

# Empowerment from behind the veil

Henry Shull

**M**ARIA TV, a new Egyptian channel that solely features veiled women, might be the first in the industry without a makeup room.

The satellite television project debuted this summer, and the women who work for it say they hope their images on TV will empower like-minded women across the region who adhere to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam known as Salafism.

But there is also a big role for men at the channel. Maria TV's owner, Ahmed Abdallah, is a prominent Salafi preacher, well known in Egypt for his anti-Christian rhetoric. Abdallah and his son Islam, the channel's chief executive, were arrested last month for burning a Bible during a protest outside the US Embassy in Cairo on September 11.

And while the women who work for Maria TV said they want to promote their belief that all Egyptian women should be covered, the channel also serves as a vehicle for what the CEO said was an effort to dim the influence of Christianity in the Muslim-majority region.

Those views would have met strong resistance during the rule of President Hosni Mubarak, who kept a tight lid on fundamentalist ideologies until his ouster in February 2011. But Islamists have perhaps reaped the most benefit from the country's revolution, and with a new Islamist president, varying



A director speaks with a presenter (left) in a studio of a new Egyptian TV channel which is managed and run exclusively by women who wear the full veil. REUTERS

vate Islamic channels that are part of this country's crowded television landscape. But Maria TV's presenters, who wear the niqab, a style of dress that

up roughly 10 percent of Egypt's population, are voicing concern about their rights in the post-Mubarak era. In recent months, churches have been burned

rose to power on the strength of the once-banned Muslim Brotherhood's political savvy.

Though all women who work at Maria TV wear the niqab, its

The women at the channel say they find it ironic that the niqab is often seen as a symbol of oppression.

"My freedom is Islam, my

filmmaker and Coptic Christian, said she learned about the channel on Facebook, where she saw pictures of a presenter wearing a niqab.

segments of society, including Salafis like Abdallah, are competing to define the role of religion in Egypt.

In September, a woman wearing a cream-colored head scarf read the midday news on state television, as officials here lifted a decades-old ban on veiled female presenters on state TV.

Most Egyptian women cover their hair, and women had already been appearing with their heads covered on pri-

segments of society, including Salafis like Abdallah, are competing to define the role of religion in Egypt.

"The goal is that all classes of society have a chance and a place to grow, to think, to become something," said the channel's executive manager, Aalaa Ahmed Abdallah, whose brother is the CEO, gesturing with gloved hands as she sat in a cramped studio.

But their appearance comes as Coptic Christians, who make

and several anti-Christian riots have occurred.

Mona Makram-Ebeid, a Coptic Christian and a former member of parliament who is now a professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, said that in the past, "You had channels that were critical of the Christian religion, but never as virulent and insulting" as today's.

Maria TV is owned by al-Ummah TV, a Cairo-based regional broadcaster that launched in 2006. Chief executive Islam Ahmed Abdallah said it was the first Egyptian station dedicated to boosting the role of Islam and dimming the influence of Christianity. Today, he said, his satellite programs have a broad geographic reach, as far east as Iran and as far west as Morocco.

The all-female Maria TV launched July 19, the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, broadcasting for four hours each day using al-Ummah's satellite frequency. The channel takes its name from Maria al-Qibtiyya, an enslaved Coptic Christian from Egypt who became one of the wives of the prophet Mohammed. The name represents "transferring from slavery to freedom, from Christianity to Islam", the CEO said.

Under the Mubarak government, women wearing the niqab and men with long beards were often harassed by security officials. The al-Ummah chief said that during those years, his studios were raided three times. Such scrutiny has eased since the election of President Mohamed Morsi, an Islamist who

executives insisted that the channel is not directed only at women who already dress that way. "We tried to create a diverse mix of shows," the manager said, with programs on politics, culture, medicine and religion. One program, called *My Kingdom*, focuses on domestic life and showcases embroidery, crafts and cooking.

Station officials declined to

my freedom is Islam, my freedom to talk from my niqab, work in my niqab, go to university in my niqab," the manager said. "So I am trying to bring across the idea that every human has a right to live and choose the lifestyle they find appropriate."

During the interview, Islam Ahmed Abdallah stood up to answer a cellphone that had been ringing inside a plastic bag. After switching it off, he

channel have the right to their own channel. But she worries that, among both Muslims and Christians, Egypt is moving toward a more religious society. "We will have a generation who is very extremist on both sides, and the role of the state and the citizenship will have problems," she said.

Maria TV officials said no men work at the channel, and men do not appear on its shows, even as guests. But male employees of the parent al-Ummah TV sometimes step in to help out with the studio equipment.

Islam Ahmed Abdallah, the chief executive, said women have total control over programming. But he insisted on being present for all interviews with female staff members and occasionally interrupted to answer questions on their behalf.

Mantawy, the Maria TV anchor, said veiled women are unfairly scorned. Critics "have this idea that this woman who wears the niqab is backward", she said.

In fact, Islam Ahmed Abdallah argued, many are quite accomplished. "We have scientists in chemistry, biology, physics," he said. "We have even nuclear scientists."

But Heba Serag el-Din, a 27-year-old director at Maria TV who wore a denim niqab with jeans and high heels, said she still sees challenges for women wearing the niqab.

"It's not about pre- and post-revolution," Serag el-Din said. "It's just discrimination, and it's still happening today." THE

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## My freedom is Islam, my freedom to talk from my niqab, go to university in my niqab

provide information about the size of the channel's audience. But Aalaa Ahmed Abdallah, the manager, said she recently received a call from a viewer in Tunisia who complained that her country's 2011 revolt did not improve the standing of Salafists there. The women of Maria TV "lifted our spirits to resist what is happening and to keep wearing the niqab and adhere to our religion," Abdallah said the caller told her.

Maria TV's staff includes 30 volunteers and a few dozen women who work there occasionally. Several have stories about discrimination in the workplace against women wearing the niqab.

Ingy el-Mantawy, an anchor, said she had been accepted to work at a prosecutor's office before joining the channel. It was a prestigious position, she said, but when she began wearing a niqab, her acceptance was cancelled.

explained that it belonged to a former Coptic Christian his team had recently converted to Islam. New converts are not allowed to use technological devices during their first three months as Muslims, to prevent relatives or other loved ones from trying to make them reconsider, he said.

Makram-Ebeid, the Coptic woman who served in parliament, said some of her fellow Christians are terrified by what they see as a "wave of anti-Christianism". But others are not.

Bishoy Wagdi, a 28-year-old banker whose father is a Coptic priest, said Islamic channels have long been used in Egypt not just for religious education, but to promote Islamist political groups. He's seen Maria TV on YouTube, and doesn't oppose it. "We are a free country right now after the revolution," he said.

Mavie Maher, a 26-year-old