

Ten years of power for Sisi: Egypt has become one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists



As President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi prepares to celebrate the 10th anniversary of his arrival to power, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) looks back at the relentless methods he has used to reshape the Egyptian media landscape in the past decade and turn Egypt into one of the world's most oppressive countries for journalists.

3 July 2013, 9 p.m. : Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi appears on TV in a military beret to announce the constitution's suspension and the end of Mohamed Morsi's presidency. As he spoke, security forces were preparing to storm the Cairo bureaux of the Qatari TV channels *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Jazeera Mubasher* and arrest their journalists. That same evening, authorities also closed [three other media outlets](#) for allegedly supporting Morsi's party, the Muslim Brotherhood, and arrested their directors.

These events were just a foretaste of the purge that Sisi would wage against the media. In the past ten years, at least 170 journalists have been jailed, dozens of others have been arbitrarily arrested and interrogated, access to [more than 500 news websites has been blocked](#) and six journalists have been killed. The first was **Ahmed Samir Assem el-Senoussi**, a photographer for the newspaper *Al-Horreya-Wal-Adalah* ("Freedom and et Justice"). He was covering a pro-Morsi demonstration outside Republican Guard headquarters in Cairo five days after the coup when soldiers opened fire, killing 51 people, [including Senoussi](#).

Sisi's rule began with a witch-hunt against the Muslim Brotherhood with such extensive ramifications that it impacted the international media. The correspondents of the *France 2* and *Deutsche Welle* TV channels and *The Guardian* were [officially accused](#) of contributing to "Western media coverage that is biased [in favour of] the Muslim Brotherhood."

Al Jazeera's journalists were also leading targets. "For the Egyptian authorities, Qatar supported the brotherhood, and Qatar financed *Al Jazeera*, so it made sense to them that *Al Jazeera* journalists were guilty," said **Peter Greste**, an Australian journalist who was *Al Jazeera's* correspondent in Cairo.

It was this circular logic that resulted in Greste being [arrested in January 2014](#) and held for more than a year, along with two other *Al Jazeera* journalists, **Mohamed Fahmy** and **Mohamad Badr**. "It was politically convenient to arrest *Al Jazeera* journalists, but the authorities also wanted to make the point that no journalists were safe, whether they were local or foreigners," Greste said.

Arrests of journalists had been common when Hosni Mubarak was president but they became systematic under Sisi. All protest movements questioning the legitimacy of Sisi's rule or denouncing his government's corruption resulted in [waves of arrests](#). And there was no longer any sanctuary. On 1 May 2016, the police raided the Cairo headquarters of the Journalists' Syndicate for the first time since its creation in 1941 and [arrested two journalists](#) for covering anti-Sisi protests a month earlier.

Some subjects, such as corruption, became completely taboo. For persisting in covering anti-corruption protests, *Egypt's Oxygen* news blog founder **Mohamed Ibrahim Radwan**, also known as **Mohamed Oxygen**, was returned to prison in 2019, [within months of being released](#) after being held for a year "spreading false information." Criticising the army or even commenting on military operations also became impossible. For doing this, **Ismail Alexandrani**, a journalist specialising in the Sinai region, was [sentenced to 10 years in prison](#) on charges of "disclosing state secrets" and "belonging to a banned group."

Routinely jailed without been tried, some journalists are [held incommunicado for months](#), others are [beaten during interrogation](#) or [deprived of medical care](#). Those subjected to ill-treatment include Mohamed Oxygen, who was tortured and [placed in solitary confinement](#) after being jailed again in Tora high security prison. "He has lost all hope," his lawyer said. In desperation, he tried to end his life.

Another leading figure in the 2011 revolution, the writer and blogger **Alaa Abdel Fattah**, who is also now jailed on a charge of "spreading false news", [went on hunger strike](#) in April 2022, deliberately putting his life in danger in protest against the conditions in which he is being held. Despite pressure from the international community, this famous blogger is still behind bars.

Sisi's government has not just jailed and mistreated journalists, it has also steadily imposed draconian media legislation. The "[cybercrime law](#)" that took effect in 2018 legalised website censorship. "Persecution and the law operate side by side in Egypt," an Egyptian lawyer said. "The laws are so terrible for press freedom that, even if they comply with them, journalists risk being arrested or censored." One of Egypt's last independent media outlets, *Mada Masr*, is the subject of [several legal proceedings](#). Its site is blocked in Egypt and its editor, **Lina Atallah**, has been detained three times in the past ten years.

To secure its grip on the media system, the Egyptian government has also gradually taken control of many media outlets. A [survey of media ownership](#) in Egypt in early 2019 revealed that almost all media now toe the government line, either because they are directly controlled by the state or the intelligence agencies, or they are owned by a small number [wealthy businessmen allied with the government](#). The star TV anchors who take their orders from the government even conduct [smear campaigns](#) against the few remaining independent journalists who still dare to criticise the Sisi regime. There is no longer any way out.

Hosni Mubarak restricted press freedom and Mohamed Morsi's brief presidency followed suit, but Sisi's years in power have clearly been "the worst years for press freedom in Egypt," to quote an Egyptian journalist who requested anonymity. It is no surprise that Egypt has fallen eight places in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) in the past decade and is now ranked 166th out of 180 countries.