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Vodafone Egypt and the Arab Spring: When Government and Business Collide

"[Vodafone] believe[s] that access to communications technology can support greater freedom of expression. However, the right to freedom of expression and privacy must be balanced with the protection of vulnerable groups, such as children, and public safety or security in certain exceptional circumstances."¹

Vodafone's Human Rights Policy

Introduction

As the desert sunset cast a gloom over the quiet office building at Vodafone Egypt headquarters, Hatem Dowidar gazed worriedly to the east, where a tense revolutionary fervor hung over Cairo. As CEO of Vodafone Egypt, Dowidar had helped the company achieve years of stable growth in his native country, but he now faced the hardest decision of his professional career. In early 2011, protests were peaking across the Middle East with major epicenters in Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia. Empowered by social media, protesters collaborated and tensions between ruling government entities and citizen groups escalated.

With an effort to stem the tide of anti-government protests, the authoritarian Egyptian regime issued an order to all its major telecommunications and Internet service providers (ISPs) to shutdown service to create a communication blackout. Dowidar had to decide between obeying government demands or protecting the rights of Vodafone customers. This communication blackout spanned to corporations like Vodafone Egypt, Link Egypt, and Telecom Egypt, affecting approximately 93% of Egyptian websites and networks.² The government-operated Telecom Egypt immediately complied, as did all of the other foreign telecom companies operating in Egypt.

As head of the country's largest mobile operator, Dowidar considered the consequences of shutting off service. Terminating operations would prevent Egyptians from communicating among themselves and with the outside world. If Dowidar disobeyed the government, he risked losing access to one of Vodafone's fastest-growing markets. Dowidar had to quickly decide Vodafone's strategy in the growing conflict within the tremulous Egyptian revolution, as the pressure to do so was mounting.

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