

EGYPT

	2009	2011
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	Partly Free	Partly Free
Obstacles to Access	13	12
Limits on Content	12	14
Violations of User Rights	26	28
Total	51	54

POPULATION: 80.4 million
INTERNET PENETRATION: 24 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: No
BLOGGERS/ONLINE USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Partly Free

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following report covers developments in Egypt until December 31, 2010. However, events that have occurred since the end of the coverage period have significantly altered the country's political and internet freedom landscape. On January 25, Egyptians took to the streets as part of widespread protests against President Hosni Mubarak, demanding that he step down.

Social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter played a strategic role in mobilizing citizens and disseminating news. The authorities soon responded with intermittent blocks on access to such tools and to the websites of prominent independent newspapers. Then, in an extreme measure, from January 27 to February 2, the government, cut off all internet access and mobile-phone services in the country. A large number of bloggers and online activists were also detained during the protests, including Google executive Wael Ghonim, who disappeared on January 28, and was released from government detention on February 7.

On February 11, Mubarak stepped down, and the government ceded power to the Egyptian Army, while all detained journalists were freed. However, tensions between citizens and the army have since surfaced. On March 28, military police arrested blogger Maikel Nabil Sanad for criticizing the lack of transparency in the armed forces. On April 11, he was sentenced to three years in prison.

INTRODUCTION

While the Egyptian government has aggressively and successfully sought to expand access to the internet as an engine of economic growth, its security forces have increasingly attempted to curtail the use of new technologies for disseminating and receiving sensitive political information. Rather than relying on technical content filtering or monitoring, they typically employ "low-tech" methods such as intimidation, legal harassment, detentions, and real-world surveillance of online dissidents. The growing crackdown is a response to increased

internet-based activism among Egyptians in the last few years, which has given rise to political opposition movements such as the April 6 Youth Movement and the National Coalition for Change. The authorities' desire to suppress web-based and traditional media became even more evident in advance of the November 2010 parliamentary elections.

The internet was first introduced in Egypt in 1993 through the Egyptian Universities Network and the Egyptian cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC). The general public gained access in 1995, but the technology did not really take off until 2002, when the government introduced a "Free Internet" initiative, whereby anyone with a telephone line and a computer could access the internet for the price of a local call (US\$0.15 an hour). To date, there are no laws regulating internet use in Egypt, although the government represses internet activism using the Emergency Law, which has been in effect since 1981.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Access to digital communications has grown exponentially since it was first made available to the public in the mid-1990s. According to government statistics, 0.58 percent of the population used the internet regularly in 1999.¹ By the end of 2009, the figure had grown to 24 percent, or 20.1 million users.² However, several barriers to access remain, including basic illiteracy, computer illiteracy, and high prices. Broadband internet, while widely available, remains prohibitively expensive for most of Egypt's population, nearly a fifth of which lives on less than US\$2 a day.³ There were only 1.1 million broadband subscribers in 2009,⁴ although the actual number of users is hard to estimate because it is not unusual for users to share a connection, often illegally. Internet cafes offering such connections are common, even in urban slums and small villages.

The number of mobile-telephone users has grown to 55.3 million, constituting a 67 percent penetration rate.⁵ Later generation mobile phones are available in the country. In April 2009, the government allowed the use of the Global Positioning System (GPS) feature, having previously banned it for security reasons.

A total of 214 internet-service providers (ISP)s serve Egypt's population of over 80 million. The largest ISP is TE Data, the communications and internet arm of state-owned landline monopoly Telecom Egypt. TE Data owns about 70 percent of internet bandwidth

¹ Egyptian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, <http://www.mcit.gov.eg>, accessed July 3, 2010.

² International Telecommunications Union (ITU), "ICT Statistics 2009—Internet," <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>, accessed February 20, 2011.

³ World Bank, "Data—Indicators: Poverty Headcount Ratio at \$2 a Day," <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.2DAY>, accessed September 13, 2010.

⁴ ITU, "ICT Statistics 2009—Internet"

⁵ ITU, "ICT Statistics 2009—Mobile Cellular Subscriptions," <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>, accessed February 20, 2011.

in Egypt. Three mobile-phone operators—Vodafone, Mobinil, and the Dubai-based Etisalat—serve Egyptian subscribers. All three offer broadband internet connections via USB modems. Mobile-phone services and ISPs are regulated by the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA), pursuant to the 2003 Telecommunications Regulation Law. As of the end of 2010, the NTRA's board was chaired by Minister of Communications and Information Technology Tarek Kamel, and included representatives from the presidency; the Ministries of Interior, Defense, Information, and Finance; the country's domestic intelligence service; and the State Security Council.⁶ There were no reported incidents of ISPs being denied registration permits.

The video-sharing site YouTube; social-networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter; and various international blog-hosting services are freely available. Egypt is the leading Arab country in terms of Facebook use, with over 4.5 million users by the end of 2010.⁷ There are nine radio stations broadcasting online in Egypt.⁸ However, in March 2010, the NTRA banned access through USB modems to Skype, the voice over internet protocol (VoIP) application that allows users to make international phone calls via the internet. The service is still accessible through other types of internet connections.

LIMITS ON CONTENT

The government's sporadic efforts to remove websites that run against its interests and limit the spread of information through new technologies became first apparent in the run up to the November 2010 election. In the past, the authorities typically focused on intimidating users rather than actually removing content and blocking websites.⁹ In fact, in December 2007, an administrative court judge issued a decision rejecting a request by a fellow member of the judiciary to ban 51 Egyptian websites, including those of several human rights organizations. In his decision, the judge emphasized the importance of respecting freedom of expression, including on the internet.¹⁰

Nonetheless, as political temperatures started to rise in the fall of 2010, several individuals who called for political change and democratic reform saw their websites affected. In one example, the blog belonging to Amr Osama—which promoted an opposition presidential candidate—was closed by its Emirati hosting service in September 2010. Those who later attempted to visit the site were greeted with a message by the

⁶ National Telecommunication Regulatory Agency, "About Us: Board Members,"

http://www.tra.gov.eg/english/DPages_DPagesDetails.asp?ID=175&Menu=5, accessed July 10, 2010.

⁷ CheckFacebook.com, "Egypt," <http://www.checkfacebook.com/>, accessed December 28, 2010.

⁸ Naayem Saad Zaghoul, *Electronic Mass Communication in Egypt: Reality and Challenges* (Cairo: Egyptian Cabinet, Information and Decision Support Center, February 2010), 38.

⁹ Rasha Abdulla, *The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2007).

¹⁰ Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), "Court Rejects Request to Ban 51 Websites," International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX), January 2, 2008, <http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/89371>.

hosting service stating that the blog was removed due to a complaint by Gamal Mubarak, the president's son.¹¹ In another attempt to hamper the flow of independent news, in October, the NTRA issued a decision requiring that all group newsfeeds sent by short message service (SMS) had to be pre-approved by the regulator. The decision was a strong blow to independent civil society groups and media institutes who rely on mass messaging to disseminate news and information to their members; it was overturned by the State Council Administrative Court in November.

Also, in November, two Facebook groups, both popular platforms for organizing protests and with more than 200,000 members, were temporarily removed. One of the two groups "We Are All Khaled Said" emerged as the leading voice against police violence and corruption; the other group was in support of Mohammed ElBaradei, a former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency and a presidential hopeful favored by the opposition. Many suspect that the removals were carried out at the request of the Egyptian government, although Facebook claimed that the groups were removed because their administrators used pseudonymous accounts, which is in violation of the company's terms of use.¹²

The government maintains long-standing but unwritten "red lines" regarding certain sensitive issues, such as the president and his health; the military; Muslim-Christian tensions; Islam as a religion; and torture. Media personnel know that such topics should be handled with particular care, if at all. However, online activists and bloggers have become increasingly outspoken and routinely disregard most of these taboos. Internet users can freely access local and international political websites as well as the sites of human rights organizations, including some that harshly criticize the government and the political system.¹³ In 2009, an administrative court ordered a ban on pornographic websites in Egypt, but the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology spoke against the court order, saying it is practically impossible as a technical matter to enforce an effective ban on pornography. The ban was never implemented.

In the past several years, Egypt has witnessed the birth of a lively and diverse blogosphere. Several bloggers have become media celebrities and won international awards for their work. Foremost among them is Wael Abbas, who received the prestigious Knight International Journalism Award in 2007. This in turn may have helped spur interest in internet activism among young Egyptians. The number of blogs was estimated at 160,000 in April 2008.¹⁴ The popularity of the social networking site Facebook has also helped to create a culture of internet-based activism. Many bloggers now post "notes" and links to their blogs

¹¹"Blog Shut Down After Promoting Opposition Candidate," IFEX, September 16, 2010 http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2010/09/16/amrosama.eb2a_blocked/.

¹²Danny O'Brien, "Facebook gets caught up in Egypt's media crackdown," Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), December 1, 2010, <http://www.cpj.org/internet/2010/12/facebook-gets-caught-up-in-egypts-media-crackdown-1.php>.

¹³Abdulla, *Policing the Internet in the Arab World* (Dubai: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2009).

¹⁴Zaghloul, *Electronic Mass Communication in Egypt*, 38.

on Facebook. Twitter is used to disseminate links to Facebook posts and blogs. Though Twitter is not yet very popular, messages posted to the service by ElBaradei have been widely read on Facebook.

As the number of blogs has increased, so has the diversity of opinion and content. In addition, opposition and human rights activists have found innovative ways to use blogs and social networking sites to call attention to causes and organize protests. In some cases, they have succeeded in doing what traditional activists could not. For example, in November 2007, a Cairo court sentenced two police officers to three years in prison for beating and raping a microbus driver based on video evidence that was first obtained by Abbas, who posted the material on YouTube.¹⁵ The trial and sentencing of police officers for such wrongdoing was believed to be unprecedented. In 2008, a Facebook group formed by Esraa Abdel Fattah in support of workers in an Egyptian village called for a national day of strikes on April 6. The group gathered over 70,000 members and led to the formation of what is now known as the April 6 Youth Movement. The success of the group was aided by the fact that it caught the attention of the traditional media,¹⁶ and thousands of Egyptians opted to stay home on the day of the strike. Internet also played an important role in protests, public discussions, and monitoring of the November 2010 elections. Since the government rejected the calls for international observers, a group of activists initiated a crowdsourcing and interactive mapping website based on the Ushahidi model, to quickly record and report on election violations.¹⁷

As of the end of 2010, the central goal for Egyptian internet activists and bloggers was political change. ElBaradei supporters and other activists were calling for Egyptians to sign a list of seven reform demands. They were hoping to pressure the government into abolishing the Emergency Law and enacting constitutional amendments that would limit presidents to two terms in office and make it possible for independents to run for the presidency.¹⁸ They were also calling for the upcoming presidential election to be monitored by independent local and international observers to ensure fairness and transparency.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

No laws specifically grant the government the power to censor the internet. Egypt's constitution and the 2003 Law on Telecommunications uphold freedom of speech and

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Police Officers Get Three Years for Beating, Raping Detainee," news release, November 6, 2007, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/11/06/egypt-police-officers-get-three-years-beating-raping-detainee>.

¹⁶ Abdulla, *Policing the Internet in the Arab World*.

¹⁷ "Activists Strive to Monitor Egyptian Vote," *Egyptian Gazette Online*, November 25, 2010, <http://213.158.162.45/~egyptian/index.php?action=news&id=13154&title=Activists%20strive%20to%20monitor%20Egyptian%20vote>.

¹⁸ President Hosni Mubarak has been in power since 1981.

citizens' right to privacy, and require a judicial warrant for surveillance.¹⁹ However, articles of the penal code and the Emergency Law—which has been in effect without interruption since 1981 and was most recently extended for another two years in 2010—give security agencies broad authority to monitor and censor all communications, and to arrest and detain individuals indefinitely without charge.²⁰ Amendments to the Press Law passed in 2006 preserved provisions that criminalize “spreading false news” and criticizing the head of state of Egypt or another country,²¹ and courts have ruled that these restrictions apply to online writings.²² Constitutional amendments passed in 2007 paved the way for future counterterrorism legislation that could make permanent the Emergency Law provisions allowing for widespread surveillance.²³ In 2010, Egypt saw the first court case in which a judge found an internet cafe owner liable for defamatory information posted online by a visitor to his shop.²⁴

In 2008, Egypt proposed an Arab Satellite Broadcasting Charter to the information ministers of other Arab states at a meeting of the Arab League in Cairo. The nonbinding document, which is regarded as a serious threat to freedom of expression,²⁵ was adopted by most Arab countries, with the exceptions of Qatar and Lebanon. Egypt is working on a Satellite Broadcasting Regulation Law based on the charter, which would act as the regulatory document governing satellite and internet communications.

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Egyptian security services monitor internet and mobile-phone communications, although a history of distrust between citizens and security forces has led to the widespread assumption that such monitoring could be in place at any time. All internet and mobile-phone users are required to register their personal information with the ISP or mobile operator. Those who buy a USB modem have to fill out a registration form and submit a copy of their national identification card. The same regulations apply for home internet subscribers. The government asks most internet cafes owners to record the names and identification numbers of their customers.

Social networking sites make it much easier for internet activists to organize, but they also allow government agents to monitor such activity and identify participants.²⁶ The government regularly applies offline punishments or intimidation to online activists.²⁷ This

¹⁹ Law No. 10 of 2003, Article 65.

²⁰ Law No. 162 of 1958, renewed in 1981.

²¹ Law No. 147 of 2006.

²² “The Blogger and the Pharaoh,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 26, 2007, <http://www.ihb.com/articles/2007/02/26/opinion/edblogger.php>.

²³ Amnesty International, “Egypt: Proposed Constitutional Amendments Greatest Erosion of Human Rights in 26 Years,” news release, March 18, 2007, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE12/008/2007/en>.

²⁴ “Journalist and Blogger Fined and Sentenced to Six Months in Jail,” IFEX, September 3, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2010/09/03/shehata_sentenced/.

²⁵ Article 19, “Arab Charter for Satellite TV: A Major Setback to Freedom of Expression in the Region,” news release, February 13, 2008, <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/egypt-adoption-of-the-arab-charter-for-satellite-tv.pdf>.

²⁶ Abdulla, *Policing the Internet in the Arab World*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

includes “friendly” warnings in phone calls from military or security officers, beating or detaining activists during street demonstrations, and court cases that may lead to prison sentences. In addition, security services use legal and extralegal means to collect users’ internet and mobile-phone records from ISPs, internet cafes, and phone companies in the course of their investigations. These abuses have resulted in Egypt’s inclusion on the Reporters Without Borders list of “internet enemies” since 2006, and as one of the 10 worst countries to be a blogger according to the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2009.²⁸

Security services have used detentions and harassment, and in some cases torture, to intimidate online writers, and a growing number of bloggers have spent time in jail. In February 2007, Abd al-Karim Nabil Suleiman (widely known by his blogging name, Karim Amer), then a 22-year-old student of religious law at Al-Azhar University, became Egypt’s first blogger to be sentenced to prison for his online writings. A court in Alexandria handed Suleiman a four-year prison term on charges of “inciting hatred of Islam” and “insulting the president.”²⁹ He was released in November 2010.

Those who have been detained for shorter periods include Esraa Abdel Fattah, the creator of the Facebook group calling for the general strike on April 6, 2008. She was detained for two weeks that month on charges of “inciting unrest,” but the charges were dropped by the prosecutor.³⁰ Also in 2008, Hany Nazeer was detained for a blog post that included a link to a book seen as insulting to Islam. He was kept in detention under the Emergency Law for 21 months before finally being released in July 2010.³¹ In February 2010, blogger Ahmed Mostafa was detained and slated for trial before a military court, despite being a civilian, after he wrote about alleged abuses by the Egyptian army. The military abruptly dropped the case in March, however.³² A Cairo appeals court in February reversed a lower court’s November 2009 decision to sentence blogger Wael Abbas to six months in prison and a fine for allegedly damaging an internet cable, but in March an economic court gave him an identical sentence for providing telecommunications service without authorization.³³

Internet activists have rallied around the case of Khaled Said, a 28-year-old who was allegedly beaten to death in June 2010 by two plainclothes policemen who dragged him

²⁸ Reporters Without Borders, “Internet Enemies: Egypt,” March 12, 2010, <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-egypt,36679.html>; Committee to Protect Journalists, “10 Worst Countries To Be a Blogger,” special report, April 30, 2009, <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2009/04/10-worst-countries-to-be-a-blogger.php>.

²⁹ Reporters Without Borders, “Internet Enemies: Egypt.”

³⁰ ANHRI, “Woman Detained for Promoting General Strike on Facebook, Released; Student Briefly Detained for Urging Release of Internet Activists,” IFEX, April 24, 2008, http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2008/04/24/woman_detained_for_promoting_general/.

³¹ John Ehab, “Controversial Blogger Released by Authorities,” *Al-Masry al-Youm*, July 27, 2010, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/controversial-blogger-released-authorities>.

³² ANHRI, “Authorities Close Case Against Blogger Ahmed Mostafa,” IFEX, March 11, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2010/03/11/mostafa_case_closed/; ANHRI, “Blogger Tried in Military Court,” IFEX, March 2, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2010/03/02/mostafa_military_court/.

³³ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Egyptian Blogger Abbas, Cleared Once, Is Convicted Anew,” news release, March 11, 2010, <http://cpj.org/2010/03/egyptian-blogger-abbas-cleared-once-is-convicted-a.php>.

from an internet cafe. The officers—now on trial for illegal arrest, torture, and excessive force, but not for murder—claimed that he choked to death while trying to swallow illegal drugs. He had reportedly posted a video on the internet showing policemen sharing the spoils of a drug bust, raising suspicions that he had been targeted for that reason.³⁴ A Facebook group called “We Are All Khalid Said” has garnered over 200,000 supporters (see also “Limits on Content”), and organized several offline demonstrations and protests, in which thousands of youths all over Egypt wore black and stood silently with their backs to the street.

In one of the most recent examples of government’s misuse of power, Youssef Shabaan, a journalist for the online news outlet *Al-Badil*, was arrested in November 2010 while covering street protests in Alexandria and charged with drug possession. According to various independent groups, the charges against Shabaan were made up to punish him for his critical coverage of police brutality during the protests.³⁵

³⁴ “Egypt Police in Brutality Trial over Khaled Said Death,” British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), July 27, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10773404>; Kareem Fahim, “Death in Police Encounter Stirs Calls for Change in Egypt,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/19/world/middleeast/19abuse.html>.

³⁵ “Egypt Detains Journalist on Drug Charges in Alexandria,” Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), November 22, 2010, <http://cpj.org/2010/11/egypt-detains-journalist-on-drug-charges-in-alexan.php>.