

Egypt

There is no evidence of Internet filtering in Egypt, although a small group of politically sensitive Web sites have been blocked in the past. The authorities have increased their crackdown on online writers and bloggers and have harassed and detained them for their online activities. Surveillance efforts have also increased. Similar to second-generation controls found elsewhere in the world, Egypt has used broad national security laws to justify restrictions on new media services, such as satellite television and cellular phones.



Background

Egypt has amended its constitution to allow opposition parties to contest presidential polls, but potential candidates face restrictive criteria for participation. Political reform activists have become more outspoken and have organized street protests in defiance of an emergency law in force since 1981.¹

The emergency laws grant the government the power to search, arrest, and detain individuals without the supervision of judicial bodies. Rights groups state that the

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No Evidence of Filtering	Suspected Filtering	Selective Filtering	Substantial Filtering	Pervasive Filtering
Political	•				
Social	•				
Conflict and security	•				
Internet tools	•				

Other Factors	Low	Medium	High	Not Applicable
Transparency				•
Consistency				•

KEY INDICATORS	
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international dollars)	5,052
Life expectancy at birth (years)	71
Literacy rate (percent of people age 15+)	66
Human development index (out of 179)	116
Rule of law (out of 211)	101
Voice and accountability (out of 209)	184
Democracy index (out of 167)	119 (Authoritarian regime)
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	91
Internet users (percent of population)	15.4

Source by indicator: World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, UNDP 2008, World Bank 2009b, World Bank 2009b, Economist Intelligence Unit 2008, ITU 2007, ITU 2008.

uninterrupted application of emergency laws has led to the emergence of a parallel legal system, one that is unchecked by ordinary judicial bodies.² Despite this, journalists now openly criticize the regime's policies, and both private and opposition media have started to break taboos despite judicial, bureaucratic, and economic pressure against them.³

Egypt was listed by the Committee to Protect Journalists as one of the top ten worst countries to be a blogger, because the authorities monitor Internet activity on a regular basis and have detained a large number of active bloggers (more than 100 in 2008 alone) for open-ended periods.⁴ Nevertheless, Egyptian bloggers and online activists have managed to utilize the power of the Internet to organize street protests and to expose human rights violations in Egypt. For example, two government officials were arrested and imprisoned in November 2007 for torturing prisoners after video clips of their actions were posted on the Internet by online activists.⁵

Internet in Egypt

Egypt has become a leading Internet market in Africa in terms of users, international bandwidth, and services offered. Also, unlike in many Arab countries, the international bandwidth market and VoIP telephony have been liberalized, and more than 200 Internet and data service providers operate in Egypt, making ADSL services among the least expensive in Africa.⁶ The ICT sector continues to grow—Egypt's spending on information and communication technology (ICT) reached USD 9.8 billion in 2008 and is expected to rise to USD 13.5 billion by 2011.⁷

As part of the Egyptian government's ambitious program to expand access to ICT, an agreement to spread personal computers to every home was signed in August 2008 among the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA), the Egyptian National

Post Organization (ENPO), and the Computer and Software Department at the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce. The agreement is the second phase of a 2002 initiative and is part of the MCIT's strategy of spreading the practice and utilization of IT tools and the Internet to all social segments in Egypt, focusing on remote areas and limited-income families. The initiative will include offering integrated packages of personal computers and 512 Kbps ADSL subscriptions for three years for monthly installments.⁸

Furthermore, telecommunications companies continue to enable users to access Internet content. For example, Egypt's telecommunications giant Vodafone, which has 15 million subscribers, announced in August 2008 its intention to buy a majority stake in content provider Sarmady Communications (Sarcom) in an attempt to boost its Internet service by providing content to its customers, which is also part of a strategy to dominate the Internet market.⁹

Egypt's monopoly fixed-line telephone company, Telecom Egypt, owns a 45 percent stake in Vodafone Egypt and had 11.3 million fixed-line subscribers at the end of June 2008. Other Egyptian mobile operators pay Telecom Egypt for use of its network for mobile to fixed-line calls and for international calls. Egypt's plans to sell a second fixed-line license in September 2008 would end Telecom Egypt's monopoly.¹⁰

Almost a million Egyptian households have access to broadband, thanks to sharing of ADSL lines. In fact, 63.4 percent of Egyptian households share connections with their neighbors. In 81.9 percent of households that share lines, the connection is shared with more than three other households. Egypt had 427,085 ADSL lines by the end of 2007. It is estimated that 75 percent of those are residential ADSL lines. Among Egyptian Internet users, 81.2 percent state a preference for browsing Arabic-language Web sites. Internet cafés remain an important source of connectivity for Egyptians, with 27.8 percent of Internet users reporting they use Internet café services.¹¹

The number of blogs in Egypt has risen from just 40 in 2004 to an estimated 160,000 in July 2008, according to a report released by the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC). Of these Egyptian bloggers, 76.8 percent write in Arabic, 20.8 percent in mixed Arabic and English, and 9.6 percent solely in English. Egyptian blogs account for more than 30 percent of all Arabic blogs. Most of the bloggers are young men in their 20s, 27 percent are female, and over half of all bloggers are between the ages of 20 and 30.¹²

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The government continues to stifle freedom of the press and restricts the flow of information. For example, it proposed a draft bill on audiovisual media that critics say is aimed at cracking down on dissent and opposition voices on television and the Internet across the region.¹³ The bill requires journalists and broadcasters to avoid

damaging “social peace,” “national unity,” “public order,” and “public values.” Violators of the rules face imprisonment, cancellation of broadcasting licenses, confiscation of equipment, and fines.¹⁴ The bill will create a National Agency for Regulation of Audio and Visual Broadcast to enforce the implementation of the proposed rules. The agency will be composed of representatives from national security and military intelligence entities. This draft bill coincides with an increase in the closure of television channels by the government.¹⁵

The Egyptian government enforced media licensing laws to punish an Egyptian satellite company for broadcasting protest footage of antigovernment demonstrations in April 2008.¹⁶ The company was later shut down. This incident came a few weeks after three other satellite channels were dropped by Egypt’s state-controlled NileSat satellite.¹⁷

As the Egyptian blogosphere continues to grow, so too does the government’s crack-down on bloggers and Internet users. For example, blogger Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman Amer (“Kareem Amer”) was sentenced to four years in prison in February 2007 for “incitement to hatred of Islam” on his blog and for insulting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. He became a symbol of online repression for the country’s bloggers.¹⁸ Other Egyptian bloggers have been arrested for their online activities and some were sentenced to prison. One of the most recent examples is blogger Mohamed Refaat, editor of the blog Matabbat (matabbat.blogspot.com), who was arrested in August 2008 under the state emergency law.¹⁹ He was accused of “offending the state institutions, destabilizing public security, and inciting others to demonstrate and strike via the Internet.”²⁰

The Egyptian authorities have also taken measures to restrict the potential use of cell phones for activism. Under the pretext of protecting public security, the Egyptian government asked cell phone companies to block service to anonymous subscribers in May 2008.²¹ Reuters reported that “the move comes as Egypt tries to combat a wave of public discontent over rising prices and low wages that have sparked a series of labor and anti-government strikes, organized largely by mobile phone and over the Internet.”²²

In a landmark legal case, an administrative court in December 2007 rejected a lawsuit brought by a judge calling for the banning of 51 Web sites in Egypt. The court emphasized its support for freedom of expression as long as such Web sites did not harm fundamental beliefs or public order.²³ However, in May 2009, a Cairo court ruled that the Egyptian government must ban access to pornographic Web sites because they are deemed offensive to religion and society’s values.²⁴ The suit was filed by a lawyer who claimed that a recent case of an Egyptian couple who were sentenced to prison for starting a swingers club over the Internet highlighted what he called “the dangers posed by such offensive Web sites.”²⁵ It remains to be seen whether the authorities will enforce this court order.

Surveillance

Despite the government's initiatives to encourage Internet use, the Egyptian authorities continue to place restrictions on how Egyptians use the Internet. In February 2005, for example, Egypt's Ministry of Interior ordered Internet café managers and owners to record their customers' names and identification numbers and threatened to close the cafés if they refused to implement the order. This kind of action was condemned by a Cairo-based human rights group, which described it as "a gross violation to the right to privacy."²⁶

In August 2008, the Egyptian authorities imposed new measures that increased the extent of censorship on Internet users by demanding that Internet café customers be required to provide their names, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers before they could use the Internet. Once the data were provided, customers would then receive a text message on their cell phones with a personal identification number (PIN) that they could use to access the Internet. A Cairo-based human rights group, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, considered these requirements to be censorship procedures.²⁷

Egypt has witnessed an increase in the use of Facebook for social activism, which alerted the government to the potential force of the social networking site.²⁸ As a result, there were rumors that it might be blocked, especially after a group of activists managed to recruit supporters using Facebook for a general strike that took place on April 6, 2008, protesting against rising food prices and President Mubarak's government.²⁹ Another opinion suggested that the authorities would rather leave Facebook accessible so that they could trace back suspect online activities to the individuals responsible and punish them.³⁰ Because of the increasing use of Facebook for political activism in Egypt, activists have reported that the government has started to monitor the social networking site for the organization of any possible activities similar to that of April 6, 2008. The vice chairman of Egypt's El Ghad opposition party, Wael Nawara, said, "The word is that there is even a special division called the State Security Investigation Police for Facebook."³¹

In addition to monitoring online activism, a constitutional reform approved by parliament in March 2007 gave authorities the power to spy on the correspondence of suspected terrorists and to tap their telephones without a court order.³² In fact, Vodafone's global head of content standards, Annie Mullins, revealed in February 2009 that Vodafone handed over communications data to the Egyptian authorities in response to government demands. This data may have been used to help identify rioters who were protesting over the bread crisis, which erupted in the Egyptian town of Mahallah el-Hubra in April 2008. During the demonstrations, many protesters carried cell phones, using them to call friends and send text messages. On December 22, individuals were convicted in connection with the food riots.³³

Interestingly, Egypt's minister of telecommunications and information technology publicly admitted that he allowed the security offices to monitor, record, and tap fixed lines and cell phones. A member of parliament considered this access unconstitutional and a violation of human rights.³⁴

Egyptian telecommunications law mandates that telecom operators and providers shall provide, at their own expense, equipment and software that enable the armed forces and national security entities to exercise their powers within the law.³⁵

ONI Testing Results

OpenNet Initiative in-country tests in 2008–2009 were conducted using the ISPs Link Egypt and TEDData. As in previous testing, ONI found no evidence of Internet filtering in Egypt.

In 2005, most ISPs blocked the official Web site of the Muslim Brotherhood (www.ikhwanonline.com), Egypt's largest opposition movement. At one time, the popular ISP LINKdotNET blocked www.alshaab.com, the Web site of the Labor Party's biweekly newsletter; it no longer does so.³⁶

A number of ISPs offer optional filters to block pornography. The ISP TEDData, for example, offers Internet services with "content control," which eliminates "all of the Internet's indecent content that might affect your children."³⁷

Conclusion

Egypt has become a leading Internet market in Africa, and Internet users enjoy unfiltered access to the Internet. However, the May 2009 court order to block access to pornography online might result in a shift in filtering policy. The government monitors online activities and has increased its surveillance efforts. Egyptian bloggers continue to use the Internet for online activism, which continues to result in government harassment, arrests, and intimidation. Current legislation allows jail terms for journalists, editors, and online writers, including bloggers.

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