



STIFLING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Media and Civil Society in Egypt



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STIFLING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN EGYPT

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I. Overview

More than four years after the dramatic events in Cairo's Tahrir Square led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak and Egypt's first-ever democratic elections, Egyptian civil society and independent media are once again struggling under military oppression. The July 2013 military takeover led by then-general, now-president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has brought Egypt's brief, imperfect political opening to an end.

The Sisi regime's goal is to return Egypt to the pre-Arab Spring status quo by restoring the state's control over the public sphere. To this end, it is tightening the screws on civil society and reversing hard-won gains in press freedom. Civil society activists have been imprisoned, driven underground, or forced into exile. The sorts of lively conversations and fierce debates that were possible before the military takeover were pushed off the airwaves and the front pages, and even online refuges for free discussion are being closed through the use of surveillance and Internet trolls.

Egypt's uneven trajectory over the past several years is reflected in the rankings it has received from Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* report, which downgraded Egypt to Not Free in its 2011 edition, covering events in 2010. After the revolution in early 2011, Egypt improved to Partly Free. By the 2013 edition, it was Not Free once again. And this year, Egypt sunk to its worst press freedom score since 2004.

Egypt's plummeting press freedom is in part a result of the many ways in which the state can put pressure on independent media under Egyptian law. While the January 2014 constitution contains clear protections for the media (including, under Article 71, bans on censorship and surveillance), many of the oppressive laws imposed under Mubarak remain in place.¹ These include provisions against defamation, blasphemy, and promotion of extremism, and the list is growing longer. One pending draft law prohibits publication of information pertaining to the armed forces without permission, and violators would be subject to stiff new criminal penalties.² Another draft law would criminalize publication of information that contradicts the government line in terrorism matters.³

In many cases, these repressive laws are backed up by violence. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) conservatively estimates that 10 journalists have been killed in connection with their work since 2011, and reports that a record number of journalists are sitting in Egyptian jails.⁴

Egypt has more than five hundred newspapers, magazines, journals, and other publications.⁵ While many of these titles are owned by the Egyptian state, many others are privately owned. Most publications struggle financially; the country's economic collapse has forced both state and private newspapers to implement deep budget cuts, though as of 2014, no major news outlet was forced to close its doors.⁶

In addition to their lack of resources, independent news organizations suffer from a lack of advocates. Organizations charged with representing journalists' interests before the government, such as the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate, are reliant on state funding and have consequently proven to be ineffective guardians of press freedom.⁷

Staying afloat has been easier for state media, which are estimated to receive some \$2 billion annually in both direct and advertising subsidies from the state. Exact figures on the amount and type of assistance can be difficult to obtain, given the Egyptian media industry's opacity.

After the military takeover, the Sisi regime quickly consolidated control of the state media, moving in January 2014 to name new chairpersons for all of Egypt's state newspapers. The regime has used its media control to demonize civil society organizations, foreign journalists, and the political opposition, and the generous subsidies given to state media indicate that the leadership places a high priority on its ability to shape public discourse in this way. Control of the state media is undoubtedly one of the last levers of power the current regime would be willing to release.

As a result of these pressures, self-censorship has become common in Egyptian media. Rather than face legal, financial, and physical coercion, many outlets have either aligned themselves with the government or at least avoided direct criticism, dramatically limiting the diversity of viewpoints available to Egyptian audiences.

II. The Growth of the Internet and the Government's Response

A. INTERNET USE AND FREEDOM IN EGYPT

Given the difficult operating environment for traditional media, much of Egypt's most independent news coverage and analysis is found on the Internet. Access to this information is limited by Egypt's relatively low rates of adult literacy (about 74 percent) and Internet penetration. While the latter has grown in recent years, to about 50 percent from only 16 percent in 2007,⁸ a 2013 joint research survey by Gallup and the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors found that 73 percent of Egyptians had never used the Internet, mostly because they did not know how.⁹

The same survey found that Egyptians who do access the Internet regularly are using it as an alternative to traditional media: 80 percent of Egyptians who reported using the Internet in the past week did so to access

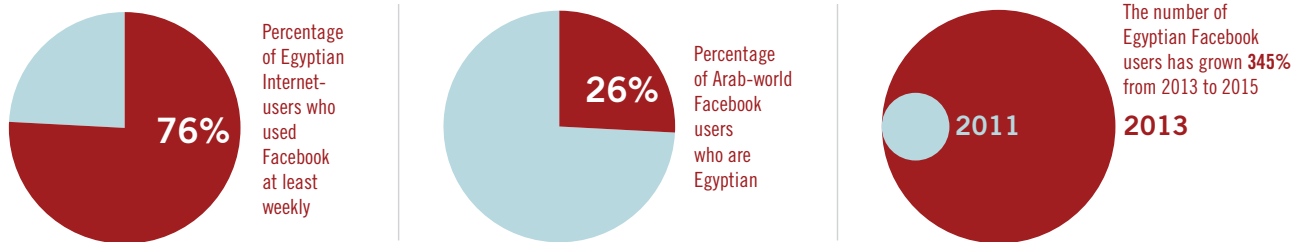
news. Internet-connected Egyptians are also active social-media users: 76 percent of past-week users reported visiting Facebook. The site's popularity has increased tremendously in recent years. At the beginning of 2011, Facebook had about 4.7 million Egyptian users, compared with 16.2 million at the end of 2013. Twenty-six percent of the Arab world's Facebook users are Egyptian, and Facebook is the most visited site in the country.¹⁰

As Egyptian public opinion has become polarized between pro- and anti-government voices, political discourse online has also become highly contentious. Verbal harassment is common, and many activists have been chased offline by aggressive pro-government social-media campaigns. Furthermore, online



Photo by Essam Sharaf, available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Egypt Facebook Statistics (as of 2013)



Data in this chart is as of 2013 and is taken from the sources in endnotes nine and ten.

activity brings both positive and negative attention. It is possible to build an audience online, but doing so risks attracting the unwanted gaze of the security services.¹¹

This state scrutiny has become increasingly sharp as new regulations restrict online anonymity and prohibit the use of encryption, making surveillance easier. Internet service providers are required to maintain databases of their customers' activities and allow the government to access the information. The Citizen Lab, a Canadian research group tracking the use of surveillance and hacking technologies online, has found that the Egyptian government possesses technical capabilities developed by corporations including Hacking Team, Gamma International, and Narus (a subsidiary of Boeing). The Sisi regime has used this technology to target opposition-minded bloggers, Internet journalists, and online activists.

B. CIVIL SOCIETY AND EGYPTIAN MEDIA AFTER TAHRIR

In the months following Mubarak's resignation in 2011, there were hopeful signs that Egypt might achieve enduring reform. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which assumed control of the government until elections could be held, presided over an Egypt in which civil society was at its zenith and the independent media were rapidly expanding. Dozens of new outlets and hundreds of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, political parties, and coalition groups were established. Revolutionary activists, NGO leaders, and artists were dominating the public sphere.

Some of the most important government and political institutions, including key elements of the state security apparatus, were shaken up by government reformers and outside activists. A new cabinet was appointed that included some independent opposition members. Notably, for the first time in decades, there was no media and communications minister, symbolizing a reduction in government efforts to interfere with news coverage. Mubarak's ruling party, the National Democratic Party, was formally dismantled, as was the state security agency responsible for brutally repressing political opposition in the country over the previous fifty years.¹³

Despite these promising steps, however, elements of the security apparatus began to reemerge in more visible and troubling ways. The State Security Investigations Service was effectively reconstituted under a new name, National Security; its new director, Hamed Abdullah, was a long-serving member of Egypt's security community.¹⁴

The SCAF began to crack down on individual media and civil society figures. By September 2011, the military leaders had stepped up a campaign against journalists, and several media outlets were raided for "not operating with the proper licenses."¹⁵ In addition, broadcast regulators were prevented from issuing new

licenses for satellite stations, and they publicly threatened to “take legal measures against satellite television stations that jeopardize stability and security.”¹⁶ In December 2011, a leading opposition newspaper, the *Egypt Independent*, was temporarily shut down after running an article about possible divisions within the military elite.¹⁷

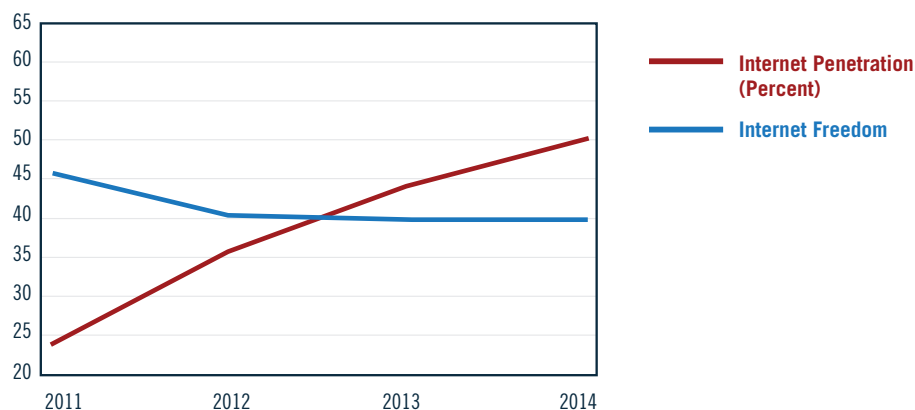
Human rights groups and activists were represented in the government media as “foreign agents” working to incite chaos in Egypt. Conspiracy theories about activists having military training, ties to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and weapons in their offices were repeated constantly on state television and on privately owned channels known to be close to the military regime. In late December, security forces raided the offices of seventeen Egyptian and international NGOs whose work included advocacy on media and freedom of expression issues.

By February 2012, forty-three workers from five international NGOs were formally charged—officially for working without a license from the Ministry of Social Solidarity, but unofficially for promoting foreign-funded “subversive activities” in the country.¹⁸ Elements of the former Mubarak regime tried these workers on false, politicized charges in both the Egyptian courts and in the court of public opinion.¹⁹

A handful of independent media outlets and courageous Egyptian journalists tried to challenge the politicized nature of the case. Egypt’s most renowned satirist and television host, Bassem Youssef, invited Human Rights Watch’s Egypt researcher, Heba Morayef, to discuss the crackdown on NGOs.²⁰ Another prominent television host, Yosri Fouda, ran a full investigative program about the case, which he dubbed “Almahzalah,” or “the absurd case.”²¹

Despite these efforts, the NGO trial was soon forgotten in the midst of a presidential election, shifting political developments in the country, growing apathy toward Egypt’s political transition among international actors, and concerted deception by both the military government and the administration of Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood-backed president from 2012 to 2013.²² In June 2013, all defendants in the case were found guilty and sentenced to between one and five years in prison for supposedly implementing a plan of U.S. and Israeli “soft imperialism.”²³

Internet Freedom and Penetration in Egypt 2011-2014



Data from Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net* (New York: Freedom House), editions 2011 through 2014. Scores have been inverted so that a score of one hundred is “most free” and a score of zero is “least free.” Internet penetration data also obtained from *Freedom on the Net*, which cites International Telecommunications data from the year preceding *Freedom on the Net*’s release.

C. THE RETURN OF REPRESSION

Few issues show the discrepancy between the promise of the 2011 revolution and the reality of repression more clearly than media independence and freedom of speech. Repression against journalists and autonomous outlets helped return Egypt to a system of authoritarian stagnation.

As mentioned above, troubling signs of this repression first emerged under the military-led transitional government in the months following the revolution. Despite their earlier promises to allow free speech, the generals eventually reinstated the position of media minister.²⁴

After Morsi took office as president in June 2012, additional controls were placed on mass media, in violation of his campaign promises. According to the Egypt-based Arab Network for Human Rights Information, Morsi's government chose to retain 70 legal articles and eight laws from the Mubarak era that had been used to suppress independent voices in the media. Morsi also filled the position of information minister with one of his closest political allies, Salah Abdul Maqoud. Together with Maqoud and others, Morsi tightened his grip on state media by appointing loyalists to lead the various outlets. According to the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Morsi and his supporters also waged intimidation campaigns against his critics, launching at least 600 criminal defamation cases and far outpacing the rate of such cases during Mubarak's tenure.

In response to the increasingly politicized and repressive behavior of the Morsi government, the media in Egypt grew more partisan and divided between supporters and critics of the president.²⁵ Different camps of journalists and media outlets were formed, ending much of the unity that journalists had sustained since the ouster of Mubarak. Many media voices began to openly align themselves with the former regime and military officials.

By this time, such counterrevolutionary forces were already on the offensive, building their own support base, attacking democracy and human rights advocates, and drawing on sympathetic voices in the media. A leaked video from Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups shows then-general el-Sisi telling his fellow officers—months before he and his allies ousted Morsi in July 2013—that he was capable of pressuring major Egyptian media companies to support their narrative as part of a broader political effort to return Egypt to the prerevolutionary status quo.²⁶

It was therefore not a surprise when many journalists cheered the military's ouster of President Morsi. Indeed, most journalists who had opposed Morsi failed to speak out forcefully against military censorship and violence in the initial days after the July 2013 takeover.²⁷ Military leaders soon turned to sympathetic and high-profile voices in the media to help garner support for their rule and revive well-worn national security and antiterrorism rhetoric from the Mubarak era. Such narratives helped silence independent reporting and commentary and restore collective fears and anxieties in the population, which served to bolster the security establishment. For example, Tawfeq Okasha, a longtime supporter of the military, copied Bassem Youssef's highly popular, satirical-style current affairs show to reinforce the new government's policies.

While propping up their media supporters, el-Sisi and his allies also created a hostile atmosphere for independent journalists, censoring criticism and issuing gag orders for specific "sensitive" topics.²⁸ Youssef had to suspend his show, *El Bernameg*, due to such pressures. Major media outlets, including Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Turkey's Anadolu News Agency, were forced to close their offices in the country.²⁹

Media groups that fail to comply with the Sisi government's mandates have been marginalized or worse. In 2014, Egypt was on CPJ's "Risk List" because of the rise in assaults against journalists. For the first time, Egypt was ranked as the third most dangerous country for journalists, following Syria and Iraq, after six journalists were killed there in 2013. Egypt was also ranked the sixth worst jailer of journalists in 2014, and continued to hold at least 22 journalists behind bars as of 29 July 2015. Most have been accused of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government has declared a terrorist organization.

"Few issues show the discrepancy between the promise of the 2011 revolution and the reality of repression more clearly than media independence and freedom of speech. Repression against journalists and autonomous outlets helped return Egypt to a system of authoritarian stagnation."

A high-profile case surrounding Al-Jazeera, in which three foreign and Egyptian journalists working for the network's English service were arrested in December 2013 for "aiding terrorism," is emblematic of the Sisi government's repressive approach to independent media and civil society.

Just as most government media and privately owned stations had used anti-American rhetoric to smear the defendants in the NGO trial as foreign provocateurs, the Sisi government and its media allies used anti-Qatari and anti-Turkish rhetoric to argue that the Al-Jazeera journalists were fomenting terrorism and spreading chaos.³⁰

A global outcry about the case—from journalists, democratic governments, and media freedom advocates—eventually compelled the Egyptian authorities to overturn the convictions of the three journalists in early 2015. That August, however, the government subjected all three journalists to a retrial in which they were each sentenced to three years imprisonment for "aiding a terrorist organization," spreading false news, and working without a license (one journalist, an Australian, was tried in absentia).³¹

During the run-up to the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, President el-Sisi pardoned the two Al-Jazeera journalists remaining in custody.³² However, many other journalists remain in custody and Al-Jazeera has effectively halted its operations in the country, while President el-Sisi continues to enjoy the hospitality of international leaders and receive international monetary support, including unconditional aid and huge private investments.

By late 2014, it was obvious that the campaign of repression had left el-Sisi with a tight grip on the domestic media. After a deadly October terrorist attack against the military in Sinai, he explicitly instructed journalists to refrain from agitating the public, saying the media needed to "preserve the integrity of the Egyptian state." The following week, the heads of 17 state and privately owned dailies, including the head of the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate at the time, announced that they had total confidence in the performance of state institutions and would refrain from publishing statements undermining them.³³

Outside the formal media structures, the Internet and social media have also been deeply affected by el-Sisi's crackdown on independent voices. Despite social media's important role during and after the Tahrir Square protests, many high-profile users and organizers, including Wael Ghonim, have been driven away from their

former activities by a constant stream of state-sponsored propaganda and online abuse from government supporters.

For example, the once-popular, Internet-based opposition youth groups that helped force the SCAF from power in 2012 through innovative tactics—including the “Kazeboon” (Liars) campaign, which used projectors to beam images and videos documenting human rights abuses by the military in public spaces around the country, and the “No Military Trials” campaign, which featured graffiti all over the country against abuse of the law by military judges—were all exhausted by the “Sons of Mubarak” campaign, which was funded generously and had a wide mobilization network and a Facebook group disseminating promilitary and counterrevolutionary messages.

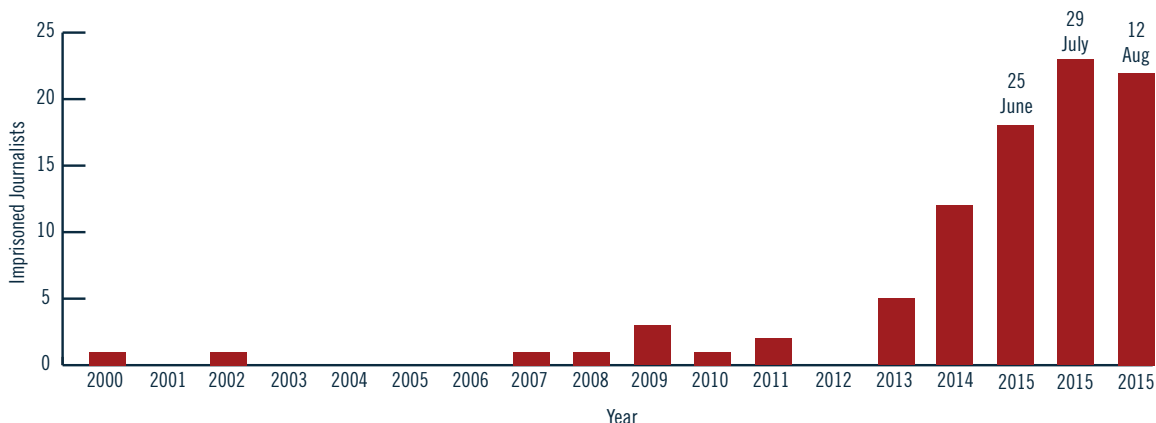
Finally, counterrevolutionary forces also pushed out their competitors with a blitz of “patriotic” content in the popular arts. Promilitary songs, including “Blessed the Hands,” replaced the revolutionary songs that had previously gained popularity among audiences on Egyptian television and radio stations.³⁴

III. Media Adaptation and Innovation

To survive a combination of overt government repression and a severe funding crisis, Egypt’s independent media took shelter online, and opposition journalists and activists formed a diaspora community outside the country. But the government still targets dissidents and journalists both at home and abroad. More than half of those on CPJ’s census of imprisoned journalists as of 1 June 2014 worked online, and most of the rest were working with opposition satellite stations based outside of Egypt.³⁵

With no parliament in place since 2012 and parliamentary elections repeatedly postponed, el-Sisi has full legislative authority.³⁶ The president is expected to sign into law a draft cybercrime bill, framed as antiterrorism legislation, that allows law enforcement agencies to block websites and pursue heavy prison sentences against Internet users for vaguely defined crimes such as “harming social peace” and “threatening national unity.”³⁷ The potential implications for bloggers and journalists are dire, according to regional experts on information systems and human rights.³⁸ The bill has been endorsed by el-Sisi’s cabinet and is awaiting the president’s approval to become law.

Journalists Imprisoned in Egypt 2000-2015



Data from the Committee to Protect Journalists “Prison Census” from 2000–2015.

Journalists Imprisoned in Egypt, as-of July 29, 2015

JOURNALIST	MEDIA OUTLET	CHARGES	ARREST DATE	STATUS
Samhi Mustafa	Co-Founder, <i>Rassd</i>	Spreading chaos; involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood	August 25, 2013	Sentenced to life in prison
Abdullah al-Fakhary	Executive Director, <i>Rassd</i>	Spreading chaos; involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood	August 25, 2013	Sentenced to life in prison
Mohamed al-Adly	Amgad TV	Spreading chaos; involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood	August 25, 2013	Sentenced to life in prison
Mahmoud Abou Zeid (Shawkan)	Freelance Photographer	Weapons possession; illegal assembly; murder; attempted murder	September 14, 2013	Held in pre-trial detention
Saeed Abuhaj	Videographer, Sinai Media Center	Inciting violence; participating in demonstrations; using arms against police	November 4, 2013	Held in pre-trial detention
Hany Salah el-Deen	Misr 25	Involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood	November 28, 2013	Sentenced to life in prison
Ahmed Fouad	<i>Karmoz</i>	Joining a group that aims to disrupt the law; demonstrating without permission; blocking a road; possessing a weapon	January 25, 2014	Held in pre-trial detention
Mosad Albarbary	Ahrar 25	Publishing false news; spreading chaos; involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood	April 2, 2014	Sentenced to life in prison
Abdel Rahman Shaheen	<i>Freedom and Justice Gate</i>	Inciting and committing violence during protests Aiding terrorism and broadcasting false news	April 9, 2014	Sentenced to three years in prison and fined 10,000 Egyptian pounds; sentenced to three additional years in second, separate case
Omar Abdel Maksoud	<i>Masr al-Arabia</i>	Working for Al-Jazeera	April 15, 2014	Held in pre-trial detention
Emad Sayed Abu Zeid	<i>Suef Online</i>	Publishing false news; belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	September 1, 2014	Sentenced to three years in prison
Mohamed Ali Hassan	<i>Misr Alan, Al Nahar</i>	Spreading false news; inciting illegal protests; funding illegal protests; belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	December 11, 2014	Held in pre-trial detention

Journalists Imprisoned in Egypt, as-of July 29, 2015 *continued*

JOURNALIST	MEDIA OUTLET	CHARGES	ARREST DATE	STATUS
Hassan el-Kabbani	Freelance Journalist	Espionage; damaging Egypt's standing abroad; joining an illegal group; disseminating false information to disturb public security and peace Spreading chaos and involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood	January 22, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention; in a second, separate case, sentenced to life in prison
Abdelrahman Abdelsalam Yaqot	<i>Karmoz</i>	Possessing explosives; participating in an illegal protest; belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	March 21, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Youssef Shaaban	<i>Al-Bedaiah</i>	Assaulting police; attempting to storm a police station	May 11, 2015	Sentenced to fifteen months in prison
Mohamed Adly	Correspondent, <i>Tahrir</i>	Belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood; working for Al-Jazeera; publishing false news	July 1, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Sherif Ashraf	Freelance Journalist	Belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	July 1, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Hamdy Mokhtar	Photojournalist, <i>El-Shaab el-Jadeed</i>	Belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	July 1, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Wagdy Khaled	Photographer, <i>Al-Masriyah</i>	Belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	July 3, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Yahya Khalaf	Director, Yaqeen	Terrorism; belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood; operating equipment without a license	July 16, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Mohamed el-Battawy	Correspondent, <i>Akhbar al-Youm</i>	Belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood	July 17, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention
Aboubakr Khallaf	Founder and Head, Electronic Media Syndicate	Taking pictures and displaying artistic works without a license	July 21, 2015	Held in pre-trial detention

Data from the Committee to Protect Journalists "Prison Census." The 2014 Prison Census found twelve imprisoned journalists in Egypt. By June of 2015, that number had risen to 18 (See "Egypt's Imprisonment of Journalists is at an all-time high," Committee to Protect Journalists). According to an unpublished CPJ assessment, by the end of July 2015 two of those journalists had been released but an additional seven were arrested.

Similarly, in April 2015 the government unveiled the National Media Authority bill, which is expected to be passed after parliamentary elections.³⁹ Local journalists see the bill as a major blow to online media and social-media freedoms in Egypt.⁴⁰ According to the newspaper *Al-Watan*, the new National Media Authority would replace the current Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), and will regulate not only the official, terrestrial broadcast media but also satellite broadcasts and online video-streaming services like Bambuser and Ustream.

The law may target the resilient and growing exiled opposition media, which are mainly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and broadcast from satellite stations outside the country, including in France and Turkey. Major stations in this sector include Misr al-Aan (Egypt Now), Al-Sharq (The East), and Mekammelin (We Will Continue). They cover opposition activities, including street protests, but they have also played a very prominent role in releasing leaked video and audio recordings of President el-Sisi.

The Egyptian government has put pressure on other countries in the region in a desperate attempt to close down these stations. The most revealing example of such activity involved Mosad Albarbary, the former administrative manager of the Brotherhood-affiliated television channel Misr 25. After a short visit by the Egyptian foreign minister to Lebanon, Albarbary was arrested in April 2014 in Beirut, where he had gone to reopen and manage another satellite station, Ahrar 25, on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴¹

Ahrar 25 operated from Lebanon between September 2013 and February 2014, but faced several disruptions before being finally removed from the air due to pressure from neighboring governments, according to news reports.⁴² Albarbary was arrested near Rafik Hariri airport and kept there for five days by Lebanon's security service, following a request by the Egyptian government. He was then deported to Cairo with Egyptian security agents, based on a bilateral extradition treaty between the countries.⁴³ Ahrar 25 staff members reportedly fled Lebanon after Albarbary was arrested.

The Egyptian government and its allies use more sophisticated approaches to lobby democratic countries and justify their censorship outside the Arab region, where they are less influential. In a visit to France in May 2015, the Egyptian prime minister thanked France's High Audiovisual Council for suspending the transmission via French satellites of a pro-Muslim Brotherhood station called Rabaa TV (named after the Cairo square in which hundreds of Morsi supporters were killed in August 2013), and asked it to similarly halt the broadcast of another pro-Brotherhood television channel, Al-Sharq.⁴⁴ The council had acted on the grounds that Rabaa TV incited violence and hatred, an accusation the station denied.⁴⁵ The Egyptian prime minister pressed his case by invoking the recent terrorist attack on the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*, and praised the French model of cracking down on hate speech.⁴⁶ He even said that he hoped to emulate the French system and set up a similar regulatory body in Egypt.

Despite these efforts to improve Egypt's image abroad, repression continues at home. Indeed, some have argued that members of the security apparatus and the judiciary—or what some have called the “deep state”—are now at odds with el-Sisi regarding particular cases that have brought Egypt great embarrassment on the international stage.⁴⁷ For example, while el-Sisi promised international leaders more than once to resolve the Al-Jazeera case by issuing an amnesty, the presiding judge decided to issue his conviction of the three journalists immediately after a visit by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.⁴⁸

Under such repressive circumstances, the independent media outlets and opposition or civic activists still operating in Egypt tend to view their mere existence as a success. Some think they can work quietly until another political opening affords them an opportunity to publish and speak in a more candid and open way. During the tightly controlled May 2014 presidential election, which confirmed el-Sisi's takeover, opposition figures like Hamdeen Sabahi were able to use their limited appearances on state-friendly media to expose problems within the regime. Sabahi, el-Sisi's only challenger in the election, forced the former general to confront real policy dilemmas to some degree, revealing his inability to answer basic questions about his plan to revive Egypt's economy. It is possible that parliamentary elections could bring another opportunity for independent voices to make themselves heard.

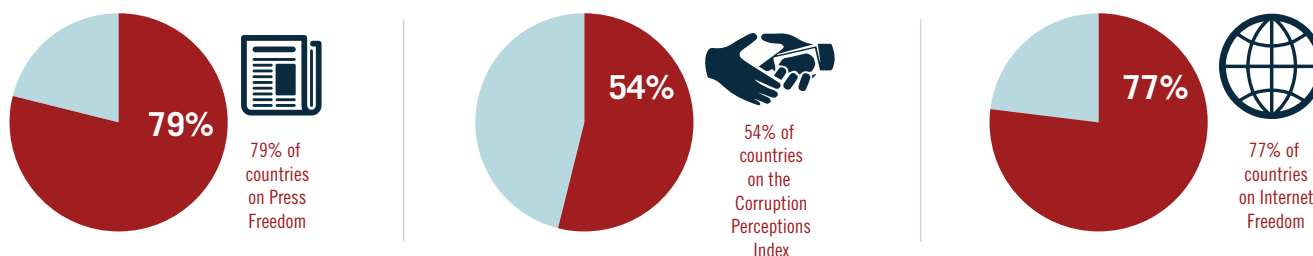
Other journalists and activists have decided to take a hiatus, or to end their careers altogether. Yosri Fouda, who criticized the NGO trial, continued his show despite pressure until late 2014, when he decided to stop. In an interview marking 100 days away from his show, Fouda told another prominent and critical journalist, Al-Nahar TV host Mahmoud Saad, that while he could not continue with the show under the present circumstances, he still believed that the freedoms sought in the 2011 revolution would come in due time.⁴⁹

“After a brief period of openness following Mubarak’s ouster in 2011, the hopes of many Egyptians to live in a free society were met with escalating repressive tactics that focused on civic activists and the media.”

Some of the journalists who stepped away from their work have tried to return, only to be frustrated by the lack of change. Reem Maged, former host of the popular ONtv talk show *Baladna bel Masry*, which was critical of military rule after Mubarak's ouster, chose to stay away from the camera for two years. She then returned in May 2015 with a new show that concentrated on social issues, exploring the lives of Egyptian women. But the program was suspended by its broadcaster after only two episodes. The producer blamed unspecified pressure for the decision.⁵⁰

Given these experiences, many journalists who have tried to maintain their independence have grown increasingly despondent. “In this military regime, there won't be a real opportunity for change,” said Kotb al-Arabi, an Egyptian journalist who is close to the Muslim Brotherhood and a former board member in the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate.⁵¹ The brutal power of the government transcends its own laws and its own constitution, he added. Even when there is a positive development, like the election of independent and critical journalists to the board of the Journalists Syndicate, state institutions are quick to respond harshly. In June 2015, a day after the syndicate organized a protest to object to the arbitrary detention of journalists and criticized the Ministry of Interior, another journalist was arrested at his home and disappeared for several days, despite a law that says the syndicate should be alerted when there is an arrest and that the journalist should be given access to a lawyer during the investigation.⁵²

In 2014, Egypt Performed Worse than...



Press Freedom data from Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2014* (New York: Freedom House, 2014). Corruption rankings from Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2014* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2014). Internet Freedom data from Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2014* (New York: Freedom House, 2014).

However, there are some who believe that the demand for high-quality, independent media, which was strengthened during the period after Mubarak's resignation, still exists. They argue that the demand could be enough to sustain independent media through this troubled time. Bassem Youssef chose to take his satirical show off the air after el-Sisi was elected, concluding that the only alternatives were to be co-opted or self-censor. He said in May 2015 that he is focusing on helping his brand survive. While teaching a course on political satire at Harvard University's Kennedy School, and avoiding the exorbitant fines pending against him in Egypt, he told Mahmoud Saad that he is already starting a new initiative that sponsors young media innovators and talented young people across Egypt to emulate his experience using YouTube.⁵³ "If conditions now do not allow me a platform, the best thing I can do is to give others the same opportunity.... It is better to invest in millions instead of one."⁵⁴

IV. Prospects and Challenges for the Future

After a brief period of openness following Mubarak's ouster in 2011, the hopes of many Egyptians to live in a free society were met with escalating repressive tactics that focused on civic activists and the media. The failures of President Morsi led to a political divide in the media, which undermined promises and opportunities for reform and squandered much-needed unity among revolutionary voices.

The repression became both more brutal and more effective under the current military-led government. El-Sisi's supporters executed a calculated campaign and sought broader acceptance of repression, using the media to silence dissent and promote the president as a new strongman. They controlled the narrative at home by vilifying their opponents and stressing themes of national security and counterterrorism, and launched an aggressive lobbying effort abroad to ensure that they paid a minimal cost for their oppression in their relations with the international community.

While independent and opposition voices struggle to survive, online and in exile, there is some hope in the short term. The Internet may continue to provide a limited haven for the media, opposition satellite stations may grow more popular, or new political developments may offer another chance for significant progress in the public's understanding of the need for critical media and a true civil society.

In fact, there is ample reason to believe that the status quo is untenable, and that another shift in the political situation may not be far away. When el-Sisi declared that he was retiring from the military and running for presidency in March 2014, he asked Egyptians to be patient with him for two years so that he could tackle Egypt's most challenging problems: the deteriorating economic and security situations.⁵⁵ Whenever he comes under pressure, whether from leaked recordings that reveal corruption or from a spike in terrorist attacks, he promises huge new development projects and makes grand pledges to end terrorism.⁵⁶

However, two years after the military takeover, neither the economy nor the security situation have substantially improved. The economy has seen limited progress thanks to aid from Persian Gulf monarchies and some macroeconomic reforms, but it has yet to provide sufficient relief to the poor or create jobs for the growing young labor force. Moreover, the ill-advised expansion of the military's stake in the economy raises additional concerns about corruption.⁵⁷ This may be why el-Sisi in early July signed a law granting him the right to fire heads and members of major state audit agencies when necessary to protect the "supreme interests of the country or any public legal entity."⁵⁸

Experts have long recognized that poor governance, including corruption and the absence of the rule of law, has fueled popular discontent, social and economic instability, and the growth of violent extremist groups across much of the Middle East.⁵⁹ For the cycle of authoritarian misrule and terrorist violence to be broken, citizens must push for open, inclusive, accountable governments that can deal with violent groups, safeguard citizens' rights, and enable these countries to achieve genuine modernization.

This understanding of the region has been borne out in el-Sisi's Egypt. While the president has used the threat of terrorism to silence all critical and opposition voices,⁶⁰ a brutal war in the Sinai is killing soldiers, civilians, and militants alike. Not only has the regime's approach not stopped terrorist attacks, but the number of attacks has actually increased fivefold since el-Sisi took power.⁶¹ This does not bode well for his long-term ability to maintain power without significant opposition.

Finally, el-Sisi may not be able to produce economic growth while maintaining control over media, due to budget constraints at state outlets and the increasing alienation of the Egyptian business community, which operates major private outlets.⁶² Some 28 percent of Egypt's state budget for the fiscal year that started on 1 July 2015 is devoted to interest payments on debt, and the state broadcaster, ERTU, estimated its losses for the same year at 4.1 billion pounds (\$520 million).⁶³ Government-owned newspapers have sustained even bigger losses, reported at more than 12 billion pounds (\$1.5 billion) in 2014.⁶⁴

All of this suggests that Egypt's opposition figures, civic leaders, and independent journalists could have another opening to push for change, if they can hold on long enough to outlast the current, seemingly relentless repression.

The views expressed in this paper represent the opinions and analysis of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or its staff.

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