

Egypt

	2016	2017		
Internet Freedom Status	Not Free	Not Free	Population:	95.7 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	15	16	Internet Penetration 2016 (ITU):	39.2 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	15	18	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	33	34	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	63	68	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2017 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: June 2016 – May 2017

- More than 100 websites—including those of prominent news outlets and human rights organizations—were blocked by June 2017, with the figure rising to 434 by October (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services are restricted on most mobile connections, while repeated shutdowns of cell phone service affected residents of northern Sinai (see **Restrictions on Connectivity**).
- Parliament is reviewing a problematic cybercrime bill that could undermine internet freedom, and lawmakers separately proposed forcing social media users to register with the government and pay a monthly fee (see **Legal Environment** and **Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity**).
- Mohamed Ramadan, a human rights lawyer, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and a 5-year ban on using the internet, in retaliation for his political speech online (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).
- Activists at seven human rights organizations on trial for receiving foreign funds were targeted in a massive spearphishing campaign by hackers seeking incriminating information about them (see **Technical Attacks**).

Introduction

Internet freedom declined dramatically in 2017 after the government blocked dozens of critical news sites and cracked down on encryption and circumvention tools.

Amid geopolitical tensions, human rights abuses, and economic discontent, the Egyptian government made several unprecedented moves to control the internet in the past year. After a diplomatic crisis between several Middle Eastern countries and Qatar, Egypt blocked 21 news sites for allegedly promoting terrorism, including the website of al-Jazeera, a Qatari-owned television network banned in Egypt over its editorial support for the ousted (and now outlawed) Muslim Brotherhood. The incident opened the floodgates to further censorship, resulting in the blocking of the progressive and independent news site *Mada Masr* as well as the websites of numerous local and international human rights organizations. More than 100 websites had been blocked by the end of this report's coverage period, and the figure jumped to 434 by October 2017. News websites were blocked for the first time in 2015, though at that time only two were singled out—the Qatari owned *al-Araby al-Jadeed* news site and its English version *The New Arab*.

Security forces also detained individuals for criticizing the government's human rights record and mocking President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on social media. A human rights lawyer in Alexandria was sentenced to 10 years in prison, followed by a five-year ban on leaving the house and using the internet, based on allegations he ran a Facebook page that incited "terrorism," a loose term that has been applied to nonviolent criticism of the government. Several others have been arrested or sentenced for allegedly administering Facebook pages that poked fun at government officials or expressed legitimate opposition to their policies.

Egypt's parliament has also taken several steps to restrict the online sphere. In addition to a problematic cybercrime bill currently under review, parliamentarians have suggested forcing social media users to register with the government and pay a monthly fee in order to facilitate state surveillance. Leaked documents indicate certain government agencies possess sophisticated surveillance equipment. At the same time, progovernment hackers adopt relatively low-tech means to spy on prominent activists. Individuals from seven prominent nongovernmental organizations were subject to an extensive phishing campaign targeting their personal and professional accounts between November 2016 and January 2017. Authorities have also used digital tools to pursue gay men on charges of "inciting debauchery," with devastating consequences for their physical security.

Obstacles to Access

Poor telecommunications infrastructure and relatively high costs continue to pose obstacles to universal internet access in Egypt. The government's control over the internet backbone dampens market competition and centralizes control over the internet. Although the mobile market is more diverse, VoIP services continue to be restricted over mobile broadband networks.

Availability and Ease of Access

Key Access Indicators		
Internet penetration (ITU) ^a	2016	39.2%
	2015	35.9%
	2011	25.6%
Mobile penetration (ITU) ^b	2016	114%
	2015	111%
	2011	105%
Average connection speeds (Akamai) ^c	2017(Q1)	2.0 Mbps
	2016(Q1)	2.4 Mbps

^a International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

^b International Telecommunication Union, "Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

^c Akamai, "State of the Internet - Connectivity Report, Q1 2017," <https://goo.gl/TQH7L7>.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration stood at 39 percent at the end of 2016, up from 25 percent five years ago. Egypt's mobile phone penetration rate was 110 percent in January 2017,¹ amounting to over 98 million mobile subscriptions, as well as 26 million mobile internet subscriptions.²

Broadband prices have been slowly decreasing with increased competition between mobile providers, despite the dominance of the state-owned internet provider. Prices will rise, however, as the Ministry of Finance announced a 14 percent value-added tax (VAT) on ADSL internet services starting from September 2017. After VAT, plans advertised at 1 Mbps speeds with a 10 GB data allowance will cost EGP 57 (USD 3.23) per month, up from EGP 50 (USD 2.83), while the 2 Mbps speed and 150 GB data package will rise to EGP 160 (USD 9.08).³

Furthermore, the overall poverty level impedes access to broadband internet for many Egyptian households.⁴ Telephone lines are not universal, with large segments of the country unconnected to the landline telephone grid. Even when they are, the phone infrastructure, based on antiquated underground copper lines, frequently does not allow for speeds above 1 Mbps. In the ITU's ICT Development Index, a composite index which compares developments in ICT across countries, Egypt ranked 100 out of 175 countries in 2016, 3 spots lower than the previous year.⁵

1 MCIT, "Key Indicators Viewer," February 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rURR5n>.

2 MCIT, "ICT Indicators in Brief," February 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rURR5n>.

3 "Increase in ADSL internet prices in September," *The Daily News Egypt*, July 26, 2017, <https://dailynewsegyp.com/2017/07/26/increase-adsl-internet-prices-september/>.

4 World Bank, "Egypt, Arab Republic," <http://data.worldbank.org/country/egypt-arab-republic?display=default>.

5 International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring the Information Society Report 2016*, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/mis2016.aspx>.

Restrictions on Connectivity

Authorities have repeatedly shut down telecommunications networks in the Sinai Peninsula, ostensibly to prevent their use by Islamist militants. For example, phone and internet services went out for at least eight hours on September 17, 2016.⁶ Mobile networks were reportedly shut down for hours on April 24, 2017 during operations by security forces.⁷ The indiscriminate shutdowns have a debilitating effect on local residents, who are unable to make emergency phone calls or use banks. Sinai's population has long felt marginalized by the central government. Similar shutdowns were noted throughout 2014⁸ and 2015.⁹

The Egyptian government has centralized internet infrastructure and fiber-optic cables to create highly controllable choke points.¹⁰ In addition, virtually all of Egypt's telecommunications infrastructure is owned by Telecom Egypt, a state-owned company. The arrangement makes it easy to suspend internet access or decrease speeds, as was the case during the 2011 revolution. From January 27 to February 2, 2011,¹¹ authorities disabled the country's Border Gateway Protocol Routes, shutting down all internet traffic in less than one hour.¹² Telecommunications companies were then ordered to cut mobile internet and text-messaging services under the terms of strict agreements they had signed with regulators. At the time, state intelligence agencies claimed that "foreign intelligence [was] using communication technologies to plan terrorist actions."¹³

VoIP services have been intermittently blocked over mobile networks. Users experienced disruptions when attempting to make voice calls over apps like WhatsApp, Apple's FaceTime, Viber, Skype, and Facebook Messenger in April 2017.¹⁴ The disruptions may have been linked to the announcement of a three-month state of emergency after a terrorist attack killed dozens at a church on Palm Sunday.¹⁵ The National Telecom Regulatory Authority (NTRA) denied that VoIP calls had been restricted.¹⁶ Similar restrictions were reported in October 2015, but at that time mobile operators confirmed that the NTRA had ordered the block.¹⁷ Periodic blockages of VoIP traffic over mobile network were documented as early as 2010,¹⁸ but debate over VoIP flared up in June 2013 after the NTRA announced the establishment of a committee to "monitor" communications on free messaging apps WhatsApp and Viber, pending a potential decision to block or restrict them. The NTRA stated

6 "Netizen Report: Internet Shutdowns Are Ever-Present in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula," *Global Voices*, September 22, 2016, <https://globalvoices.org/2016/09/22/netizen-report-internet-shutdowns-are-ever-present-in-egypts-sinai-peninsula/>.

7 "Egypt is blocking voice calls made over social media apps," *Quartz*, April 25, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2qsE0PO>.

8 Reham Zahrain, "In Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Internet Blackouts Are Systematic," *Global Voices*, April 9, 2014, <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2014/04/09/in-egypts-sinai-peninsula-internet-blackouts-are-systematic/>.

9 Jared Malsin, "Inside Egypt's Black-Out War with ISIS-Affiliated Militants," *Time*, December 27, 2015, <http://time.com/4157435/isis-isil-egypt-sinai/>.

10 James Glanz and John Markoff, "Egypt Leaders Found 'Off' Switch for Internet," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2011, <http://nyti.ms/nTX2HK>.

11 Erica Chenoweth, "Backfire in the Arab Spring," Middle East Institute, September 1, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1W8Refh>.

12 Iljitsch van Beijnum, "How Egypt did (and your government could) shut down the internet," *Ars Technica*, January 30, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1i2l5qS>.

13 Ameera Fouad, "Saying no to mobile phones," *Ahram Online*, February 2-8, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1NlfDWi>.

14 "Egypt Is Now Blocking Voice Calls Made Over Viber, FaceTime, WhatsApp & Facebook," *Inc Arabia*, April 23, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2sjbyY2>.

15 "Egypt is blocking voice calls made over social media apps," *Quartz*, April 25, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2qsE0PO>.

16 NTRA Twitter account, April 21, 2017, <https://twitter.com/NTRAegyofficial/status/8555394618992885>.

17 "The national regulator responds to the blocking of free calls," *Dot Masr*, October 5, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2f0zd2C>.

18 "Confusion reigns over the status of Internet calling apps," *Mada Masr*, October 6, 2015, www.madamasr.com/news/confusion-reigns-over-status-internet-calling-apps.

the rationale was economic.¹⁹ It is theoretically prohibited to make international calls from VoIP networks under Article 72 of the 2003 Telecommunications Law, which forbids the “by-passing [of] international telephone calls by any means whatsoever.”²⁰

ICT Market

The Egyptian mobile phone market is divided between three companies. Vodafone Egypt, which is 55 percent owned by the private company Vodafone, enjoys the greatest market share with 40.5 percent.

Orange Egypt has a market share of 33 percent. Formerly known as Mobinil, it underwent rebranding in March 2016, and is now 99 percent owned by its French parent company.²¹ Finally, Etisalat Misr has a 24 percent market share. The company is 66 percent owned by Etisalat, an Emirati company with strong ties to that country’s rulers.²²

In 2016, Egypt sold 4G licenses to all existing networks, as well as a fourth license to a state-owned company, Telecom Egypt, which announced it would offer 4G services in 2018. Telecom Egypt obtained a license to establish a new mobile telephone company in April 2014 but had yet to launch in mid-2017.²³

In the fixed-line broadband market, Telecom Egypt (under the banner TE Data) controls 75 percent of the ADSL market. Egypt’s main internet service providers (ISPs), also known as “Class A” ISPs, are Etisalat Egypt, Noor, and Vodafone data. These companies lease lines from TE Data and resell bandwidth to smaller ISPs.²⁴

Regulatory Bodies

Mobile service providers and ISPs are regulated by the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) and governed by the 2003 Telecommunication Regulation Law. The NTRA’s board is chaired by the ICT minister and includes representatives from the defense, finance, and interior ministries; the state security council; the presidency; workers’ unions; as well as public figures, experts, and other military figure.²⁵ Officially, the NTRA is responsible for regulating the telecommunications industry, ensuring a competitive environment in the market, managing the frequency spectrum, standardization, and interconnection agreements.²⁶ In addition, it aims to enhance and integrate advanced telecommunications and broadband technologies.²⁷ The NTRA has

19 “Egypt considers banning Viber, WhatsApp,” *Ahram Online*, June 8, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1KO112u>.

20 Telecommunication Regulation Law No. 10 of February 2003, www.tra.gov.eg/uploads/law/law_en.pdf.

21 “Are you Orange?” *Mada Masr*, March 14, 2016, www.madamasr.com/news/economy/are-you-orange.

22 Etisalat Group, “Results Q4 2015” investor presentation, March 10, 2016, www.etisalat.com/en/system/docs/12-4-2013/Q4-2015-ResultsPresentation.pdf.

23 “Egypt’s 4G wireless frequencies ready for use: minister” *Reuters*, 21 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-telecoms-4g/egypts-4g-wireless-frequencies-ready-for-use-minister-idUSKBN18H0AE>.

24 MCIT, <http://www.mcit.gov.eg/>.

25 National Telecom Regulatory Authority, “Board Members,” accessed October 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2y4tGoh>.

26 National Telecom Regulatory Authority, “Scope of Work”, accessed 06 October 2017, <http://bit.ly/2yudQEO>.

27 Natalie Bannerman, “4G frequencies given to Egypt’s telcos.” *Capacitymedia*, June 23, 2017, www.capacitymedia.com/Article/3727608/4G-frequencies-given-to-Egypt-s-telcos.

led reforms to upgrade telecoms infrastructure by installing fiber-optic cables to increase internet speeds and, in October 2016, auctioned 4G frequencies to all mobile providers.²⁸

Limits on Content

Egypt has blocked more than 400 websites, including independent news outlets, human rights organizations, VPN and proxy services, and social media platforms, in an aggressive and unprecedented wave of censorship. Egyptians still manage to use satire to push the boundaries on sensitive issues—which now include debating questions of public interest and policies under consideration by parliament.

Blocking and Filtering

Dozens of websites were newly blocked to restrict access to political information in 2017. Previously, only two websites were known to be blocked in the country: *al-Araby al-Jadeed* and its English version, *The New Arab*. Both were blocked in December 2015 due to their links to Qatar.²⁹

On May 24, 2017, Egyptian state news announced 21 websites had been blocked for allegedly supporting terrorism, according to an official. Among them were several prominent news outlet linked to Qatar, the extremist group Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood, in addition to *Mada Masr*, an independent, progressive, and bilingual news site based in Egypt which has been nominated for awards by Reporters Without Borders and Index on Censorship.³⁰ Security officials interviewed by Reuters stated the sites were blocked for their links to the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar.

No official blocking order was issued by a court or government authority, making it impossible to challenge the ban through legal channels.³¹ The independent daily *al-Masry al-Youm* published an “official report” from an unnamed “sovereign authority” that justified the blocking on grounds that one-third of countries around the world ban websites for “terrorism, pornography or prostitution, illegal immigration, and money laundering.” The report erroneously supported that assertion using a chart taken from the 2016 edition of *Freedom on the Net*, which actually shows that 35 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where the internet is “Not Free,” an unrelated finding³²

The blocks coincided with a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and other Middle Eastern countries sparked when hackers posted remarks attributed to the emir of Qatar on the Qatar News Agency website, which appeared to confirm regional fears that he supports political and extremist groups in defiance of neighboring countries. The *Washington Post* reported that the hack was orchestrated by the United Arab Emirates to discredit Qatar.³³ Egypt was one of several countries that broke relations with Qatar after the incident.

28 Ola Noureldin, “Egypt completes long-Delayed 4G mobile license deals,” Reuters, October 16, 2016, <https://goo.gl/mAz7GR>.

29 “Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt block access to Qatari-owned news website,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/05/saudi-arabia-uae-egypt-block-access-qatari-news-website>.

30 “Mada Masr nominated for 2 international journalism awards,” *Mada Masr*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/10/26/news/politics/mada-masr-nominated-for-2-international-journalism-awards/>.

31 “Decision from an Unknown Body: On blocking websites in Egypt”, AFTE, June 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2s56AsK>.

32 “Official report defends decision to block websites with Egypt for supporting terrorism (full text),” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1139015>.

33 Karen DeYoung and Ellen Nakashima, “UAE orchestrated hacking of Qatari government sites, sparking regional upheaval, according to U.S. intelligence officials,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2017, <http://wapo.st/2zPGmRE>.

Censorship escalated, and by the end of June, over 100 websites were blocked, including *Huffington Post Arabic*, the financial newspaper *al-Borsa*, and the entire online publishing platform Medium, where *Mada Masr* had reposted content in a bid to outwit censors. Websites run by Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, the activist April 6 Youth Movement which was active in the 2011 revolution, and the jailed democracy activist Alaa Abdel Fattah were also inaccessible. Reporting on its Facebook page, *Mada Masr* indicated the decision to block the websites was made by the Egyptian authorities, rather than ISPs.³⁴ Authorities also blocked the websites of various tools which help circumvent censorship, including Tor,³⁵ TunnelBear, CyberGhost, Hotspot Shield, TigerVPN, ZenVPN, and other virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxy services. Tor usage data showed an uptick in downloads from Egypt as users reportedly found other ways to obtain access to the service.³⁶ By October, the number of blocked websites had risen to 434, according to the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), an Egyptian nongovernmental organization.³⁷ In mid-2017, AFTE and *Mada Masr* filed separate lawsuits to appeal against the blocking

In December 2016, authorities blocked the encrypted communications app Signal, as well the website of its operator Open Whisper Systems.³⁸ This was the first known incident of Egyptian authorities blocking an app in its entirety, but some users may still be able to use it (see “Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity”).

Content Removal

Egyptian authorities report shutting down dozens of social media pages. Major social media companies did not report having implemented direct government requests to remove content, but popular satirical pages were disabled when government supporters reported them to Facebook for violating the platform’s community standards. Observers speculated that the activity had official support after President Sisi stated, “With the assistance of two web brigades, I can shut down the pages, take them over and make them my own.”³⁹

One satirical Facebook page under the name of President Sisi with over 800,000 followers was closed down after it posted a fabricated screenshot of the president’s cell phone displaying 12 missed calls from Saudi Arabia’s King Salman after an Egyptian court ruled that the government could not cede two Red Sea islands to the kingdom. Satirical pages operating under the names of former President Hosni Mubarak and members of his family were also closed down after they were reported. Facebook requires that users share content under the name they go by in everyday life.⁴⁰

Separately, in December 2016, the Ministry of Interior claimed it shut down 163 Facebook pages and

34 Mohamed Hamama, “Mada Media and Censorship,” *Mada Masr* English page on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/mada.masr.english/photos/a.234906877010177.1073741843.174978936336305/246794465821418/?type=3&theater>.

35 Maria Xynou, Vasilis Ververis, Arturo Filastó, Wafa Ben Hassine, “#EgyptCensors: Evidence of recent censorship events in Egypt,” OONI, June 19, 2017, <https://ooni.torproject.org/post/egypt-censors/>.

36 “Another website is blocked in Egypt, taking total to 64,” *Mada Masr*, June 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2roNBMu>

37 “Decision from an unknown ody: on blocking websites in Egypt,” AFTE, June 4, 2017, https://afteegypt.org/right_to_know-2/publicationsright_to_know-right_to_know-2/2017/06/04/13069-afteegypt.html?lang=en.

38 Farid Y. Farid, “No Signal: Egypt blocks the encrypted messaging app as it continues its cyber crackdown,” *TechCrunch*, December 26, 2016, <https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/26/1431709/>.

39 Sayed Elhadidi, “Egyptian authorities ban social media satire pages,” *al-Monitor*, August 21, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/egypt-government-close-facebook-satire-pages-sisi.html>.

40 Sayed Elhadidi, “Egyptian authorities ban social media satire pages,” *al-Monitor*, August 21, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/egypt-government-close-facebook-satire-pages-sisi.html>.

arrested 14 administrators for allegedly “inciting people to commit acts of vandalism against state institutions and citizens,” according to *Daily News Egypt*.⁴¹

Facebook, Google, and Twitter, did not report that Egyptian authorities had requested that they remove user-generated content on their platforms in 2016, though full data for the coverage period had not been published in mid-2017.⁴²

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

At a time when traditional media is suffering from what several independent newspaper editors have referred to as unseen levels of homogeneity, online media is also struggling to maintain its independence.⁴³ Numerous news sites have been blocked for failing to adhere to the government’s editorial line (see “Blocking and Filtering”).

Online journalists are often reluctant to cross red lines on sensitive topics, which include sectarian tensions, sexual liberty, the Muslim Brotherhood, detainees, military operations in the Sinai, and the military’s outsized role in the national economy. A provision in the August 2015 antiterrorism law criminalizes the publication of information regarding militant attacks that contradicts official government statements, punishable by two years in prison.⁴⁴

The rising number of arrests for social media posts, including satirical images and comedy videos, have also had a chilling effect on online speech. In June 2017, an online skit mocking the army’s production of Ramadan cookies—a seasonal staple—that ran on a little-known website attracted the ire of the government and its supporters, who called the actors “traitors” and “foreign agents.” The website removed the video, but it was blocked a few days later.⁴⁵

Registering a local .eg domain requires the submission of personal data and copies of a national ID, which may inhibit local sites from criticizing the government. Online-only news websites are not recognized by the state as news outlets, unless connected to a print newspaper, making it tough to obtain press credentials, gain access to sources or fact-check information with officials

The economic viability of independent news websites is constantly under threat, as exemplified by the string of closures and financial difficulties experienced by most. The landscape is dominated by the online versions of state-owned newspapers or those benefiting from the backing of government-connected financiers.⁴⁶ The most widely read news outlets, per the most recent Alexa ranking, are primarily tabloids, news portals aligned with the government, and sports websites.

41 Sarah el-Sheikh, “Interior Ministry Closes 163 Facebook pages, arrests 14 administrators,” *Daily News Egypt*, December 17, 2016, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2016/12/17/605145/>.

42 See Facebook Transparency Report, <https://govtrequests.facebook.com/country/Egypt/2016-H1/>; Google Transparency Report, <https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/by-country/EG>; Twitter Transparency Report, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/eg.html>.

43 Mohamed El Dahshan and Rayna Stamboliyska, *Egypt: News Websites and Alternative Voices*, Article 19 and Heliopolis Institute, (London: Free World Centre, 2014) <http://bit.ly/1KramwE>.

44 “Draft Terrorism Law (full text),” [in Arabic] *Al Masry Al Youm*, July 4, 2015, www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/768074.

45 “Sweet revenge: Egypt blocks website after it slates army’s Eid biscuits,” *Middle East Eye*, June 27, 2017, www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-blocks-website-following-video-criticising-army-made-eid-sweets-1239929612.

46 Leslie T Chang, “The news website that’s keeping press freedom alive in Egypt,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1BuOn6k>.

Blogging platform “Blogspot” is the 16th most popular website in the country, an indication that many Egyptians use it to share opinions and news.⁴⁷

Digital Activism

Digital activism and political organizing have been largely subdued over the past several years due to fears of arrest, harsh jail sentences, and even murder by police forces while attending protests.⁴⁸ For example, Shaimaa al-Sabbah, a liberal activist, died from shotgun pellets while attending peaceful demonstration in Cairo; footage of her death went viral and sparked public outrage.⁴⁹ A November 2013 law has effectively banned protest and given free rein to police in cracking down on demonstrations.⁵⁰ In one exception, activists at the American University in Cairo, a private institution, used social media to draw attention to the administration’s decision to abruptly end of the contracts of workers there.⁵¹

Violations of User Rights

Several new laws threaten free expression online. An antiterrorism law was passed in August 2015, and a cybercrime law is under consideration. Both laws include harsh penalties for online activities, which activists and observers warn could be used to prosecute dissidents and opposition political parties. Several users were arrested or imprisoned over the coverage period for laws related to insulting the president, inciting debauchery, or contempt of religion. The monitoring of cyberspace by the authorities remains a high concern.

Legal Environment

Egypt’s constitution, amended on January 18, 2014,⁵² contains articles that address and nominally guarantee freedom of the press, stating that Egyptians “have the right to own and issue newspapers and establish visual, audio and digital media outlets.” According to Article 70, “the law shall regulate ownership and establishment procedures for visual and radio broadcast stations in addition to online newspapers.” This wording implies that even online sources of information could be regulated and their owners may be required to seek government approval in order to operate, as is currently the case with newspapers. Article 71 states that censorship is forbidden “in any way” and no individuals should be punished for publications. However, exceptions are made for “times of

47 Alexa, “Top Sites in Egypt,” accessed July 18 2016, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/EG>.

48 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>;

49 “Egyptian activist shot and killed during protest in Cairo,” *Time*, January 24, 2015, <http://time.com/3681599/egypt-activist-shaimaa-al-sabbagh-tahrir-square-shot-killed/>.

50 David D. Kirkpatrick, “New law in Egypt effectively bans street protests,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2013, <http://nyti.ms/1EY7Lyi>.

51 “AUC Workers Strike 2017,” *Facebook page*, July, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/aucworkersstrike2017/?ref=br_rs.

52 Draft Constitution of The Arab Republic of Egypt, December 2, 2013, Trans. by International IDEA, <http://bit.ly/1eLPdIF>.

war or general mobilization," with crimes delineated for "incitement to violence," "discrimination amongst citizens, or impugning the honor of individuals."⁵³

Article 211 outlines the establishment of a "National Media Council" tasked with regulating "the affairs of radio, television, and printed and digital press, among others" and ensuring that the press maintains a commitment to "professional and ethical standards, as well as national security needs." The Supreme Council for the Administration of the Media was created in December 2016 with the power to fine and suspend media organizations⁵⁴

Furthermore, Article 57 states that private communications "may only be confiscated, examined or monitored by causal judicial order, for a limited period of time, and in cases specified by the law." Judicial warrants are needed in order to enter, search, monitor, private property such as homes as specified in Article 58. However, the constitution continues to permit the trial of civilians under military courts, despite objections from political activists.⁵⁵

In August 2015, a new antiterrorism law was ratified by the president⁵⁶ The bill had been set for changes after criticism from the international community,⁵⁷ but was rushed through after the assassination of Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat on June 29, 2015.⁵⁸ The antiterrorism legislation classifies a larger number of crimes as terrorism and provides for the establishment of a "terrorism Prosecutor's Office," which would likely be subject to fewer checks and appeal provisions than normal civilian courts. One provision would allow the police to monitor internet traffic and social media activity to "prevent their use for terrorist purposes."⁵⁹ Furthermore, Article 27 calls for a minimum sentence of five years in prison for "setting up a website with the goal of promoting ideas or beliefs inciting to the use of violence, broadcasting information to mislead the police or judicial authorities on terrorism cases, or exchanging messages and issuing orders between terrorist groups or organizations."⁶⁰ Setting up a group with the intention of "advocating by any means the obstruction of provisions of the constitution or laws" is punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty, a charge that activists pointed out could apply to any peaceful political party or advocacy group.⁶¹ Finally, journalists face heavy fines for disputing official accounts of attacks by militant

President el-Sisi had previously issued a separate law broadening the definition of "terrorist entities" to include anyone who threatens public order "by any means," and allowing the state to draw up

53 The full text reads, "It is prohibited to censor, confiscate, suspend or shut down Egyptian newspapers and media outlets in any way. Exception may be made for limited censorship in time of war or general mobilization. No custodial sanction shall be imposed for crimes committed by way of publication or the public nature thereof. Punishments for crimes connected with incitement to violence or discrimination amongst citizens, or impugning the honor of individuals are specified by law." Miriam Rizk and Osman El Sharnoubi, "Egypt's constitution 2013 vs. 2012: A comparison," *Ahram Online*, December 12, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1boZjtj>.

54 Ahmed Aboulenein, "New Egyptian law establishes media regulator picked by president," Reuters, December 26, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-media-idUSKBN14F11S>.

55 "Egypt panel approves 'conditional military trials of civilians'," *Ahram Online*, November 21, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1EY7StE>.

56 "Egypt's al-Sisi imposes strict anti-terrorism laws," BBC News, August 17, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33955894>.

57 José Gonzalez, "Egyptian draft anti-terror laws pose a threat to freedom of expression," Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, May 5, 2014, <https://cjfe.org/resources/features/egyptian-draft-anti-terror-laws-pose-threat-free-expression>; Erin Cunningham, "Egyptian draft laws to widen 'terror' definition drawing fierce criticism," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2014, <http://wapo.st/1QAuyBA>.

58 Mai El-Sadany, "Yet Another Terrorism Law," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, July 6, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1KO98Cb>.

59 Al Hussaini, "Egypt's Anti-Terrorism Law to Target Internet."

60 Al Hussaini, "Egypt's Anti-Terrorism Law to Target Internet."

61 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, "Egypt's draft anti-terrorism laws constitute greatest threat to civil liberties in 37 years," IFEX, April 30, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1KraMDe>.

lists of alleged terrorists or terrorist organizations.⁶² The law, which passed in February 2015, met with skepticism from legal and rights activists, who said its loose wording could allow the state to consider political parties, student unions, political movements, and human rights organizations as terrorist organizations.⁶³

With respect to cyberspace, Article 34 of the constitution outlines the role of the government as preserving the security of cyberspace, “an integral part of the economic system and national security.” Various versions of a new cybercrime law have been floated since 2015. A bill under consideration by parliament during the coverage period outlined penalties for incitement, terrorism, religious intimidation, and the use of personal photos and videos for blackmail. It also allows law enforcement agencies to submit requests to block websites deemed to threaten national security, a term that has been used as an excuse to censor political opponents, journalists, and activists.⁶⁴ Website managers who fail to take sufficient precautionary measures or fail to report wrongdoing to the authorities could be prosecuted for enabling crimes to be committed.⁶⁵ The bill was subject to criticism from human rights groups.

Amendments to the Emergency Law, Anti-Terrorism Law, and criminal code were rushed through in April 2017 after terrorist attacks on three Coptic churches. The amendments allow for the indefinite detention of individuals suspected of threatening national security through special emergency courts, and curtail the right to appeal court decisions and obtain a fair trial. Police may also detain individuals for seven days without bringing them before a judge or prosecutor, opening the door for mass arrests and enforced disappearances.⁶⁶ A similar law used during the Mubarak era was struck down by the constitutional court in 2013.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Egyptians continue to face heavy penalties for their online activities. Over the past year, a number of Facebook users were arrested and in some cases sentenced to prison for spreading false news, inciting violence, or insulting the president. Some were charged on the basis of content shared on pages they administered. This was a break from the past, when the government mainly targeted prominent members of organized opposition movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the April 6 Youth Movement.

- On February 8, 2017, Amr “Socrates” Mostafa was arrested from a cafe in downtown Cairo and later charged with posting false news on Facebook.⁶⁷
- On March 8, 2017, Mohamed Rabie Abdel Aziz was sentenced by the Madynet Nasr Awal Court to one year in prison on charges of “protesting without permission,

62 Sarah El Deeb, “Egyptian president issues new anti-terrorism law,” *Yahoo News*, 24 February 2015, <http://yhoo.it/1Kid3k9>.

63 Enas Hammad, “Egypt’s terrorism law whittles down opposition,” *Al Monitor*, March 2, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1KIYSig>.

64 Ragab Saad, “Egypt’s Draft Cybercrime Law Undermines Freedom of Expression”, Atlantic Council, April 24, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Eofymq>; For the full text of the law, see “Al-Watan publishes the text of the draft cybercrime law submitted to the parliament,” [in Arabic] *Al-Watan*, May 11, 2016. <http://bit.ly/2dA6svQ>.

65 “Egypt’s new cybercrime bill could send you to prison.” *Mada Masr*, www.madamasr.com/en/2016/10/12/feature/u/egypts-new-cybercrime-bill-could-send-you-to-prison/.

66 “Draconian amendments to Egyptian laws spell further disaster for human rights,” Amnesty International, April 19, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/04/draconian-amendments-to-egyptian-laws-spell-further-disaster-for-human-rights/>.

67 “The quarterly report on the state of freedom of expression in Egypt First quarter (January - March 2017)”, AFTE, 2017, https://afteegypt.org/afte_releases/2017/05/22/13021-afteegypt.html?lang=en.

publishing and broadcasting false news and information via Facebook, and administrating pages inciting against state institutions.”⁶⁸

- On March 14, 2017, Abdul Aziz Mahmoud, founder of the “Soldiers Against the Coup” Facebook page, was sentenced to three years in prison on charges that included “inciting against state institutions, calling for changing the constitution, insulting the president, and spreading false news through social networks.”
- In April 2017, a court in Alexandria sentenced human rights lawyer Mohamed Ramadan to 10 years in prison followed by five years under house arrest and a five-year ban on using the internet on charges that included insulting the President, misusing social media platforms and incitement to violence on Facebook.⁶⁹

Six members of comedy group “The Street Children” were detained for five months in 2016 after uploading satirical videos criticizing President Sisi. They were charged them with “inciting people against the authorities, forming a group that stands against state principles, and attempting to topple the regime”.⁷⁰ Their arrest was widely condemned by Egyptian media, and led to campaigns demanding their release.⁷¹ They were required to report to police twice a week in 2017, and their case had not been dropped by the public prosecution as of September.

Egyptians have also been targeted for addressing religious taboos, including four teenagers sentenced to five years in prison for a video mocking the so-called Islamic state. They reportedly sought asylum in Switzerland.⁷² Others have been sentenced to prison for Facebook posts for criticizing or questioning religious doctrine.⁷³

Authorities use social media and dating apps to entrap sexual and gender minorities accused of performing illegal acts.⁷⁴ A number of Egyptians stand accused of promoting “sexual deviancy” and “debauchery” after images shared on social media showed them holding a rainbow flag at a concert by the Lebanese band Mashrou’ Leila, whose frontman is openly gay. Dozens were arrested in the aftermath of the concert, which took place in Egypt on September 22, 2017.⁷⁵ At least six were sentenced to prison terms of between one and six years in early October 2017.⁷⁶

Several prominent digital activists and online journalists remain in prison. In many cases, individuals

68 “The quarterly report on the state of freedom of expression in Egypt First quarter (January - March 2017)”, AFTE, 2017, https://afteegypt.org/afte_releases/2017/05/22/13021-afteegypt.html?lang=en.

69 “Egypt: 10-year prison term for insulting President an outrageous assault on freedom of expression,” Amnesty International, April 13, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rkKCoy>

70 “‘Street Children’ band members released,” *Daily News Egypt*, September 7, 2016. www.dailynewsegypt.com/2016/09/07/street-children-band-members-released/.

71 George Mikhail, “Satire leads Egypt youth troupe to prison,” *Al Monitor*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/egypt-arrest-satire-troupe-street-children-sisi-charges.html>.

72 Luiz Sanchez, “Coptic teenagers accused of insulting religion seek asylum in Switzerland,” *Mada Masr*, September 6, 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/09/06/feature/politics/coptic-teenagers-accused-of-insulting-religion-seek-asylum-in-switzerland/>.

73 “Egyptian writer Fatima Naoot sentenced to 3 years in jail for ‘contempt of religion’,” *Ahram Online*, January 26, 2016. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/185963/Egypt/Politics-/Egyptian-writer-Fatima-Naoot-sentenced-to--years-i.aspx>.

74 “Vice police entraps a sexual deviant on the internet” *Youm7*, April 13, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2f0PMez>.

75 “Egypt ‘hunting down’ gays, conducting forced anal exams – Amnesty,” Reuters, September 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-rights/egypt-hunting-down-gays-conducting-forced-anal-exams-amnesty-idUSKCN1C50D3>.

76 Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Mass Arrests Amid LGBT Media Blackout”. 6 October 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/06/egypt-mass-arrests-amid-lgbt-media-blackout>.

faced charges unrelated to their online activities, although their supporters believe they were arrested in order to prevent them from expressing their views. For example, Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent blogger and leading figure in the 2011 revolution, was sentenced to five years in prison on February 23, 2015, along with 24 other defendants, in relation to participating in a 2013 protest against newly passed legislation that effectively criminalized any protests without government permission.⁷⁷ In June 2016, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a legal opinion⁷⁸ stating that Abdel Fattah was being detained arbitrarily and calling on the Egyptian government to immediately release him.⁷⁹

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Surveillance is a significant concern. Research and leaked documents have shown that Egyptian authorities have purchased or received surveillance equipment from international companies like Blue Coat,⁸⁰ Nokia Siemens Network,⁸¹ and Hacking Team.⁸² Following pressure from human rights organizations, Italy revoked authorization from surveillance company Area SpA to sell equipment to Egypt's Technical Research Department in early 2016.⁸³ There is no transparency about which agencies may operate this equipment, and doing so may violate privacy protections in the constitution (see "Legal Environment").

Encryption remains restricted. In December 2016, Egypt blocked Signal, a messaging app which allows users to send and receive content using end-to-end encryption. According to Open Whisper Systems, the company behind the app, this was the first time the program had been censored in an entire country. One week after the block, Signal introduced a feature to its Android app allowing it to sidestep censorship in Egypt, using a feature called "domain fronting"—concealing Signal's traffic inside of encrypted connections to a major internet service, in this case Google's App Engine platform designed to host apps on Google's servers. Blocking Signal would thereby require blocking the entirety of Google products.⁸⁴

In June 2017, the *New York Times* reported that a bill was to go before Egypt's Parliament requiring ride-sharing companies Careem and Uber to provide the government access to their internal data about customer and driver movements. Careem's CEO, Mudassir Sheikha, has said that the Egyptian

77 "Alaa Abdel Fattah: Egypt jails activist-blogger for five years," *BBC News*, February 23, 2015, <http://bbc.in/17Mgxil>.

78 United Nations Human Rights Council, "Opinion No. 6/2016 concerning Alaa Ahmed Seif al Islam Abd El Fattah (Arab Republic of Egypt)", 6 June 2016, www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session75/Opinion_2016_6_Egypt.pdf.

79 EFF, "Alaa Abd El Fattah Must Be Released, Says UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention," July 5, 2016, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2016/07/alaababdelfattahmustbereleasedsaysunworkinggrouparbitrarydetention>.

80 "PLANET BLUE COAT, Mapping Global Censorship and Surveillance Tools", *Citizen Lab*, January, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2tNVack>.

81 J.M. Porup, "European spy tech sold to ultra-secret branch of Egyptian gov't, claims new report," *Ars Technica*, February 25, 2016, <http://arstechnica.co.uk/security/2016/02/european-spy-tech-sold-to-secret-branch-of-egyptian-intelligence-claims-new-report/>.

82 Cora Currier, Morgan Marquis-Boire, "A detailed look at Hacking Team's Emails about its repressive clients," *The Intercept*, July 7, 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/07/07/leaked-documents-confirm-hacking-team-sells-spyware-repressive-countries/>.

83 "Italy cancels surveillance export to Egypt but new undercover documentary shows surveillance industry brazenly continues to export to repressive regimes," Privacy International, April 11, 2017, <https://www.privacyinternational.org/node/1439>.

84 "Encryption App Signal Fights Censorship With A Clever Workaround," *Wired*, December 21, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/12/encryption-app-signal-fights-censorship-clever-workaround/>.

government had offered him preferential treatment over Uber in exchange for access to customer data.⁸⁵

In April 2017, Member of Parliament Reyad Abdel Sattar introduced a bill that would require users to register their full name, national identification number, and email address via a government-run platform to gain access to social media in a bid to “facilitate state surveillance over social networks.”⁸⁶ The bill also included a punishment of six months’ imprisonment or EGP 5,000 (USD 280) for those found to be using social media networks without permission from the government. In another bill, Sattar suggested Egyptian social media users pay a monthly fee of EGP 200 (USD 10).⁸⁷

Intimidation and Violence

Bloggers are frequently intimidated online by government supporters, who often work in collaboration with progovernment news websites to smear prominent activists. Esraa Abdel Fattah had her personal photos, emails, and recorded phone calls leaked on social media in 2017. A progovernment Facebook page posted photos of her without a hijab in order to accuse her of “indecentcy.” She had earlier had her cell phone stolen.⁸⁸

Egyptians also face other sanctions for their online activities. In March 2017, Cairo University student Hussein Bondoq was investigated in relation to comments posted on Facebook. In a separate case, a university professor was fired after she posted a video of herself dancing on her personal Facebook page.⁸⁹

In 2014, the local LGBT community warned that police were using the dating app Grindr to embarrass and entrap gay men, a practice that reportedly continues.⁹⁰ Grindr has disabled the use of geolocation data in Egypt and displayed a warning message to all local users after the incidents were reported. The *New York Times* estimated that between mid-2013 and mid-2016, at least 250 gay, lesbian, and transgender Egyptians were arrested.⁹¹ Homosexuality is not a crime under Egyptian law, but authorities have frequently charged individuals for “debauchery and immorality” (see “Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities”).

Technical Attacks

Local human rights activists and nongovernmental organizations experienced a wave of phishing attacks over the past year, in an operation dubbed “NilePhish.” Over 92 sophisticated phishing attempts were documented between November 24, 2016 and January 31, 2017.⁹² Phishing messages

85 “Dilemma for Uber and Rival: Egypt’s Demand for Data on Riders,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/world/middleeast/egypt-uber-sisi-surveillance-repression-careem.html>.

86 “How surveillance, trolls, and fear of arrest affect Egypt’s journalists,” C J, June 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rpiFqT>.

87 “Egyptian Facebook Users Should Pay \$US 11 Monthly to Government: Parliamentarians,” *Egyptian Streets*, April 16, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2plsNnw>. “MPs suggest Facebook users pay monthly subscription to aid state surveillance,” *Egypt Independent*, April 16, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2tjSino>.

88 “How surveillance, trolls, and fear of arrest affect Egypt’s journalists,” C J, June 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rpiFqT>.

89 AFTE quarterly report, March, 2017, https://afteegypt.org/afte_releases/2017/05/22/13021-afteegypt.html?lang=en.

90 “Egypt shock: the police use Grindr to locate and arrest gays,” *Gay.it*, August 29, 2016, <http://www.gay.it/attualita/news/egitto-polizia-grindr-localizzazione-gay>.

91 Liam Stack, “Gay and Transgender Egyptians, Harassed and Entrapped, Are Driven Underground,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/11/world/africa/gay-egyptians-surveilled-and-entrapped-are-driven-underground.html>.

92 EIPR, “How does Nile Phish technically attempt to break into the civil society?”. February 2, 2017, <https://eipr.org/nilephish>.

try and trick the recipient into revealing account credentials that may be used to collect private information.

NilePhish targeted the organizational and personal accounts of human rights activists from seven prominent NGOs, all of which are accused of receiving illegal foreign funds in a long-running trial. Hackers tried to obtain personal information and account credentials by impersonating recognized companies and services, like Google and Dropbox, or other civil society activists.

Multiple journalists and bloggers have reported attacks on their personal accounts. For instance, blogger Wael Abbas reported receiving multiple text messages containing two-step verification codes, indicating third-party actors were attempting to access his Facebook account.⁹³ Two-step verification requires you to provide a second piece of information besides your password when logging into a service in order to foil an intrusion by hackers.

Other activists also reported that hackers obtained access to their accounts by hijacking their mobile phone lines or intercepting two-step verification texts.⁹⁴ In July 2017, activist Ola Shohba stated she had received a text from Vodafone informing her that her SIM card had been deactivated. Someone had issued another SIM card for her account, apparently by taking a copy of her national identification card to a Vodafone branch, and used it to reset all of her online accounts, including her Gmail, Facebook, and Twitter accounts. Shohba accused Vodafone Egypt of negligence for failing to secure her account.⁹⁵ Mobile companies are not allowed to issue or replace a new SIM without owner and the original SIM being present.

In addition, several news sites have been hacked. In early June, the websites of news outlets *al-Badil* and *Yanair* were hacked in order to publish by fake articles under the name of their respective editors-in-chief. A few hours later, both websites were banned.⁹⁶

93 "How surveillance, trolls, and fear of arrest affect Egypt's journalists," C J, June 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rpiFqT>.

94 Facebook Status, *Activist Asmaa Mahfouz*, 29 July, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/asmaa.mahfouz/posts/10159148230255230>.

95 "Details of the hacking of Ola Shohba's accounts; Vodafone replies," Tahrir News, July, 15, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2tV9J2n>.

96 "Al Badil's management: the website was hacked, and we have relation to Khaled Al Balshi's article" *Misr Al Arabia*, June 12 2017, <http://bit.ly/2ytCstn>