



Freedom of the Press 2017 - Egypt

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 1 November 2017

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2017 - Egypt*, 1 November 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59fc67f10.html> [accessed 13 December 2017]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Total Score: 77/100 (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 26/30 (↓1)

Political Environment: 34/40 (↑1)

Economic Environment: 17/30

Quick Facts

Population: 93,500,000

Freedom in the World Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 35.9%

Key Developments in 2016:

- Egypt was the world's third-worst jailer of journalists in 2016, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), with 25 journalists behind bars as of December.
- In November, the head of the Journalists' Syndicate and two of its board members were sentenced to two years in prison for allegedly protecting journalists from arrest and spreading false news about a police raid on the syndicate's headquarters. The defendants remained free pending an appeal at year's end.
- A new media regulatory framework signed into law in December created three government-dominated supervisory bodies with sweeping powers over content and licensing, and provided few protections for the press, drawing criticism from journalists and media freedom advocates.

Executive Summary

The efforts of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government to quash dissent and shutter critical news sources have produced a media environment in which most public and private outlets are firmly supportive of the regime. Government officials have directly pressured media owners regarding content, and managers cancel programs or withdraw articles that could draw reprisals from the authorities. In December 2016, for example, the television program of prominent journalist Ibrahim Eissa stopped airing new episodes after his increasingly critical coverage of the government and parliament prompted denunciations by lawmakers, threats of legal action, and economic pressure on the station's owner. Cancellation of the show appeared likely at year's end.

The government has also sought to support the creation or acquisition of friendly private media groups. Multiple projects were reportedly being organized during 2016, including the DMC television network, which was scheduled to launch in January 2017. The network was alleged to have close ties to the government and security agencies.

Separately during 2016, authorities continued to employ a variety of coercive tools against journalists and media enterprises that strayed from officially sanctioned narratives, including criminal prosecution, gag orders, arbitrary detention, and serious physical abuse in police custody. Freedom of expression activists documented hundreds of violations during the year, as journalists faced physical attacks and other attempts to obstruct reporting by both security agents and civilians.

Legal Environment: 26 / 30 (↓1)

The 2014 constitution contains several positive provisions regarding freedom of expression, access to information, and the media. Article 65 guarantees freedom of thought, opinion, and the expression thereof. Article 68 declares that all official state documents and information are the property of the people, who have the right to access such materials in a timely and transparent manner. Articles 70, 71, and 72 all govern the press, providing for many of the rights that support a free media environment. They guarantee the freedom of the print, broadcast, and digital sectors; enshrine the right to establish media outlets; ban all forms of media censorship, including the suspension and closure of outlets; ban prison terms for press crimes; and declare the independence and neutrality of all state-owned media outlets. The constitution also calls for the establishment of independent regulatory bodies tasked with supporting and developing both private and state-owned media and administering all relevant regulations.

However, these guarantees are seriously undermined by a variety of exceptions and ambiguities. Article 71 authorizes media censorship "in times of war or general mobilization." The same article, which ostensibly eliminates jail terms for media offenses, leaves room for imprisonment for crimes related to incitement of violence, discrimination, and defamation. The constitution notably fails to specify the composition and appointment procedures for regulatory bodies, meaning ordinary legislation can create structures that enable political influence.

Moreover, the country's press laws and penal code include an array of articles that can be used to imprison journalists. For example, defamation is a criminal offense, and sentences of up to five years in prison can be imposed for blasphemy, or "exploiting religion in spreading, either by words, in writing or in any other means, extreme ideas for the purposes of inciting strife, ridiculing or insulting [the Abrahamic faiths] or a sect following it, or damaging national unity."

The authorities continued to arrest and prosecute journalists during 2016, subjecting them to deeply flawed legal proceedings that disregarded their fundamental rights. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 25 reporters were behind bars in Egypt as of December, making the country the world's third leading jailer of journalists. In May, security forces raided the headquarters of the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate to arrest Mahmoud el-Sakka and Amr Badr, two journalists who had been hiding from the police. In June, prosecutors brought charges against Yahya Qalash, the head of the syndicate, and two of its board members for allegedly harboring the journalists and spreading false news. Qalash and the board members were convicted and sentenced to two years in prison in November, but remained free at year's end with an appeal pending.

In April 2015, 13 journalists were sentenced to life in prison, and one was sentenced to death, following convictions for plotting against the state during a 2013 sit-in at Cairo's Raba'a Square, which ended when a violent crackdown by security forces killed hundreds of civilians. Some of those convicted were tried in absentia. After months of delays and obstructions in the appeals process, Egypt's Court of Cassation granted the nine journalists who were tried in custody a retrial in December 2015. They remained in detention throughout 2016, and their retrial was ongoing.

In February 2016, authorities blocked Hossam Bahgat, a prominent journalist with the online newspaper *Mada Masr*, from boarding a flight to Jordan and informed him that he was prohibited from leaving the country by order of the public prosecutor's office. The order was part of a wide-ranging criminal investigation into certain journalists and human rights advocates for allegedly accepting foreign funding to undermine national security. Bahgat had been briefly detained for questioning in late 2015. As part of the ongoing investigation, Bahgat's assets were frozen by a court in September 2016.

A variety of laws restrict reporting on sensitive issues. A counterterrorism law issued by al-Sisi in 2015 prohibits journalists from publishing information related to militant violence if it contradicts official government accounts. Violations can result in heavy fines and a one-year ban from the practice of

journalism. The measure makes it extremely difficult for journalists to freely report on areas affected by terrorism and insurgency, particularly the Sinai Peninsula.

Freedom of information legislation has been under discussion for years but never implemented. In December 2016, a parliamentary committee agreed to appoint a subcommittee to complete the formulation of a draft law, but no substantive progress was made by year's end.

Licensing and registration processes are often arbitrary and opaque, with formal regulations weakly or unevenly enforced. Decisions on media operations are frequently made according to political or security concerns rather than impartial regulatory mechanisms. Despite this lack of standardized procedures, journalists and media outlets that fail to toe the government line regularly face accusations of failing to secure proper registration. In December 2016, authorities arrested Al-Jazeera news producer Mahmoud Hussein after he arrived in Egypt for a vacation. Though he was not there in a professional capacity, he was charged with a variety of offenses, including operating as a journalist in the country without a proper license and spreading false news.

In December 2016, the parliament passed a law creating three new media regulatory bodies, fulfilling a mandate of the 2014 constitution. The National Agency for the Media will manage state-owned television and radio, while the National Agency for the Press will manage state-owned print media. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation, the dominant body, will have licensing powers for both audiovisual and print outlets and supervise the entire media landscape in coordination with the other agencies. Each body has 13 board members, with the chairman appointed by the president. The president also selects two additional members on each panel, and certain cabinet ministries and the parliament appoint several members. Only four are selected by journalists' associations. Due to heavy reliance on the executive for appointments and al-Sisi's de facto control over the parliament, the government will effectively choose majorities for each of the regulatory bodies, undercutting their independence. Journalists harshly criticized the law for enshrining government control of the media and failing to establish unambiguous guidelines for media conduct. The legislation includes vague language about the bounds of permissible reporting, leaving room for arbitrary enforcement.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to protecting journalists' rights and freedom of expression have long been subject to restrictive laws that apply to all civil society groups. In 2014, al-Sisi signed a decree that amended the penal code to ban the receipt of foreign funding for activities that "harm the national interest," potentially affecting NGOs. During 2016, both Hossam Bahgat and another prominent free expression advocate, Gamal Eid, were facing charges under the amended code. In particular, Eid was accused of accepting money from the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists for the purpose of "defaming Egypt." Their case remained open at year's end.

The government has been working to augment its electronic surveillance capabilities over the past several years, adding to concerns about privacy and the confidentiality of journalists' sources and activities. In late 2014, a new interagency body, the High Council for Cybersecurity, was established. Although it was ostensibly founded to defend Egyptian interests against cyberattacks, digital rights advocates have expressed concern that it expands the state's surveillance capacity. Meanwhile, the government has increasingly asserted its intention to monitor online activity in the interest of protecting national security.

Political Environment: 34 / 40 (↑1)

Following the 2013 coup that brought al-Sisi to power, the authorities began to purge the media of any support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Any sharp criticism of al-Sisi was also sidelined or suppressed. This process continued in 2016, with public and private outlets broadly embracing pro-Sisi and anti-Muslim Brotherhood narratives and expressing strong support for the security forces. Al-Sisi himself has convened private meetings with prominent newspaper editors and television presenters, during which he discourages critical reporting and calls on journalists to produce material aimed at inspiring national unity.

As in previous years, state media generally displayed a progovernment bias in 2016. Journalists at public outlets can face disciplinary action for straying from government narratives. In November 2015, a prominent Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) host, Azza al-Hanawy, was suspended after calling on al-Sisi to address government corruption. Although she was allowed to return to work later that month, ERTU fired her in March 2016 after she again criticized al-Sisi on air. Apolitical but progressive cultural and religious

content is also restricted by authorities. In February, ERTU canceled the television show of another broadcaster, Aytan al-Mogy, after she aired an interview with a reformist Islamic scholar that drew criticism from Al-Azhar, the country's most respected religious institution.

There are virtually no private outlets based in Egypt that oppose the government. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist opposition elements have moved their affiliated media operations abroad, primarily to Turkey, where they established satellite television and online outlets. Many such outlets feature inflammatory political and sectarian rhetoric.

While some Egypt-based reporters at private outlets criticized government agencies during 2016, they generally refrained from targeting al-Sisi so as to avoid pressure from owners and management. One prominent exception for most of the year was Ibrahim Eissa, who used his program on the privately owned channel Al-Kahera wal Nas to air pointed criticism of the parliament, the government, and the president himself on a variety of topics. He persisted despite denunciations from lawmakers, threats of legal action, and government pressure on the other businesses of his station's owner. In December, however, the channel stopped airing new episodes of Eissa's program, and it appeared likely to be canceled. In another case involving Al-Kahera wal Nas, in May 2015 journalist Islam al-Beheiry was convicted of blasphemy in connection with the content of his television show, which discussed sensitive religious issues and drew rebukes from Al-Azhar. He was ultimately sentenced to a year in prison, but was released early in November 2016, after receiving a presidential pardon.

In addition to editorial pressure at public and private outlets, direct censorship was a problem in 2016, with the government or judicial officials issuing multiple gag orders to restrict media coverage of sensitive topics. This strategy is often used by authorities to hide embarrassing details of official corruption cases. In July 2016, the attorney general issued a gag order related to an investigation into an allegedly corrupt judge.

Journalists frequently face interference in the course of their work. Domestic media rights organizations documented numerous cases of obstruction of coverage, illegal detention, and outright attacks in 2016. The Association for Free Thought and Expression (AFTE), an Egyptian NGO, documented at least 437 such violations during the year, committed by both civilians and state actors.

Journalists have been detained for long periods of time without charge, and some have reported torture or mistreatment in custody. Among other cases in 2016, three photojournalists were arrested in September on charges including spreading false information and were reportedly beaten and electrocuted by authorities. They remained in pretrial detention as of December.

Economic Environment: 17 / 30

Egypt has more than 500 newspapers, magazines, journals, and other periodicals, and the state retains ownership of several important titles. However, print media have limited circulation. In a country of more than 93 million people, the largest newspapers, including *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Masry al-Youm*, have circulations of well under a million.

ERTU remains the only terrestrial broadcaster and controls a range of regional and specialty channels. Its programming is among the least popular in the country, with audiences increasingly turning to privately owned Egyptian satellite television channels or those based in the Gulf Arab states. In 2015, the government began a five-year restructuring process aimed at reducing ERTU's considerable debt and improving the quality of its programming. It is expected to privatize several of its media properties during the restructuring process.

In 2016, the government and its allies were also reportedly preparing to launch new, ostensibly private television enterprises, including DMC, which was scheduled to debut in January 2017. The network was alleged to have close ties to the government and security agencies.

Some 39 percent of Egyptians accessed the internet as of 2016. Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, play an important role in diffusing news and information. Egyptians account for the largest share of Facebook users in the Arab world.

Authorities sometimes interfere with media production and distribution. In April 2016, the daily *Al-Masry al-Youm* was forced to halt printing and change a headline on its lead story documenting the visit of Saudi Arabia's king, as it had implied that the Egyptian government had ceded Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia in exchange for economic aid.

Trends in media ownership, spending, revenues, and advertising are difficult to assess given the industry's opacity. The government supports state media directly and through advertising, although it is unclear what types of advertising subsidies exist. The country's weak economy has forced both state-owned and private outlets to slash their budgets. Shutdowns, layoffs, and cuts to content were common across the media sector in 2016.

Copyright notice: © Freedom House, Inc. · All Rights Reserved

Search Refworld

by keyword

and / or country

[Advanced Search](#) | [Search Tips](#)

Countries

- [Egypt](#)

Topics

- [Freedom of expression](#)
- [Freedom of information](#)