymakers find that the media can help them to enhance their credibility in front of the people and that mean the benefits exceed the costs, they may give much freedom to them. On the contrary, if the costs exceed the benefits for any reason, the media freedom and its functions as well will be decreased to the minimum. (Popescuy, 2010)

These determinants according to many studies are only some of many that may change from a context to another. Forth, the critics to the role of the media in constructing the problems which mainly that the media gets used of the status quo to strengthen their power and shows dominance and influence on the audience to achieve particular interests. Furthermore, the media role in non-democratic countries has no specific role or functions unlike the position in the democratic countries. Parsons highlighted Nelson’s model of how a certain issue transformed from private pain and professional interest of being a public and policy issue. (Parsons, 1995).
c-The ways the media influencing the policies and policymakers

Donna Killingbeck (2001) stated the notion that the influence of the media is elaborated on in what is called ‘Cultivation Theory’. This theory main theme is that “the popular media, such as television, has the power to influence our view of the world as “it is and it is primarily responsible for our perceptions of day-to-day norms and reality”. Killingbeck’s study highlighted that there were some arguments concerning the role of the media as it presented the counter opinion about the capacity of the mass media to shape the people’s thinking. For example, “Agenda-Setting Theory” puts less emphasis on the impact of the media on public opinion and more emphasis on what issues are actually covered in the media. Furthermore, it mentioned Bernard Cohen’s idea about the media role as he stated that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is attractively successful in telling its readers what to think about”.

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In addition, Kelly Blidook (2003) addressed that the media affects the policy making all the time either directly or indirectly as if the issue is clear to be understood by the public, the public can affect the policy making directly. If the issue is ambiguous or hard to be understood by the public, the media can influence the policy makers directly. On the other hand, Fay Lomax Cook et al. (1983) thought that media has an effect on policy makers, and that impact can occur without the policy maker personally seeing that. As most policy makers’ assistants provide them with written or verbal information about a particular issue or problem depending on the media, the policymakers are indirectly influenced by the media. As result of that, the media have the capacity to change the attitudes in tackling a particular issue.

Simultaneously, Michael Barker (2005) concluded that the media can play an integral role in shaping the social context in which policies are developed owing to its ability to stimulate change or maintain the status quo depends on policy issue and how they frame it. As he thought the media is important for understanding the political agenda and the framing of decisions about special issues, but Bakers’ notion “normal politics and the broader policy priorities [or governmental issues] are largely unaffected”

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By answering the three questions of the media ‘role in influencing policy making especially with constructing the problem stage, we can analyze the media’ role in influencing the policy making concerning the addressed case study or any other case.

4 - Michael Barker, Manufacturing policies: the media’s role in the policy making process, paper presented to the Journalism Education Conference, Griffith University, 29 November – 2 December 2005
In analyzing the case that the paper addressing, there no one model, theory or notion could be applicable, but the contribution of the literature could be very useful in understanding the various dimensions of the case. The role of the media, its determinants and impacts can be different from country to another owing to the political, economic and cultural status in each one.

III. The Media role in making policies in the case of Madinaty and Palm Hills

The second part of the paper related to the case study and it gives an excerpt about the status quo of the real estate sector in Egypt within housing policies and the Egyptian social and economic context. It presented the media’ coverage of the issue of real estate problems in Egypt (Madinaty and palm hills projects) and the ways the media influenced the policymaker’ decisions of the case study.

a- The real estate status quo and housing policies in Egypt.

This part is considered as one of the main determinants of the media role in influencing making policies in Egypt and that helps to understand the impacts and the constraints in that concern. Egypt’s housing policies in the new century emphasis on encouraging the private sector to participate in housing field. As a result of these new policies in partnership with private sector, the role of the state in providing houses is declined. The new role is to share the draw of the housing policies and dividing responsibility among various parties such as private real-estate development companies and the general public governmental finance institutions to enhance the state’ capacity.
The Egyptian government has offered many incentives to the private sector that encourage it to invest in the Egyptian market. For example, the state has allowed the private sector’ participation in owning and administrating the new cities and urban communities and the taxes and fees have been decreased. (Egypt Year book, 2009)

Moreover, tax-exemption and utility and services networks have been presented by the state to encourage the private sector. By making real-estate mortgage law in March 2004, the private sector has become very interested in investing to build and finance housing projects in Egypt. In that context, there have been a growing attitude criticizing the Egyptian housing policies that create what is called the gated communities or the mega-real estate projects that seem to be sprouting everywhere in this country. (Egypt Year book, 2005). For example, Salama A Salama (2007) said that the government has instead of focusing on luxury housing that benefits only a small class of the super rich to encourage investors to head into industrial and productive projects that generate jobs. Salama’ vision is that Egypt is really in a need to have a strategy for investment that takes into account the social and political repercussions of investment.

On the other hand, as it was mentioned in the article (Egyptian housing policy gets mixed reviews, 2006) “Egypt is home to 1221 slum areas, housing between 12 and 15 million of the country's approximately 75 -million citizens” said by Ola Abbas, vice-chairman of the General Organization for Physical Planning at the housing ministry.
She added also that “The Egyptian government doesn't allocate land for the poor, so they move to the outskirts of cities and establish their own networks of slum housing.”

In that context, the facts about income distribution, unemployment rates, the price of food in Egypt is very critical to understand the people reaction about any issue or problem related housing policies. For example, one of Al Aharm economist said that some 95 percent of public-sector employees live in poverty. One of the United Nations reports has mentioned that about one in five of them live in absolute poverty, on under $1 a day, and that in a time when dozens of luxury communities with gates have been created and used by the elite to live in for a few days every year.

This introduction about the current situation of the real estate sector and housing policies in Egypt, economic indicators, social features are crucial to understand the importance of that issue of the media’ influence on the policy makers. Furthermore, these aspects will be very essential in understanding (to whom the policies are adopted and how?).

b- The media’ coverage of the issue of real estate problems in Egypt (Madinaty and palm hills projects)

Real estate problems in Egypt take up significant space in all newspapers. All the papers stressed how the problem has come to the surface when the government signed the contract with Talat Mostafa Group (TMG) and the total amount of the contract was based on LE297 per square meter, for a total area of 33.6 million square meter which is too low.

This low price has pushed Mr Hamdi Al-Fakharani, Egyptian engineer, to file many lawsuits against the government accusing it of selling the land’ state without an auction which is inefficient and circumventing the laws that obligate that the state’ property sales should be through a public auction. Al-Fakharani has submitted a suit against the Palm Hills deal for a 960,000 square meter of land in Cairo suburb because it was offered below the market price and it wasted Egypt 15 billion Egyptian pounds of public money. (Al-Masry Al-Youm, Sep 27, 2010, Sherine El Madany and Dina Zayed, 2010, Reuters Sep 16, 2010).

The paper will focus on only the press coverage of the issue and not all the mass media. The problem has made headlines of the most of the Egyptian and some International newspapers for months. The press as a very critical part of the media has tackled the issue by highlighting all the vision about the issue; the government, the businessmen, Talat Mostafa Group, the activists, the experts and the public opinion all were represented in the news papers. Many of the papers tended to blame the businessmen for abusing the open-door economy policy for serving their own interest (Almasry Alyoum, Sep 23, 2010, Reuters Sep 14, 2010). Moreover, the press spotlighted the court rules concerning the irregularities in selling the land.

The Press has tried to provide the government with solutions to that problem; for example, some news papers suggested that TMG may pay a fine or additional money based on the re-evaluation of Madinaty’project. Another suggestion has been that the government could take part in the project in a way that give the state the ownership of the land and in the same time allows the company to end the project and get its profits.
Regardless the differences of the suggested solutions, they all agree that these solutions should care of all the stakeholders. (Alexander Dziadosz and Dina Zayed, 2010).

Some newspapers insist in highlighting the businessmen point of view about the whole issue in order to mobilize the public opinion against the issue and these enterprises as well. Many businessmen evaluated this problem by expecting negative possible consequence if these problems aren’t solved in a wise way (Niveen Wahish, 2010). Some of them go further by saying that these problems would affect not only the future of Egypt’s real estate, but also it will affect generally the stability of the investment. For example, according to Hussein Sabbour, an Egyptian businessman, “there are thousands of tourist, industrial, real estate and other projects either built or being constructed on land sold directly by the government to private investors after 1998”6. Some newspapers highlighted some of the businessmen vision about the need of the state to their role sticking to the fact that the real estate sector still plays a key role in Egypt's economy, contributing around 8.6 percent of GDP in 2009 (the daily news, 2010).

The press has dealt with the issue of Madinaty from different aspects; some of these aspects are related to the personal life of Hisham Mustafa, the Egyptian parliament member, who was accused of being murder of the Lebanese singer to make the problem more complex and grasp the public attention to the issue. Furthermore, the press spotlighted the relationship between some of the ministers in the government and wealthy business owners who are associated with these problems as political scandals.

6 - How best to manage state land? , Al-Ahram Weekly, 28 October - 3 November 2010
http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1021/feature.htm
Some argued that these personal aspects have made the Palm Hills case to be much smaller than Talat Mustafa Group case. (Niveen Wahish, 2010, Abdel Latif Wahba, 2010)

The Newspapers in covering Madinaty problem aim to involve the public opinion to the problem by highlighting the issue as one of the main corruption cases related to the public fund, interests and lack of transparency. Many newspapers praised the ruling of the Supreme Administrative Court and highlighted the some aspects mentioned in the ruling. (Al-Ahram Weekly, Almasry Alyoum, Sep 2010) For example, “The contract also included unfair conditions and there was a huge difference between the undervalued price for the sale of property for the Madinaty project and the price of other property in the same area," the ruling said.\(^7\) The demands of the press, the activists and the public opinion were not against the businessmen or facilitating investment, but it was for guaranteeing transparency and real prices in the case of Madinaty and any other projects.

As one of the square meter of land was sold to the Talaat Moustafa Group for dozens of times less than its true price in the same area. Owing to the fact that in neglecting this issue, the corruption levels will be increased in the real estate market in Egypt. The press stressed that the government would receive only 7 % in profits on sold housing units and the state loses out of this project was estimated as 300 billion pounds. Many contracts of the land such as those in Jazirat Ammon and the Palm Hills put the government in a dilemma because of the misallocations of the state lands and not abiding to laws of bids no.89 for the year 1998. (Mohamed Mahmoud, 2010).

\(^7\) - Mohamed Mahmoud, Ruling invalidating Madinaty contract creates anxiety in Egyptian real estate market, Alshorfa news 2010-09-20
The press not only stressed the current problems, but it also called other similar and different stories related to the state’ land and about the use and management of the state land. For example, the case of Medhat Barakat, Egyptian businessmen spent three years in prison for illegally occupying more than 2,000 acres of state land and building it. Calling the previous problems and how they have been tackled by the government or business is a way used by the press to grab the attention of the public and policymakers as well about how critical the current issue is. They highlighted that the problem in Egypt is not a problem of laws as there are enough laws in Egypt, but the problem is that they are not implemented. (Al-Ahram Weekly, 28 October, 2010).

c-The ways the media influenced the policymaker’ decisions of the case study.

The media plays a crucial role in getting ruling from the court or the attention of the public rapidly and that usually didn’t happen as lawsuits takes long time in courts. As result of the efforts and relatively long coverage of the press to the problem from different perspectives and some political developments, some steps have been taken by the government or the policymakers to deal with the problem. By reporting the violations of the real estate projects in Egypt again and again, they succeeded to affect the policy makers either directly or indirectly by influencing the public opinion. (Niveen Wahish, 2010).

According to Nelson 'model on how a certain issue transformed from private pain and professional interest of being a public and policy issue through the media, the media in the studied case has adopted that model may be deliberately or by chance.
As legal professional research into the problem have been conducted by law experts and highlighted by the press, and the mass media discussed the different dimensions of the problem. As a result of the intensive coverage of the media to the problem, the public awareness about the problem increased especially that they suffer from the housing policies that deprive many the Egyptian of having a small flat and give the land to the rich approximately for free. The media supports the public interests as the issue is related to the state 'land and it is a public issue, so it formulates the issue and tackled it as problem that needs a policy to be settled and pushes in that concern. (Parsons, 1995).

President Hosni Mubarak and the government decision were to form a neutral and an independent legal committee of experts for many reasons. First, solving Madinaty problem by preserving the interests and the right of owners, shareholders, workers and the public. Second, calming fears that the ruling opens the way to an endless number of lawsuits threatening the future of the Egyptian economy as a whole.
The press hasn’t only highlighted the decision or the policy, but it goes further to evaluate that policy and compares it with the expected policy to deal with the problem. For example, most of the famous newspapers followed the work of committee and start to predict about; Al-Shorouk and Al-Dostour stressed the possibility of a new settlement. (Niveen Wahish, 2010, Noha El-Hennawy, 2010, Almasry Alyoum, Sep 21, 2010)

“President Mubarak’ decree to cancel immediately the Amun island deal between the ministry of housing and Palm Hills Development”#8. Although some newspapers argued this decree was very late, some of them were sure that it will be declared in today or tomorrow because of the opposition pressures on some political and economic issues. As a result of these pressures and the coming Egyptian parliamentary elections, the cost benefit analysis according to Popescu’notion was in favor not only giving more to the media, but also responding to it demands. Owing to the fact that some ministers are involved in these problems, there have been calls by the press to the necessity of the need to create a mechanism.

Through these mechanism, businessmen who are part of the government can. The cases are a reminder of the need to create a mechanism by which businessmen who are part of the government should give up the management of their companies. (Niveen Wahish, 2010).

#8 - Amun and the Horus of the National Security
The newspapers used the tools of making the interviews with some activists that can impact the public opinion’ enthusiasm and awareness about the problem, so they can affect the policy makers. For example, an interview with Ibrahim El-El-Gaafari, Parliament member from the opposition, he said that “there is no problem in encouraging investment by the private sector if it contributes to long-term development, but not at the expense of the public or of future generations”\(^9\). The influence of the media according to Blidook’ notion was directly to the policymaker in some aspects of the problem especially that related to the rules, law and the allocation of the state’ land. In addition it has indirect impact by affecting the public opinion and drawing their perception about the problem, so it affects the policymakers’ decision and that exactly the idea of Killingbeck about the media role in formulating the public perception about the world. (Al-Ahram Weekly, July 7, 2010)

\(^9\)- Niveen Wahish, Protecting the people's land, Al-Ahram Weekly, 1 - 7 July 2010
http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1005/ec7.htm
IV. Conclusion

By reviewing the different literature in the issue of the media’s role in constructing problems to be tackled by the policies, there is no one model or theory can understand the media role in constructing the real estate problem in Egypt. The different notions, models, theories and concepts related to the role of the media in making policies constitute together a framework that can analysis the various dimensions of the case or the problem. The press through its coverage to the problem from different perspectives sends a message to the policymakers that each problem has many dimensions that should be considered. The media has a significant impact in influencing the policymakers’ attitude either directly or indirectly by mobilizing the public opinion or providing the policymakers with the data through their assistants. It is very important to highlight that the political and economic status quo in Egypt have given the press much freedom and much ability in maneuvering with the policymakers. Some scholars may argue that not all the media tools serve the public interest since some newspapers affected by business-media relationship and serve their own interests and power.

The press in my point of view can use the current climate of change to enhance its ability to construct the problem not only by spotting the lights on the various problems to the public attention, but also it can provide the policymakers with effective solutions that may be very helpful in making policies. The real estate problem in Egypt is serious issue that should be controlled by the government; otherwise, the consequences would be destructive because it is not the case of Madinaty or Palm Hills, but it is the case of the managing the state’s lands. The state’s land is directly related to the public interest and that identically what is the media in general and the press in that case try to grasp the attention of the public, policymakers, experts and even the businessmen to it.
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