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Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2020 - Egypt

NOT FREE

26

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

26 / 100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Internet freedom continued to deteriorate as a result of increased website blocking and social media and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) disruptions in response the September 2019 protests. Censorship continued to impact freedom of speech in Egypt, as the government issued reporting directives to journalists around the protests as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pretrial detentions of various journalists and activists were repeatedly extended during the coverage period, and one human rights activist received a 15-year sentence for content posted to Twitter following the reporting period. The Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) blocked several independent news sites and opposition websites, including *Mada Masr*, Darb, and Al-Manassa. Government surveillance was also problematic, as Egyptian citizens were targeted through sophisticated surveillance software linked to the government.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who first took power in a 2013 coup, has governed Egypt in an increasingly authoritarian manner. Meaningful political opposition is virtually nonexistent, as expressions of dissent can draw criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Civil liberties, including press freedom and freedom of assembly, are tightly restricted. Security forces engage in human rights abuses with impunity, and physical security is further undermined by terrorist violence centered in the Sinai Peninsula.

Key Developments, June 1, 2019 - May 31, 2020

- Disruptions to Facebook Messenger and Skype were reported during the antigovernment protests in September 2019 (see A3).
- The SCMR blocked several independent news websites on a number of telecommunications networks operating in Egypt including *Mada Masr*, Darb, and al-Manassa (see B1).
- During the antigovernment protests in September 2019, police and plainclothes security forces arrested bloggers, online journalists, and activists for protesting and content they posted online. Police also seized and searched the mobile phones of citizens, demanded the owners unlock and provide access to their social media accounts, and checked the accounts for evidence of antigovernment sentiments (see B8, C3, C5, and C7).
- In March 2020, a woman in Damietta was arrested for a video she posted on Facebook that allegedly spread false news about the COVID-19 outbreak. The prime minister had commanded authorities to take legal measures everyone who broadcasting news, false statements, or rumors to disturb the public peace, terrorize citizens, or harm the public interest (see C3).
- Citizens continued to be arrested and criminally charged for social media posts and online content, including a 15-year prison sentence given to exiled human rights activist Bahey el-Din Hassan in August 2020, after the coverage period (see C3).
- In October 2019, it was revealed that Egyptian citizens had been targeted through sophisticated spyware in downloaded apps that enabled attackers to read emails, log contacts, and record the locations of citizens. The central server used in the attacks was linked to the Egyptian government (see C5).

A Obstacles to Access

While internet penetration has increased in recent years, geographical disparities in access continue to pose an obstacle. Authorities reportedly disrupted the internet and other communications networks for several hours during antigovernment protests in September 2019.

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet 3 / connections? **6**

Despite efforts to improve the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and increase the number of internet users in Egypt, internet connections continue to suffer from poor quality and low speeds. According to the Information and Communication Technology Indicators Bulletin, a report issued by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), internet penetration stood at 48 percent in November 2019. The mobile phone penetration rate was 95.6 percent, amounting to more than 95.25 million subscriptions.¹ Figures from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) figured the internet penetration rate at nearly 47 percent at the end of 2018 and the mobile phone rate at 95 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.²

Egyptians are increasingly using mobile services to access the internet. According to the same 2019 MCIT report, there were 40.90 million internet users, but only 7.17 million ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) subscriptions, which use fixed-line infrastructure. By contrast, there were 38.67 million mobile internet users.³ In response to the COVID-19 crisis and the social distancing measures adopted during the spring of 2020, the MCIT instructed internet service providers (ISPs) to raise the internet bandwidth of fixed broadband by 20 percent without extra charge. Some ISPs have also offered discounts on internet packages for a limited period of time.⁴ In June 2020, MCIT announced that around \$1.6 billion had been invested to improve the ICT infrastructure and increase the speed of the internet. It further unveiled the government’s plan to spend \$400 million to connect 2 million homes to the internet. They intend for connection speeds to reach 20 Mbps by the end of 2020, and 40 Mbps in 2021.⁵ The National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA) has led reforms to upgrade the telecommunications infrastructure and increase internet speeds by installing fiber-optic cables. In 2016, it auctioned fourth-generation (4G) mobile service frequencies to all mobile providers.⁶ During a Cairo ICT conference in November 2018, the acting executive president of the NTRA announced that more advanced fifth-generation (5G) mobile networks were expected to be launched in Egypt by 2020.⁷ In February 2019, Telecom Egypt partnered with Nokia to deploy 5G technology and test it in the Egyptian market.⁸

In mid-2018, the MCIT announced plans to improve fixed-line connection speeds by switching from copper to fiber-optic cables. According to tests undertaken in recent years by Speedtest, Akamai Technologies, and OpenSignal, the quality of fixed-line connections in Egypt is relatively poor.⁹ In 2019, the installation of fiber-optic cables improved local network bandwidth sixfold, and internet speed increased from 5 Mbps to 30 Mbps at a total cost of 30 billion Egyptian pounds (\$1.9 billion), as reported by the MCIT.¹⁰ In an April 2020 Speedtest report, Egypt was ranked 95th out of 139 countries for mobile internet speeds and was ranked 100th out of 174 countries for fixed broadband speeds—the latter a 66-place improvement in fixed broadband rankings, which could be attributed to the MCIT investments.¹¹

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 1 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? **3**

Broadband internet connections are relatively affordable. A monthly package costs about \$10.93.¹² While Telecom Egypt, the state-owned internet service provider (ISP) continues to dominate the sector, increased competition among mobile providers has caused a decrease in broadband prices. However in September 2017, prices rose due to the implementation of a 14 percent value-added tax (VAT) on ADSL internet.¹³ Nonetheless, according to Cable, a London-based broadband comparison website, Egypt ranked ninth out of 195 countries on consumer broadband prices. In July 2019, Egypt was reported as one of the top 20 cheapest countries in the world offering broadband packages, with an average price of \$13.82.¹⁴

The distribution of fixed-line internet access varies across different parts of the country. In November 2019, 38 percent of the country’s ADSL subscriptions were in greater Cairo, 32 percent were in the Nile Delta region, 14 percent were in Upper Egypt, 10 percent were in Alexandria and Matrouh, and 6 percent were in the Sinai, Red Sea, and Suez Canal areas.¹⁵ Between July and September 2019, ADSL subscribers were reported at 7.12 million compared to 6.21 million subscriptions in July and September 2018, an annual change rate 14.6 percent.¹⁶

Internet penetration is hindered by digital illiteracy, among other factors. The Inclusive Internet Index 2019 ranked Egypt 82nd out of 100 countries on support for digital literacy.¹⁷ In 2015, Facebook zero-rating services were provided by the Emirati telecommunications firm Etisalat for two months, during which time three million internet users gained free access to the internet. While a government official claimed that the offer’s permit was scheduled to expire in December 2015, the service’s suspension was shortly before the fifth anniversary of the 2011 revolution, which had been driven in large part by organizing on social media.¹⁸ Reuters reported that the zero-rating services were suspended because Facebook had refused to comply with a government request to help conduct surveillance.¹⁹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, some ISPs have also offered discounts on internet packages.²⁰

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 3 / restricting connectivity? **6**

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 due to the lack of internet shutdowns experienced during the reporting period, though there were reports of brief social media and VoIP blockings during the September 2019 protests.

The government has considerable control over internet infrastructure and has restricted connectivity. Article 67 of the Telecommunication Regulation Law provides Egyptian authorities with the power to commandeer telecommunication services and networks of any operator or service provider and “call operation and maintenance employees of such services and networks in case of natural or environmental disasters or during declared periods of general mobilization in accordance with the provisions of Law No. 87 of 1960 or any other cases concerning national security.” This means that the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA), alongside the military and national security agencies, is entitled by law to set the operational plan for the deployment of telecommunication networks during cases provided in Article 67.²¹

The government has centralized the internet infrastructure and fiber-optic cables to create highly controllable choke points.²² In addition, virtually all of Egypt’s telecommunications infrastructure is property of Telecom Egypt, a state-owned company. This arrangement facilitates authorities’ ability to suspend internet access or decrease speeds, as was the case during the 2011 revolution.²³ On February 14, 2019, Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly issued Decree 242, which put the telecommunications infrastructure under the ownership of the National Service Projects Organization, which is run by the Ministry of Defense—further consolidating the state’s hold on telecommunications in Egypt.²⁴

Voice over Internet Protocol services have been intermittently blocked on mobile networks. Disruptions to Facebook Messenger and Skype were also reported during the September 2019 protests (See B1).²⁵ Interruptions of VoIP services were further reported amid the COVID-19 crisis, which hindered the capacity of Egyptians to check on their family and friends living abroad during times of social distancing. In response, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called upon the Egyptian government to work with civil society and the press during this critical time rather than imposing restrictions on social media.²⁶

Users experienced disruptions when attempting to make voice calls via applications like WhatsApp, Apple’s FaceTime, Viber, Skype, and Facebook Messenger in April 2017.²⁷ The disruptions may have been linked to the announcement of a three-month state of emergency after a terrorist attack killed dozens of people at a church on Palm Sunday.²⁸ The NTRA denied that VoIP calls had been restricted.²⁹ VoIP services had previously been blocked in October 2015, though in that case mobile service providers confirmed that the blocking had been requested by the NTRA.³⁰ Periodic blockages of VoIP traffic over mobile networks were documented as early as 2010,³¹ but debate surrounding VoIP intensified in June 2013 after the NTRA announced the establishment of a committee to “monitor” communications on WhatsApp and Viber, pending a potential decision to block or restrict them. The NTRA cited an economic rationale, noting that the free services had a negative impact on traditional telecommunications companies.³² Making international calls over VoIP networks is technically illegal under Article 72 of the 2003 Telecommunication Regulation Law.³³

In December 2018, signal jamming was reported by international journalists who were visiting North Sinai as part of a state-regulated media tour meant to promote a “return to normalcy” in the wake of a government counterterrorism campaign.³⁴ In April 2019, communications disruptions were reported on social media following attacks by the Islamic State (IS) militant group in the Sinai city of Sheikh Zuweid’s central market.³⁵ Security forces reportedly shut down the internet and other communications networks for several hours as a result of the attack, which killed five civilians.³⁶

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 3 / 6

The Egyptian ICT market is dominated by a small number of companies, creating obstacles to competition and innovation. Three companies largely control the mobile phone market. Vodafone Egypt enjoys the greatest market share, with 40.5 percent, while Orange Egypt has 33 percent. The latter, formerly known as Mobinil, underwent rebranding in 2016 and is now 99 percent owned by its French parent company.³⁷ Etisalat Misr, with a 24 percent market share, is 66 percent owned by Etisalat, which has strong ties to the rulers of the United Arab Emirates.³⁸ In 2017, the state-owned Telecom Egypt officially launched We,³⁹ the country’s fourth mobile network. Telecom Egypt also owns about 45 percent of Vodafone Egypt.

Vodafone and Orange launched their 4G services in 2017 after receiving access to the frequencies from the government. The Telecom Egypt network We was the first mobile service provider to acquire a 4G license in 2016; the remaining three companies faced delays due to their refusal to meet the terms set by the NTRA, including paying half of the license fee in US dollars.⁴⁰ In receiving the license for We, Telecom Egypt promised to sell its Vodafone shares within a year, but did not do so.⁴¹

In January 2020, Vodafone announced the potential sale of 55 percent of their shareholding in Vodafone Egypt to Saudi Telecom Co (STC).⁴² In response, the NTRA issued a press release highlighting that the deal of acquisition has to be approved by NTRA before it is completed to safeguard the rights of users to telecommunication services.⁴³ The Financial Regulatory Authority (FRA) also pointed out that this transition requires a mandatory tender according to the Egyptian capital market legislation, Law No. 95 of 1992.⁴⁴ Additionally, Telecom Egypt, which owns 45 percent of Vodafone Egypt, declared that it will assess possible investment options and opportunities

should the transaction come into force. Some experts speculate that Telecom Egypt could sell its stake to get cash, as the company has accumulated over 15 billion Egyptian pounds (\$928.9 million) of debt since the launch of its mobile network.[45](#)

Telecom Egypt, under the banner TE Data, controls 75 percent of the ADSL market. Egypt's other main ISPs, also known as Class A ISPs, are Etisalat Egypt, Noor, and Vodafone Data. These companies lease lines from TE Data and resell bandwidth to smaller ISPs.[46](#)

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? 1 / 4

Telecommunications services and ISPs are regulated by the NTRA under the 2003 Telecommunication Regulation Law. The law does not guarantee the independence of the NTRA.[47](#) The authority is subordinated to the MCIT, and the members of its board are selected by the prime minister, who also determines their salaries.[48](#) The NTRA board is chaired by the minister of communications and information technology and includes representatives from the Ministries of Defense, Finance, and Interior; the National Security Council; the presidency; and trade unions, among others.[49](#) Officially, the NTRA is responsible for ensuring a competitive market environment, managing the frequency spectrum, setting industry standards, and overseeing interconnection agreements.[50](#) In addition, it aims to enhance and integrate advanced telecommunications and broadband technologies.[51](#)

The NTRA played a significant role in the five-day shutdown of internet and mobile services during the 2011 revolution. According to a judgement by an administrative court, the authority participated in all stages of the shutdown and represented the MCIT in this operation. It also worked with telecommunications companies to follow the Ministry of Interior decree calling for the shutdown; in the same judgement, the decree was ruled an infringement on the right to communicate, among other rights.[52](#)

B Limits on Content

At least 546 websites were blocked by the end of the reporting period, some of which were only blocked for a limited period of time. The most notable sites affected by blocking included Mada Masr and Darb, both independent news outlets that sometimes post content critical of the government. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the SCMR sent a warning letter to 16 news websites and social media accounts advising them against broadcasting false news about the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanta City and instructing them to abide by the Ministry of Health's official figures. The government also issued guidelines to journalists on covering the September 2019 protests.

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content? 1 / 6

The state continued to block news websites during the coverage period as part of a wider crackdown on freedom of expression and civil society activism. At the end of the first quarter of 2020, 546 websites were reported blocked by the authorities.[53](#) While some of these websites were blocked for a limited period of time, others remained blocked throughout the coverage period.[54](#)

In July 2018, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE) and the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) found 178 blocked websites. Those sites, blocked largely through ISPs' use of deep packet inspection (DPI), included news outlets (62 percent), censorship circumvention services (24 percent), human rights groups (6 percent), and political platforms (5 percent).[55](#) The news sites, many of which had been blocked since the beginning of 2017, included Huffington Post Arabic, the financial newspaper *Al-Borsa*, and the entire online publishing platform Medium, where the blocked news outlet *Mada Masr* had reposted its content. Websites run by Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, the April 6 Youth Movement (which was active in the 2011 revolution), and the jailed democracy activist Alaa Abdel Fattah were also inaccessible. Separately, some websites were blocked shortly after their launch, such as Katib in June 2018, which reported on human rights violations,[56](#) and Geem, a gender and sexuality website, in July 2018.[57](#)

In May 2019, at least three cases had been submitted to the Administrative Court of the State Council in an effort to identify the state bodies that ordered widespread blocking. In one instance, a committee responsible for the custody and administration of funds seized from the banned Muslim Brotherhood issued a public blocking order, but this accounted for just 33 websites.[58](#)

In April 2019, the Bitly service, which allows URLs to be shortened and is often used by online journalists and bloggers, was blocked for some 12 hours by several providers, including Telecom Egypt and Etisalat. While a reason for the blocking was not provided, it affected nearly 40 billion URLs.[59](#)

After the endorsement of the media regulations law (see B3), a number of websites were blocked by the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR). In December 2018, five sites owned by the company MO4 were blocked for not having licenses. Moreover, the SCMR determined that an article published by MO4's online magazine *Al-Fasla* had been an "unjustified insult to the Egyptian passport" (see B6), and that another outlet, *CairoScene*, published "indecent pictures and pornographic expressions."[60](#) After it was blocked, sports website *Ibarina* reported in January 2019 that a high-profile sports figure had sought to block the MO4 sites in response to coverage of his intention to buy an Egyptian media group.[61](#)

In March 2019, the SCMR fined the newspaper *al-Mashhad* 50,000 Egyptian pounds (\$3,100) and ordered the blocking of its website for six months after it allegedly defamed media figures by publishing inappropriate photos.⁶² The action was the first case of enforcement of the new media regulation law signed in August 2018. In April 2019, after *al-Mashhad* appealed, the SCMR reduced the blocking duration to one month, though the site remained blocked for longer.⁶³

In May 2019, the website of the newspaper *Al-Tahrir* was blocked. The news outlet sought all possible means to investigate the reasons behind this action and even approached the SCMR, but no explanation was communicated and the reasons remain unclear (see B6).⁶⁴

In August 2019, the SCMR blocked the *Al-Ekhbariya* and *Assabah News* websites after an official complaint was submitted by the technology company Huawei in Egypt. The SCMR issued a decree to block the two websites for three months due to “the practice of extortion by publishing false news harming the activities of Huawei company in Egypt and violating the professional code of honor and written standards.”⁶⁵

On September 22, 2019, the website of the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) was blocked after it published materials titled “The Religion Category.” The online publication *7iber*, a Jordanian site that covers regional news, was also blocked after it published a story titled “Two Jordanians detained in Egypt: a routine visit ends with arrest and ‘confessing’ on the screen.” The article was about two Jordanians, Thaer Matar and Abdul Rahman Alroajbah, who got arrested for their participation in the September demonstrations but were released on October 2, 2019.⁶⁶

The monitoring group NetBlocks found that more than 34,000 websites were blocked ahead of the April 2019 constitutional referendum in an apparent bid to suppress opposition to the amendments, which were adopted as a result of a deeply flawed vote. Among other changes, the amendments allowed President Sisi to seek reelection through 2030, granted him more power over the judiciary, and reinforced the role of the military in politics. Batel, a site that quickly collected 60,000 signatures in opposition to the amendments, was among those blocked, but many others had no obvious connection to the referendum.⁶⁷ NetBlocks theorized that these sites, which shared a hosting IP range, were affected as “collateral damage” from the government’s blocking of Batel.⁶⁸ Although Batel attempted to remain accessible via other domains, all were blocked by the authorities.⁶⁹

In September 2019, it was reported that 11 instant messaging applications were blocked, or access to them was prevented by the Egyptian authorities: including Wicker, Signal, and Wire.⁷⁰ NetBlocks reported disruptions to Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Skype, the BBC, and other news websites in the wake of the antigovernment protests (see A3 and B8).⁷¹ The head of the SCMR noted that the news website blockings may have been due to “inaccurate” coverage of the protests.⁷² Security experts were concerned that the “intermittent blocking” could be a test for a further complete blockage by authorities.⁷³

Service providers are sometimes further compelled to block websites during major political and national events. Similar to the 34,000 websites blocked ahead of the April 2019 constitutional referendum, sites were blocked in the spring of 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic. Technical tests conducted by a group of lawyers and technologists working for the organization Masaar revealed several websites were blocked on a number of telecommunications networks operating in Egypt for their reporting on the COVID-19 crisis.⁷⁴

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the SCMR sent a warning letter to 16 news websites and social media accounts, advising them against broadcasting false news on the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanta City, and instructing them to abide by the Ministry of Health’s official figures (see B5).⁷⁵ The SCMR has blocked or limited access to a number of websites for allegedly reporting fake news about the spread of coronavirus and the Ministry of Health’s efforts to combat it. On March 15, 2020, the websites of Huna Aden and *Al-Gomhoria Al-Youm* were notified that they would be blocked for six months, though the block was not put into force during the coverage period. Additionally, six social media accounts were blocked for “inciting violation of the preventive measures taken by the state” to fight the pandemic. A commercial TV channel was further warned about spreading news on the shortage of medicine.⁷⁶

More websites were blocked without clear reason during the same period. On April 9, 2020, Darb, a news outlet run by the opposition Socialist Popular Movement Party, was blocked shortly after it was launched. The month-old website questioned the human rights conditions related to the situation of prisoners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and called for their release.⁷⁷ On the same day, *Mada Masr* was also blocked for the 22nd time. During the first week of April, users reported difficulty accessing the news website al-Manassa.⁷⁸

On April 21, 2020, the SCMR blocked the electronic and paper editions of the privately-owned newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. Additionally, the SCMR enforced a number of sanctions on the journal, including financial penalties, a disciplinary investigation by the Syndicate of Journalists, and a criminal investigation by the public prosecution. The SCMR’s decision did not refer to any legal provisions for imposing such harsh measures, yet it was reported that the series of articles on Sinai published by newspaper owner and businessman Salah Diab (signed under the pseudonym Newton) prompted these measures.⁷⁹

In May 2020, the SCMR banned journalists and writers working for newspapers or websites from using pseudonyms without the regulator’s prior written consent. The new decision, which is part of the SCMR’s code of conduct and ethics for media and journalism outlets, compels print and online media to submit a request identifying the reason for and the duration of using the pseudonym.⁸⁰

In June 2020, the SCMR censored print and online media outlets from covering “sensitive” topics related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), COVID-19, and the conflicts in Libya and the Sinai Peninsula. The SCMR confirmed the censorship measures, and stated “the need for all media and social media sites,” to publish the data of official sources when “broadcasting information regarding Libya, the Renaissance Dam, and the military operations in Sinai against terrorism.”⁸¹

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content 1 / hosts, or digital platforms to delete content? 4

In recent years, the government has removed objectionable content from certain outlets. In August 2019, an article on poverty in Egypt by political science professor Dr. Mostafa El-Said was banned in the *Al-Shrouk* newspaper. The reason for the ban was not clear; the article relied on income and expenditure data published by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. Dr El-Said announced on his Facebook account that the news site did not impose the ban.⁸²

In March 2018, the Facebook page of the opposition television network Watan was removed, as was a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated page bearing the name of the organization’s founder.⁸³ Numerous government supporters had apparently reported the page to Facebook for violating the platform’s terms of service.

News outlets also regularly remove articles from their own websites. In May 2018, the Arabic website of Russian state broadcaster RT was pressured to remove an online poll it had posted regarding the disputed territories of Halayeb and Shalateen on the Egyptian border with Sudan. The poll had drawn formal rebukes from the State Information Service (SIS) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and triggered the cancelation of an interview with the minister of foreign affairs.⁸⁴

According to Twitter’s transparency report, the Egyptian government did not submit any content removal requests but submitted one request for account information between January and June 2019.⁸⁵ During the same period, Facebook received restriction requests stemming from private reports of defamation.⁸⁶

Shortly before the September 2019 protests, the SCMR published an article under the title “Blocking and fines are the penalty for spreading rumours in the media” to reiterate Article 17 of the SCMR’s Sanctions Regulations, which provides penalties for spreading false news or rumors or inciting violation of the law. The sanctions vary from a penalty of no more than 250,000 Egyptian pounds (\$15,500) to “preventing the publication or the broadcast or blocking the page or the program or the website for a specific period or permanently.”⁸⁷

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, 1 / or an independent appeals process? 4

The legal framework that regulates the digital space includes some restrictions that are neither necessary nor proportionate, and that mostly lack transparency. In May 2018, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled on an appeal of a 2013 case centered on a YouTube video called “The Innocence of Muslims” that was deemed to have denigrated the prophet Muhammad. The final ruling ordered regulators to block YouTube for a month.⁸⁸ and government agencies and the NTRA were authorized to block websites on national security grounds.⁸⁹ The decision limited the ability of administrative courts to restrict executive orders for online censorship and facilitated new legislation granting judicial and executive bodies the right to block websites.⁹⁰

In August 2018, a few months after this ruling, President Sisi signed a law to combat cybercrime and a law on media regulation, respectively.⁹¹ The cybercrime law, or Law No. 175 of 2018 (see C2), allows state authorities to block websites without a judicial order for “publishing any content that constitutes a crime under the law, provided it poses a threat to national security or endangers the security of the country or its national economy”—conditions that are only vaguely defined. Personnel at service providers that do not respond swiftly to blocking decisions could face prison and fines.⁹² The government claimed that the law was meant to combat online theft and hacking.⁹³ The media regulations law, or Law No. 180 of 2018 (see B6 and C2), requires that news websites obtain a license from the SCMR. However, whether blocked websites are able to apply for one, and whether they would remain blocked after obtaining a license, is unclear.⁹⁴ The blocked news website Katib closed after the SCMR stated it would not necessarily be unblocked even if it secured a license.⁹⁵ In March 2019, officials published the SCMR’s list of sanctions, which included potential penalties for violations of the media regulation law such as suspensions, fines, and other disciplinary actions.⁹⁶

The broadly worded 2015 antiterrorism law separately allows authorities to block content or websites that promote terrorism.⁹⁷

In March 2018, the minister for communications and information technology stated that the Egyptian government was working to expand its influence on social media by establishing an “Egyptian Facebook.” He reasoned that Facebook and Google, which are used by millions of Egyptians, were making millions of untaxed dollars from advertisements (see B6).⁹⁸ A local Facebook alternative, which had yet to be created as of May 2019, would also be more vulnerable to state coercion.

In September 2019, member of parliament Gamal Abdel-Aal requested shutting down Facebook for being a source of misinformation and false news. Representative Hisham al-Shatouri further requested the arrest of the administrators of Facebook pages critical of the army and the police and called for a law to regulate rumors and

criticism of government on social media.⁹⁹ Member of parliament Mai El-Batran also called for a direct contractual relationship that covers all social and economic issues between the state and social media companies. This contractual relationship would define the roles and responsibilities of both parties and safeguard freedom of expression in line with local legislation.¹⁰⁰

After imposing a tight grip on traditional media, the Egyptian authorities closely monitored social media platforms as channels available for citizens to exercise their right to freedom of expression. According to a report by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), Facebook is the website that is most often monitored by the government. Facebook users are subject to police prosecution and are arbitrarily accused of illegally expressing their opinions or denouncing the regime online. The report provides 15 opinion-related cases against Facebook users who received pretrial detention, threats, and imprisonment (see C3).¹⁰¹

Authorities have additionally censored and blocked online content and many websites without a transparent process that allows defendants to understand the reason for such procedures taken against them (see B1 and B6).

In December 2019, the parliament approved the establishment of a State Ministry of Information, which President Sisi approved in January 2020. The Ministry will coordinate efforts with the media regulatory bodies and the state authorities. The president further commissioned the new minister to set “a professional and disciplined media capable of standing up to foreign hostile media campaigns targeting Egypt in the form of malicious rumours, TV reports, and social media attacks.”¹⁰² The new ministry was denounced because the constitution does not refer to this entity; its establishment is at odds with constitutional provisions concerning the independence of the media regulation body.¹⁰³

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 1 / 4

The rising number of arrests for social media posts has had a chilling effect on online speech. Online journalists are often reluctant to publish on sensitive topics, including sectarian tensions, sexuality, the Muslim Brotherhood, political detainees, military operations in the Sinai, and the military’s outsized role in the national economy. A provision in the 2015 antiterrorism law criminalizes the publication of information regarding militant attacks that contradicts official government statements, prescribing up to two years in prison for violations.¹⁰⁴ The new media regulation law approved in August 2018 made the publication of false news, as defined by the government, a criminal offense (see C2). Also during 2018, the SCMR established a committee tasked with monitoring social media for any important trends or prevalent ideas or topics being discussed, which could further encourage self-censorship.¹⁰⁵ To this aim, Egypt has further deployed advanced censorship and surveillance technologies to intimidate citizens and force them to self-censor, so as to curtail political opposition on digital platforms.¹⁰⁶

Registering a web address using Egypt’s .eg domain requires the submission of personal data and copies of the applicant’s national identification document (see C4), which may inhibit local sites from publishing criticism of the government.

Moreover, the crackdown on activists in the aftermath of the September 2019 protests was condemned by United Nations (UN) human rights experts who argued that the intimidation of human rights advocates in Egypt could lead to self-censorship.¹⁰⁷ Such practices targeted not only activists and journalists but also news agencies and media outlets.

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 1 / 4

Online news outlets are controlled for the purpose of suppressing dissent and quelling free expression. A variety of laws are used to reinforce this control (see C2). Journalists and bloggers also face intimidation and smear campaigns from progovernment forces, online and in the news media (see C7).

Sheikh Shawki Allam, Egypt’s grand mufti, has encouraged the screening of social media sites, claiming that a number of them promote false news.¹⁰⁸ He has also issued a fatwa (religious edict) against Bitcoin, saying the cryptocurrency causes “fraud, betrayal, and ignorance.”¹⁰⁹ Several members of parliament have called on the government to censor social media and encouraged a campaign to raise awareness of the “dangers of Facebook.”

The media landscape is dominated by the online versions of state-owned newspapers or outlets that are backed by government-connected businessmen.¹¹⁰ In March 2018, following a report by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on human rights violations in Egypt, the public prosecutor started a hotline for reporting false news. Individuals can use text messages or WhatsApp to register complaints against media outlets and social media for content that could threaten national security.¹¹¹

In January 2019, the president’s media office ordered two media companies, Egyptian Media Group (EMG) and D Media, to abstain from reporting on Sisi’s interview with the US television program “60 Minutes,” including on their websites and social media accounts. The interview tackled many sensitive topics, including Egyptian-Israeli military cooperation and Egypt’s human rights record.¹¹²

On September 22, 2019, the State Information Service (SIS) called upon international media correspondents to comply with international professional standards when covering news from Egypt. According to the SIS, this means social media outlets should not be considered news sources, “as these sources have an uncontrollable and chaotic

nature with the presence of many fake accounts and fabrications." The SIS further stated that "in developed nations such sources are not allowed to be used unless under strict regulations and after undergoing many stages of verification."¹¹³ This statement received backlash for intimidating foreign media.¹¹⁴

Facebook has reported multiple incidents of content and account removals in Egypt (see B2). In August 2019, Facebook announced the removal of a number of pages, groups, and accounts engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behavior" on Facebook and Instagram. They are linked to two separate operations; one in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates and the other in Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁵ The operation in Egypt was run by a former military officer who operates covertly to advocate for Sudan's military on social media.¹¹⁶ In October 2019, Facebook also took down a total of 443 Facebook accounts, 200 pages and 76 groups, as well as 125 Instagram accounts, from the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, for reportedly misleading social media users through "coordinated inauthentic behavior." The accounts, which are "networks of accounts to mislead others about who they were, and what they were doing," are linked to three "unconnected" operations in Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, and Nigeria.¹¹⁷

In March 2020, the Egyptian authorities revoked the press accreditation and forced the *Guardian* journalist Ruth Michaelson to depart the country after she covered a scientific study that questioned the number of COVID-19 cases reported by the government. The research produced by the University of Toronto suggested that Egypt likely has more cases than the government reported. Michaelson was accused of "misreporting an unreliable study and spreading panic."¹¹⁸

The authorities have created two WhatsApp groups to convey instructions to media outlets on what to report and what the redlines are. The group "Editors" is administered by the General Intelligence Service and the second is administered by the Ministry of the Interior. In May 2019, media outlets were provided instructions through messages on the groups to abide by the Ministry of Interior's statement regarding the explosion near Cairo's Grand Egyptian Museum where at least 12 South African tourists were injured. In September 2019, media organizations were warned against reporting on the former military contractor Mohamed Ali, who called for the September 2019 protests (see B8).¹¹⁹ In January 2020, directions were broadcasted to refrain from covering Trump's Middle East plan (dubbed the "peace plan" or "deal of the century") and to not touch upon its "violations of Egyptian and Arab principles regarding the Palestinian issue." The plan was barely criticized by any media outlet, short of a few independent online platforms.¹²⁰

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online? 0 / 3

The economic viability of independent news websites is constantly under threat. Many of such outlets have closed, and others face financial troubles. Those subjected to blocking have suffered revenue losses, leading some to suspend their operations.¹²¹

In June 2019, the board of *al-Tahrir*, whose website had been blocked since May 9, 2019, announced that the newspaper would be bankrupt within two months if the website was not unblocked. The newspaper, though offered in print, secured 80 percent of its revenues from advertisement on the website and was no longer able to meet its financial commitments. *Al-Tahrir* staff had sought all possible means to investigate the reasons behind the website's blocking. It contacted the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, NTRA, MCIT, and internet service providers but no explanation was given.¹²²

In addition, the 2018 law on media regulation requires media outlets, defined to include any website or social media account with at least 5,000 subscribers, to pay a fee of a 50,000 Egyptian pounds (\$3,100) to obtain a license from the SCMR and gain legal status.¹²³ Outlets must also have at least 100,000 Egyptian pounds (\$6,200) in capital. The law allows sites to be blocked on several grounds, including spreading purportedly false news.¹²⁴ In October 2018, the SCMR started accepting applications for licenses even though the law's implementation guidelines had yet to be released.¹²⁵ In January 2019, the SCMR announced that 113 websites had applied for registration and the regulator extended the deadline to obtain a license until the end of the month.¹²⁶

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity? 2 / 4

At a time when traditional media have become increasingly consolidated in ownership and homogenized in content, online media have also struggled to maintain their independence and diversity of views given the arduous conditions of and sweeping restrictions imposed by the new regulations and local practices. Egyptians resort to social media as the main source of information despite it also being monitored and censored (see B3 and C7). According to the SimilarWeb ranking of the most widely visited websites in Egypt in 2018, Facebook and YouTube were the second and third most visited sites, respectively.¹²⁷ The most widely read news outlets, according to the most recent Alexa rankings, are primarily tabloids, news portals aligned with the government, and sports websites.¹²⁸

The blocking of hundreds of websites has negatively affected the diversity of media, and consequently of critical opinions. According to a survey conducted by Northwestern University in Qatar, only 3 percent of internet users in Egypt use virtual private networks (VPN), which can be employed to bypass blocking and reach obstructed sites.¹²⁹

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? 3 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the government crackdown on protesters in September 2019, in which authorities attempted to disrupt mobilization efforts online by blocking websites, social media, and communications platforms.

Digital activism and political organizing have been less prevalent in recent years due to widespread arrests, harsh prison sentences for dissidents and protesters, and the use of deadly force to suppress demonstrations.¹³⁰ A law passed in 2013 effectively banned protests and gave police broad powers to crack down on unauthorized assemblies.¹³¹ At the end of the reporting period, numerous activists remained in jail for opposing the government.

The online platform Batel, launched on April 9, 2019 to mobilize an opposition movement to that month’s constitutional referendum, was blocked after just 13 hours, having collected 60,000 signatures (see B1).¹³²

A deadly Cairo train crash and fire in February 2019 prompted some social media users to condemn administrative negligence and propose demonstrations aimed at forcing accountability for the disaster, in which more than 20 people were killed and dozens of others were injured. More than 100 users were arrested for such comments, and many were charged with promoting terrorism.¹³³

In September 2019, social media users called for protesting against President Sisi after businessman and former military contractor Mohamed Ali posted videos alleging corruption by the president.¹³⁴ On September 20, 2019, thousands of citizens demonstrated in cities including Cairo and Alexandria. Security agents and police responded with force and arrested almost 2,000 people (see C3).¹³⁵ Mohamed Ali called for another protest on September 27, which did not happen because many dissenting voices and social media platforms were blocked online (see B1 and B8).¹³⁶ During the September demonstrations, police and plainclothes security forces seized and searched the mobile devices of citizens who were forced to unlock their mobile phones and social media accounts, which were checked for any evidence of antigovernment sentiments.¹³⁷ In the wake of the protests, disruptions to Facebook Messenger, Skype, and other news websites were reported.¹³⁸ A number of instant messaging applications were also blocked (See B1).¹³⁹ The Egyptian authorities arrested over 3,000 protestors, including 111 minors. Most of the arrested political activists, human rights advocates, and internet users were detained for being highly critical of the government online and offline (see C3).¹⁴⁰

In the same month, Al Jazeera launched an online solidarity campaign to call for the release of Al Jazeera journalist Mahmoud Hussein, who was taken in custody without any formal charges while visiting Egypt in December 2016. Later, he was charged with “incitement against state institutions and broadcasting false news with the aim of spreading chaos.” To mark the 1,000 days he spent in detention, Al Jazeera launched www.FreeMahmoudHussein.com calling on the public to sign a petition for his release.¹⁴¹

In October 2019, a campaign was kicked off on Twitter advocating against the censorship and suspension of Middle Eastern activists’ accounts for their posts. Egyptian Twitter users launched the hashtag #WeWillSpeak and its Arabic equivalent to denounce the temporary and permanent suspension of Twitter users on the basis of allegedly violating the platform’s policies for using “harsh and bad language.”¹⁴²

In December 2019, the vice president of the Egyptian Council of State Mohamed Abdel Wahab Khafagy accused terrorist groups of “penetrating the Egyptian streets” and spreading “toxic thoughts” through social media to instigate opposition and criticism of the state and incite protests. He explained that such “harsh and bad language” used by groups threaten national security by using social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to promote negative ideas about Egypt.¹⁴³

According to a survey conducted by Northwestern University in Qatar, 54 percent of Egyptians surveyed said that they feel comfortable speaking about politics in 2019, compared to 79 percent reported in 2018. As for freedom of expression online, only 42 percent of respondents believed that Egyptians should be able to express ideas online even if these ideas are unpopular. Further, 60 percent of Egyptians believe that the internet should be regulated, particularly to protect users’ privacy and make the internet more affordable.¹⁴⁴

C Violations of User Rights

Arrests of activists and journalists continued to be reported during the coverage period, with many facing repeated extensions of their pretrial detention. After the coverage period, an activist was sentenced to 15 years in prison for content posted to his social media accounts. In February 2020, the Egyptian parliament approved the amendment of the definition of “a terrorist entity” to exclude satellite channels, radio stations, and social media after pushback from civil society.

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 0 / 6

Egypt’s constitution contains language that nominally guarantees freedom of the media, stating that Egyptians “have the right to own and issue newspapers and establish visual, audio, and digital media outlets.”¹⁴⁵ A number of other articles relate to online media and internet freedom:

- Article 34 asserts the role of the government in preserving the security of the online environment as “an integral part of the economic system and national security.”

- According to Article 70, “the law shall regulate ownership and establishment procedures for visual and radio broadcast stations in addition to online newspapers.”
- Article 71 states that censorship is forbidden “in any way,” and that no individuals should be jailed for crimes committed through publication. However, exceptions are made for censorship in “times of war or general mobilization,” and penalties for “incitement to violence,” “discrimination amongst citizens, or impugning the honor of individuals” are to be specified by law.[146](#)
- Article 211 outlines the establishment of a national media council tasked with regulating “the affairs of radio, television, and printed and digital press, among others” and ensuring that the press maintains a commitment to “professional and ethical standards, as well as national security needs.” The SCMR was created in 2016, with the power to fine and suspend media organizations.[147](#)
- The constitution permits the trial of civilians who break these laws in military courts, despite objections from political activists.[148](#)

In April 2019, the parliament approved amendments to the constitution that would allow Sisi to stay in power until 2030, extending his current four-year term to six years and permitting him to seek an additional six-year term in 2024. Among other changes, the amendments granted the president greater control over the judiciary and expanded the political and judicial authority of the military.[149](#) The new provisions were confirmed in the deeply flawed referendum held later that month.[150](#)

In November 2019, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that freedom of expression is protected in Egypt, except when it targets state institutions, transcends the constitution or law, or violates Egypt’s international obligations in this regard. Finally, he asserted that only the judiciary can look into these cases and that defendants have the rights and necessary safeguards to defend themselves.[151](#)

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities? 0 / 4

The legal framework that governs online activity restricts freedom of expression in a variety of ways. Defamation is considered a criminal offense and included in the penal code.[152](#)

In June 2018, the parliament approved three laws regulating the media.[153](#) The laws, which replaced existing legislation and were all signed by the president in August 2018, govern three official bodies: the National Press Authority, which mainly oversees state-owned print outlets; the National Media Authority, which is primarily responsible for state-owned broadcast outlets; and the SCMR, which supervises the media more broadly, including online media. The legislation regarding the SCMR, Law No. 180 of 2018, contained a number of new restrictions, stipulating that no media outlets could be established or managed in Egypt without a license from the regulator. Moreover, the law defines media outlets to include blogs and personal social media accounts with at least 5,000 followers, subjecting the individuals behind them to account removal, fines, and imprisonment if they are found to be spreading false news (see B3 and B6).[154](#)

In August 2018, the president signed the new Law on Combating Cybercrimes, or Law No. 175 of 2018.[155](#) It authorizes the blocking of websites that are deemed a threat to national security and punishes individuals who visit banned websites with up to one year in prison. Creators or managers of websites that are later banned could face up to two years in prison.[156](#)

The 2015 antiterrorism law broadened the scope of crimes that are considered terrorism and prescribed harsh penalties for nonviolent acts.[157](#) Article 27 establishes a minimum sentence of five years in prison for creating a website “with the goal of promoting ideas or beliefs” that incite violence, “broadcasting information to mislead the police or judicial authorities on terrorism cases,” or communicating with or organizing terrorist groups.[158](#) Setting up a group with the intention of “advocating by any means the obstruction of provisions of the constitution or laws” is punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty. Activists argued that the broad language of the law could apply to any peaceful political party or advocacy group.[159](#) Finally, journalists face heavy fines for disputing official accounts of militant attacks. In March 2019, parliament’s legislative committee proposed amendments that prescribe severe penalties for expressing opinions online. Ostensibly promoting extremist ideology could carry a 10-year prison sentence, while promoting terrorist acts, extremist ideology, or ideas and beliefs that advocate violence could result in imprisonment of 15 years.[160](#)

In 2015, President Sisi issued a separate law broadening the definition of “terrorist entities” to include anyone who threatens public order “by any means,” allowing the state to draw up lists of alleged terrorists or terrorist organizations.[161](#) The law was met with skepticism from legal experts and human rights activists, who said that its vague wording could allow the state to designate political parties, student unions, or human rights organizations as terrorist groups.[162](#) In February 2020, the parliament approved amendments to the definition of “a terrorist entity” and removed satellite channels, radio stations, and social media from the list of alleged terrorist groups in response to internal government backlash. Officials worried the broad definition of “terrorist entities” adversely impacted Egypt’s reputation regarding free speech.[163](#)

Amendments to the law on states of emergency, the antiterrorism law, and the criminal code were rushed through in 2017 after terrorist attacks on three Coptic churches. The amendments allowed for the indefinite detention of individuals suspected of threatening national security through the use of special emergency courts. The right to

appeal the decisions of such courts and obtain a fair trial was curtailed. Police may also detain individuals for seven days without bringing them before a judge or prosecutor.¹⁶⁴ A similar law used during the era of former president Hosni Mubarak before 2011 was struck down by the Supreme Constitutional Court in 2013.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack on armed forces in North Sinai and the death of 11 officers,¹⁶⁵ on May 4, 2020 the parliament extended the state of emergency for three months to allow authorities to combat terrorism and fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The state of emergency was first introduced on April 10, 2017 following the terrorist attack on three Coptic churches, and has since been renewed 11 times. Anyone who violates the state of emergency can be imprisoned.¹⁶⁶

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities? 1 / 6

Internet users in Egypt operate in a highly repressive environment. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Egypt remains one of the world’s worst jailers of journalists; in 2019, 26 journalists were detained (see C7).¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸ In the wake of the September 2019 demonstrations, the Egyptian authorities arrested over 3,000 protestors, including 111 minors. Political activists, human rights advocates, and internet users were arbitrarily detained for being highly critical of the government online and offline. Most of the detainees faced mass trials based on charges that vary between “terrorism-related” activities, “membership in a banned group,” “spreading false information,” “spreading false news,” and “abuse of social media networks.”¹⁶⁹ Electronic device searches and seizures and coercive questioning have been reported to be part of the investigations.¹⁷⁰

During the reporting period, citizens were added to the 488/2019 criminal case, which is known as “the whistles and horns case.” The case began in March 2019 following a demonstration in Cairo’s main train station. People added to this case were accused of “helping a terrorist group and publishing false news.”¹⁷¹ The prosecution was massively decried by human rights organizations for its flagrant infringements of rights and its “dubious or open-ended charges.”¹⁷² In the 930/2019 case, known as the “Hope case,” 15 individuals were reported to be arrested for “peaceful political activities;” seven people detained disappeared and eight people were tortured with electric shocks, beaten, and threatened. The people detained included former parliamentarian and human rights lawyer Zyad el-Elaimy and journalists and politicians Hossam Moanis and Hisham Fouad.¹⁷³

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the Egyptian authorities adopted restrictive measures on freedom of expression online to tighten their grip on the narrative around the pandemic. On March 10, 2020, the prime minister commanded authorities to take legal measures against everyone who broadcasts news, false statements, or rumors to disturb the public peace, terrorize citizens, or harm the public interest. On March 22, 2020, the Ministry of Interior published on its Facebook page that they detained a woman in Damietta for posting a video on her Facebook account that ostensibly spread false news on COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁷⁴

On March 28, 2020, the public prosecutor stated they would issue hefty penalties of up to five years imprisonment or a fine of up to Egyptian pounds 20,000 (\$1,240) for anyone who spreads “false news” related to COVID-19. The authorities then embarked on a campaign of arrests where 12 individuals affiliated with state-owned or progovernment media institutions were detained for content posted on their social media accounts.¹⁷⁵

During the coverage period, some human rights activists were released from prison and then reimprisoned based on national security investigations. Some of the activists who received renewed detentions were Mahienour el-Masry, Mohamed Ibrahim, and Alaa Abdel Fattah.¹⁷⁶

The following were some of the more notable criminal cases involving online posts and commentary critical of the government during the coverage period:

- In July 2019, authorities arrested American teacher and dual US-Egyptian national Reem Mohamed Desouky upon arriving in Cairo from Washington DC with her 13-year-old son. She was held and interrogated for two hours and her phone was confiscated. Desouky was accused of allegedly condemning the Egyptian government on Facebook and administering social media accounts that are reportedly critical of the government.¹⁷⁷
- In August 2019, media professional Medhat Essa, who made Facebook posts criticizing constitutional amendments and the ruling regime, was arrested and his mobile phone was confiscated. He was accused of spreading rumors and false news on a Facebook page he created. Essa was detained for four days. In September 2019, he was released on bail of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$1,240) pending investigations.¹⁷⁸
- On September 16, 2019, engineer and labor activist Kamal Khalil was arrested and interrogated by the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP), and detained for 15 days.¹⁷⁹ In February 2020, Khalil was released conditionally; he has to report to the police station once a week.¹⁸⁰
- On September 12, 2019, the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies Bahey el-Din Hassan was issued in absentia a three-year sentence for posting on Twitter about the conduct of Egypt’s public prosecutors. He was accused of “publishing statements likely to undermine the judicial authority” and “falsely claiming the public prosecutor had abandoned his role,” as well as charges of disturbing or harming “public security” or the “public interest.” Hassan didn’t know about the sentence until March 2020, and was fined 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$1,240).¹⁸¹
- On September 21, 2019, blogger Mohamed Ibrahim (who uses the pseudonym Mohamed Oxygen) was arrested on new charges after being released on probation in July 2019. Ibrahim was detained while visiting

the police station as part of his probation conditions. On October 8, 2019, a Cairo criminal court ruled for him to be preventively detained on charges related to “membership of a terrorist organization,” “defamation,” and “misuse of social media.”^{[182](#)} On February 1, 2020, his detention was renewed for 15 days.^{[183](#)}

- On September 22, 2019, prominent activist and lawyer Mahienour al-Massry was arrested in front of the SSSP building and was added to the case 488/2019 despite not being part of the September protests. Al-Massry has been held since then in pretrial detention.^{[184](#)[185](#)}
- On September 22, 2019, photographer Sayed Abd Ellah, who was livestreaming the antigovernment protest in his hometown Suez, was arrested. The police physically attacked his wife and children and insulted him for his social media posts. He was charged with “membership in a banned group,” “spreading false news,” and “misusing social media platforms to disrupt national security.”^{[186](#)}
- On September 25, 2019, political science professor—and spokesperson for former army chief Sami Anan—Hassan Nafaa, political science professor Hazem Hosny, and journalist and former president of the Destour Party Khaled Dawoud were arrested. While Nafaa was arrested after posting on Twitter that President Sisi should step down, Hosny was arrested after publishing a number of posts on Facebook that support former military contractor Mohamed Ali (see B8).^{[187](#)} The three face pretrial detention and were charged in case 488/2019.^{[188](#)}
- On September 29, 2019, Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent activist and blogger, who was jailed for five years and released on probation in March 2019, was arrested again and taken to the SSSP. He faced the same charges as all other protesters. When lawyer Muhammad Al-Baqer went to defend Abdel Fattah, he was arrested and faced the same charges with him. It was reported that Abdel Fattah was beaten and insulted during his detention in Tora prison.^{[189](#)}
- In October 2019, reporter, blogger, and social media coordinator for Tahrir News Esraa Abdelfattah was arrested by plainclothes security officers. It was reported that she was taken to an unknown place and beaten to give up the password of her mobile phone. Abdelfattah was also added to case 488/2019.^{[190](#)} On June 1, 2020, Abdelfattah’s court session to determine the renewal of her detention was postponed since she was unable to come from El Qanatir prison.^{[191](#)}
- On November 24, 2019, after *Mada Masr* published an article on President Sisi’s eldest son who was sidelined from his government position, nine plainclothes security forces raided the office of *Mada Masr*. They confiscated laptops and phones and took Lina Atallah, Mohamed Hamama, and Rana Mamdouh for interrogation. On November 23, the paper’s editor Shady Zalat was taken from his home in Cairo. The detainees were later released.^{[192](#)}
- In November 2019, freelance reporter Solafa Magdy, blogger and freelance journalist Mohamed Salah, and freelance photojournalist Hossam el-Sayyad were arrested by plainclothes security officers and taken to a police station after exiting a coffee shop. It was reported that their mobile phones were confiscated and Magdy was beaten and told to unlock her phone. On November 27, 2019, state security prosecutor charged all three with membership in a banned group, and Magdy and Salah of disseminating false news.^{[193](#)}
- In January 2020, the police raided the Turkish state-run Anadolu News Agency office in Cairo and arrested four people—including a Turkish administrator and two Egyptian journalists—for allegedly spreading false news and operating without a license. The police examined phones, computers, and documents in the office and took the detainees afterward to unknown location.^{[194](#)}
- In February 2020, researcher Patrick George Zaki was arrested at the Cairo airport while visiting his family from Italy where he is a postgraduate student. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) reported that he was “beaten, subjected to electric shocks, threatened, and questioned about various issues related to his work and activism.” He has been accused of publishing rumors and false news “to disturb social peace and sow chaos”; inciting protest without state permission “with the aim of undermining state authority”; calling for the overthrow of the state; managing a social media account that “aims to undermine the social order and public safety”; and “incitement to commit violence and terrorist crimes.”^{[195](#)} Zaki has been critical of the government and its human rights violations, and has advocated for the rights of women, Christians, and LGBT+ people.^{[196](#)} He was detained by a Mansoura Court’s order pending investigations.^{[197](#)}
- In March 2020, after publishing a post on Facebook doubting the government’s official statistics regarding the spread of COVID-19, Atef Hasballah, the chief editor of the Alkarar Press website, was arrested. He disappeared for almost a month until April 14, 2020, when the SSSP ordered his pretrial detention on several charges including “joining a terrorist organization” and “spreading false news.”^{[198](#)}
- In April 2020, university student Haneen Hossam was detained for allegedly “inciting debauchery” and “promoting human trafficking” among young Egyptian women on TikTok by publishing a video explaining how to use the app for financial gains. On May 9, 2020, prosecutors’ request to extend her detention for 15 more days was accepted by a Cairo court.^{[199](#)}
- In May 2020, social media influencer Mawada Eladhm was detained for “violating family principles and values in Egyptian society” and “establishing, managing, and using [websites and social media accounts] with the aim of committing those crimes.” Eladhm, whose detention followed an arrest warrant issued by prosecutors, has reportedly attempted to escape. She has been kept in pretrial detention since she was caught.^{[200](#)}

Multiple prominent digital activists and online journalists remain in prison. In many cases, the individuals faced charges unrelated to their online activities, although their supporters argue that they were arrested to prevent them from expressing their views. Spreading false news, affiliation with a terrorist group, insulting the state, and inciting demonstrations are the prevailing allegations used to justify the arrest of human rights activists.

The campaign of Egyptian authorities to crack down on dissenting voices undermines international human rights law and internet freedoms. These moves have been criticized by local and international human rights organizations alongside intergovernmental organizations.

According to a 2019 report published by Amnesty International, the SSSP is "misusing counter-terror legislation to prosecute thousands of peaceful critics and suspend guarantees to fair trial." The report sheds light on some of the practices of the SSSP, including arbitrary detention, denial of effective legal representation, coercive questioning, prolonged pretrial detention, the denial of the right to challenge charges, torture, and enforced disappearances.²⁰¹

In October 2019, the European Parliament issued a motion for a resolution vis-à-vis the violations of human rights in Egypt. It denounced the clampdown on the freedom of expression online and offline and decried the arbitrary detention of thousands of individuals in response to the antigovernment demonstrations on September 20, 2019. The resolution, which highlights the government's malpractices, called upon the authorities to allow journalists to work without fear.²⁰² The same call was also reiterated by UN human rights experts later the same month, when they requested the Egyptian government ensure that any constraints on freedom of expression are in line with "the law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate to achieve their protective function."²⁰³ In response, the Egyptian government has sought to undermine the legitimacy of the UN's experts and Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human rights by taking control of the rapporteur's mandate and create its own report on the "effects of terrorism" to question the validity of the UN's international human rights framework.

After the reporting period, in August 2020, Bahey el-Din Hassan was sentenced to 15 years in prison by the Fifth Terrorism Circuit Court in Cairo on charges related to "insulting the judiciary" and "disseminating false news," according to an Amnesty International report. The charges, under the 2018 cybercrime law, also include "disseminating false news that could undermine public security and public benefit through social media," as Bahey had criticized the Sisi regime on his Twitter account.²⁰⁴ This is the longest sentence imposed on a human rights defender in Egypt.²⁰⁵

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 1 / 4

The NTRA's 2010 regulation of the registration of consumers' personal data in selling and activating mobile lines requires distributors of SIM cards to collect the personal data from buyers' identification documents before the cards can be activated.²⁰⁶ This threatens the anonymity of communication as well as the privacy and protection of personal data.

Individuals seeking to register a web address using Egypt's .eg domain must submit their personal data and copies of their national identification document.

Encryption remains restricted. Article 64 of the Telecommunication Regulation Law outlaws the use by telecommunications companies, their employees, or their customers of any encryption equipment without written consent from the NTRA and security agencies.²⁰⁷ In a November 2018 report, the freedom of expression group Article 19 criticized Article 72 of the new media regulation law (Law No. 180) for granting the SCMR exclusive control over the establishment of encrypted platforms and requiring government approval for any other usage of such platforms.²⁰⁸

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy? 1 / 6

Surveillance is a significant concern for internet users in Egypt. Article 57 of the constitution states that private communications "may only be confiscated, examined, or monitored by causal judicial order, for a limited period of time, and in cases specified by the law." Judicial warrants are needed for authorities to enter, search, or monitor private property such as homes, as specified in Article 58. In practice, the government's surveillance operations lack transparency, potentially violating the constitution's privacy protections.

A draft data protection law endorsed by a parliamentary committee in November 2019 would protect certain types of user data and establish a center to monitor compliance with the law.²⁰⁹ However, the same bill stipulated that service providers should retain users' data for 180 days and provide access to state authorities upon request (see C6).²¹⁰ The legislation was approved by the parliament after the coverage period, in June 2019.²¹¹

Research and leaked documents have shown that Egyptian authorities have purchased or received surveillance equipment from international companies like Blue Coat,²¹² Nokia Siemens Network,²¹³ and Hacking Team.²¹⁴ Following pressure from human rights organizations, Italy revoked authorization for the surveillance company Area SpA to sell equipment to Egypt's Technical Research Department in early 2016.²¹⁵

A provision of the antiterrorism law allows the police to monitor internet traffic and social media activity to "prevent their use for terrorist purposes."²¹⁶ A committee established by the NTRA tracks communications over VoIP services (see A3). The 2018 Law on Combating Cybercrime also facilitates surveillance by state authorities (see C6).

Amid allegations that the government was monitoring communications over Facebook and Twitter, the MCIT asserted in March 2019 that the law does not provide for social media monitoring. Instead, the ministry said, it focuses on protecting privacy and personal data.[217](#)

In September 2018, Citizen Lab reported a suspected infection of mobile phones in Egypt with Pegasus spyware, which is produced by the Israeli company NSO Group. The spyware is installed when the target clicks on a malicious link, and the perpetrator is then able to access private data.[218](#)

A December 2018 European Parliament resolution noted that Egypt has bought surveillance equipment from European companies that enables hacking and the exploitation of malicious software. This technology has contributed to the crackdown against freedom of expression online.[219](#) In July 2018, the International Federation for Human Rights published a report that unveiled technical assistance from the French government and private-sector has helped Egyptian authorities control internet infrastructure, monitor communications, and crack down on dissent.[220](#)

During the September 2019 protests, police and plainclothes security forces seized and searched the mobile devices of citizens. People were asked to unlock their mobile phones and provide access to their social media accounts, which were checked for any evidence of antigovernment sentiments.[221](#)

On October 3, 2020, the cybersecurity company Check Point published a report revealing that Egyptian citizens were targeted through sophisticated spyware in downloaded apps that enabled attackers to read emails, log contacts, and record locations of citizens. The central server used in the attacks was linked to the Egyptian government (see C8).[222](#)

C6 0-6 pts

Are service providers and other technology companies required to aid the government in monitoring 0 / the communications of their users? 6

The government can obtain user information from companies without due process. Article 64 of the Telecommunication Regulation Law allows service providers, as well as their marketing agents, to collect "accurate information and data" from "individuals and various entities within the state." It also compels providers to give security agencies access to their "equipment, systems, software, and communication."[223](#)

According to Privacy International, the 2018 cybercrime law "forces telecommunications providers, specifically ISPs, to provide technical assistance" to law enforcement and their surveillance operations. The law also compels providers "to collect data, including personal identifiers, metadata, and 'other data' not specified by the law and store them for a default period of 180 days."[224](#) Failure to retain data for this amount of time could result in a fine of up to 10 million Egyptian pounds (\$619,000); a second violation can lead to a fine of 20 million pounds (\$1.2 million) and revocation of the company's license.[225](#) State agencies can request stored data without a judicial order,[226](#) an apparent violation of Article 57 of the constitution (see C5).[227](#)

In November 2019, the parliament approved a data protection law. The law prohibits the collection, processing, or dissemination of personal data without consent and applies to all residents of Egypt and Egyptian citizens, regardless of where they are living. Noncompliance could lead to a three-month prison sentence and a fine of up to one million Egyptian pounds (\$62,000).[228](#) However, the law contradicts the Telecommunication Regulation Law, posing a challenge for service providers.[229](#)

The minister of communication and information technology described plans in March 2018 to create an Egyptian version of Facebook. A locally based social media company would presumably be easier for the government to coerce into providing data on its users (see B3).

In 2017, the Egyptian government requested access to the internal software of ride-sharing apps like Uber and Careem, including data about customers, drivers, and journeys. Uber rejected the request, but in a meeting with Egyptian military intelligence, Careem executives were reportedly offered preferential treatment if they agreed to provide the data. The company said no such deal was implemented.[230](#)

In March 2018, Uber and Careem were banned by Cairo's administrative court after 42 taxi drivers filed a lawsuit against them. However, in April 2018, another court suspended the ruling until the higher administrative court could deliver a final verdict.[231](#) In May 2018, the parliament passed a law to regulate ride-sharing apps,[232](#) requiring that the companies obtain a five-year renewable license for a fee of 30 million Egyptian pounds (\$1.9 million), that drivers pay annual fees to obtain special licenses, and that the companies retain user data for 180 days and share it with authorities "on request" and "according to the law."[233](#) Requests for data do not need to be accompanied by a warrant, though a decree from the prime minister is required.[234](#) Following the law's ratification in June 2018, negotiations between Uber and the government on implementing regulations were reportedly suspended in January 2019 due to controversy over whether the legislation can require user data to be stored in Egypt and whether security agencies can access it.[235](#) According to legal analysts, however, a data localization requirement is not enshrined in the law.[236](#)

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other 1 / actor in retribution for their online activities? 5

Imprisoned activists, bloggers, and journalists frequently experience abuse and torture while in detention. They are subject to lengthy pretrial detention, which in some cases lasts for years (see C3). In March 2019, a transgender woman Malik al-Kashef was arrested and accused of involvement with a terrorist group and using social media to disrupt public order. She reportedly suffered sexual harassment and a forced anal examination in custody.²³⁷ Galal el-Behairy, the poet imprisoned in June 2018 after writing an antigovernment song that spread online, was reportedly tortured in detention (see C3).²³⁸

Bloggers are frequently intimidated online by government supporters, who often work in collaboration with progovernment news websites to smear prominent opponents. For example, reporter, blogger, and social media coordinator for Tahrir News Esraa Abdelfattah, who was arrested on October 13, 2019 and accused as part of case 488/2019 (see C3), was attacked by progovernment media outlets that condemned her for being dishonest about her torture during her interrogation. Abdelfattah was dubbed as an “agent of chaos for the Muslim Brotherhood.”²³⁹

On February 7, 2020, Patrick George Zaki was detained and held for 24 hours by Egyptian authorities and was subjected to torture, including with electric shocks, according to Human Rights Watch. Zaki, a researcher and activist, was accused of “calling for protests without permission” and for “spreading false news and inciting violence and terrorism” after posting to his Facebook page.²⁴⁰ His Facebook posts were the focal point of his interrogation with authorities, according to Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch reported 28 cases in which the Egyptian government persecuted the relatives of activists—particularly those living abroad—who are critical of the government. Harassment measures included home raids, detentions, and in some cases travel bans.²⁴¹

On September 10, 2019, university student Omar Shandi, son of *al-Mashhad* editor Magdi Shandi, was arrested by security forces who raided Shandi’s home and seized his son without providing any information about charges. Prior to the raid, *al-Mashhad* website was blocked in March 2019 (see B1) after publishing a number of articles that were critical of the government and the army.²⁴²

On September 19, 2019, the brother of internet activist Wael Ghoneim, Hazem Ghoneim, was arrested and detained by the SSSP pending investigation in case No. 1338/2019. He was accused of being part of a terrorist group, misusing social media to commit a crime, and spreading false news to disturb public peace. Wael also reported that the security forces confiscated his mother’s mobile phone and passport alongside \$28,000 dollars from the house. These measures came after Wael posted videos on Facebook that talk about public affairs in Egypt. Wael lives in the United States.²⁴³

Following the September 2019 protests, police and plainclothes security agents conducted search and seizures of citizen’s mobile devices. People were asked to unlock their mobile phones and provide access to their social media accounts, which were checked for any expression of antigovernment sentiments (see C5). It was reported that these actions were legal as the public prosecutor had issued an order to inspect the social media accounts of allegedly illegal protestors.²⁴⁴

In November 2019, after *Mada Masr* published an article on Sisi’s eldest son who was sidelined from his government position, nine plainclothes security forces raided the outlet’s office. They confiscated laptops and phones and took three staff members for interrogation who were later released.²⁴⁵ The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted that all procedures taken in the *Mada Masr* raid were legal and that the *Mada Masr*’s office did not have the required license to operate. He further denied any detentions of staff and claimed that security agents did nothing beyond inspection, interrogation, and investigation.²⁴⁶

In January 2020, police raided the Turkish state-run Anadolu News Agency office in Cairo and arrested four people, including a Turkish administrator and two Egyptian journalists, for allegedly spreading false news and operating without a license. The police examined phones, computers, and documents in the office and took the detainees afterward to an unknown location.²⁴⁷

In March 2020, the administrator of a WhatsApp group (“The distress of Egypt’s mothers in Giza”) was arrested by police forces without any clear reason. She was escorted to an unknown place and prevented from calling anyone. She was reportedly released the next day.²⁴⁸

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 1 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? **3**

Internet users in Egypt have been subject to several internal and external cyberattacks in recent years. The country was struck in 2017 by several cyberattacks that used ransomware and affected companies worldwide.²⁴⁹ In addition, a 2018 Citizen Lab report found that Telecom Egypt, the country’s main ISP, had been redirecting Egyptian internet users to malware that mines cryptocurrency or displays advertisements, apparently to generate revenue.²⁵⁰

In March 2019, the ITU ranked Egypt 23rd out of 165 countries in its 2018 Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI), which could indicate its commitment to cybersecurity.²⁵¹ However, the cybersecurity company Trend Micro released a March 2018 report finding that Egypt was the third most vulnerable country in Africa to malware attacks, after South Africa and Morocco. The manufacturing, education, government, real estate, and technology sectors were the most targeted.²⁵²

In July 2018, US cybersecurity firm Symantec reported on a new espionage campaign named "Leafminer," allegedly led by a group based in Iran that had targeted the Middle East region—including Egypt—to gain access to the emails, files, and databases of governments and businesses since early 2017. The group penetrated networks by infecting websites that the entities might use with malware, scanning networks for vulnerabilities, and systematically attempting to log in to user accounts.²⁵³

On October 3, 2019, Check Point published a report revealing Egyptian citizens were targeted through sophisticated spyware that allowed attackers to read emails, log contacts, and record locations through downloaded apps on smartphones. Some of the apps identified in the reports include Secure Mail, iLoud200%, and IndexY, which are all available on Google Play. Check Point suggested that such operations were linked to the Egyptian government given the groups that were targeted, the government's investment of human and financial resources, the structures and data downloaded, the registered server that belongs to MCIT, and the geographic coordinates corresponding to the General Intelligence Service's headquarters. The report identified 33 individuals—including journalists, politicians, activists, and lawyers—who were specifically targeted. Some of those targeted were arrested during the September 2019 antigovernment protests, including political science professor Hassan Nafaa and former president of the Destour Party and journalist Khaled Dawoud (see C3).²⁵⁴

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