

Title	Freedom in the World 2011 - Egypt
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Egypt
Publication Date	12 May 2011
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2011 - Egypt</i> , 12 May 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dcbf51bc.html [accessed 31 January 2012]
Disclaimer	This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Freedom in the World 2011 - Egypt

Capital: Cairo

Population: 78,629,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Trend Arrow ↓

Egypt received a downward trend arrow due to extensive restrictions on opposition candidates and reform advocates during the 2010 parliamentary elections, as well as a widespread crackdown on the media that resulted in increased self-censorship.

Overview

The ruling National Democratic Party won a sweeping victory in November 2010 elections for the lower house of parliament, amid allegations of widespread fraud, violent repression, and severe restrictions on opposition candidates. The authorities pursued a media crackdown throughout the year, closing independent outlets and subjecting journalists and bloggers to physical attacks and arbitrary arrests. High-profile cases of police brutality reflected a growing disregard for the rule of law among state security services.

Egypt formally gained independence from Britain in 1922 and acquired full sovereignty following World War II. After leading a coup that overthrew the monarchy in 1952, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser ruled until his death in 1970. The constitution adopted in 1971 under his successor, Anwar al-Sadat, established a strong presidential system with nominal guarantees for political and civil rights that were not respected in practice. Sadat signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and built an alliance with the United States, which provided the Egyptian government with roughly \$2 billion in aid annually.

Following Sadat's assassination in 1981, then vice president Hosni Mubarak became president and declared a state of emergency, which has been in force ever since. A deterioration in living conditions and the lack of a political outlet for many Egyptians fueled an Islamist insurgency in the early 1990s. The authorities responded by jailing thousands of suspected militants without charge and cracking down on political dissent.

Although the armed infrastructure of Islamist groups had been largely eradicated by 1998, the government continued to restrict political and civil liberties as it struggled to address Egypt's dire socioeconomic problems.

Economic growth in the late 1990s temporarily alleviated these problems, but the country experienced a downturn after the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Popular disaffection with the government spread palpably, and antigovernment demonstrations were harshly suppressed by security forces.

The government sought to cast itself as a champion of reform in 2004. Mubarak appointed a new cabinet of younger technocrats and introduced market-friendly economic reforms. However, associates of the president's son Gamal, a rising star in the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), received key portfolios, stoking suspicions of an impending hereditary succession.

Meanwhile, a consensus emerged among leftist, liberal, and Islamist political forces as to the components of desired political reform: direct, multicandidate presidential elections; the abrogation of the Emergency Law; full judicial supervision of elections; the lifting of restrictions on the formation of political parties; and an end to government interference in the operation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The opposition nevertheless remained polarized between unlicensed and licensed political groups, with the latter mostly accepting the regime's decision to put off further reform until after the 2005 elections.

In December 2004, Kifaya (Enough), an informal movement encompassing a broad spectrum of secular and Islamist activists, held the first-ever demonstration explicitly calling for Mubarak to step down. Despite a heavy-handed response by security forces, Kifaya persisted with demonstrations in 2005, leading other opposition groups to follow suit. The United States was also pressing Egypt to democratize at the time.

Mubarak proposed a constitutional amendment that would allow Egypt's first multicandidate presidential election, but it required candidates to be nominated by licensed parties or a substantial bloc of elected officials. Consequently, all major opposition groups denounced the measure and boycotted the May 2005 referendum that approved it.

The results of the September 2005 presidential election were predictably lopsided, with Mubarak winning 88 percent of the vote. His main opponent, Al-Ghad (Tomorrow) Party leader Ayman Nour, took just 8 percent and was sentenced to five years in prison on dubious charges shortly thereafter.

Three rounds of parliamentary elections in November and December 2005 featured a strong showing by the formally banned Muslim Brotherhood, whose candidates ran as independents. The Brotherhood increased its representation in the NDP-dominated lower house sixfold, to 88 of 454 seats. Voter turnout was low, and attacks on opposition voters by security forces and progovernment thugs abounded. Judges criticized the government for failing to prevent voter intimidation and refused to certify the election results, prompting the authorities to suppress judicial independence in 2006.

After postponing the 2006 municipal elections by two years, the government began a renewed crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2007, a set of 34 constitutional amendments were passed in a referendum, with turnout as low as 5 percent, according to some estimates. Opposition leaders boycotted the referendum on the grounds that the amendments would limit judicial monitoring of elections and prohibit the formation of political parties based on religious principles. The Judges' Club accused the government of ballot stuffing and vote buying. Upper house elections held that June were similarly marred by irregularities, and the Muslim Brotherhood was prevented from campaigning freely or winning any seats. When the postponed municipal elections were held in 2008, the Brotherhood was again shut out, and many senior members were sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Political tension rose in 2010 amid rumors of Mubarak's failing health and growing uncertainty over his successor. In February, former International Atomic Energy Agency director general Mohamed ElBaradei and several opposition leaders formed the nonpartisan National Association for Change to advocate for electoral reform, particularly the removal of restrictions on presidential candidates. Popular support for reform and dissatisfaction with the regime swelled after parliamentary elections in November, in which the NDP was officially credited with 420 seats in the lower house. Six small parties won a total of 15 seats, and independents – none of whom were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and all of whom reportedly cooperated with the NDP – took the remainder. The campaign period was seriously marred by an array of state abuses, and the results were seen as blatantly rigged.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Egypt is not an electoral democracy. The political system is designed to ensure solid majorities for the ruling NDP at all levels of government. Constitutional amendments passed in 2007 banned religion-based political parties, ensuring the continued suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, a nonviolent Islamist group that represents the most organized opposition to the government. President Hosni Mubarak, who has been in power since 1981, serves six-year terms and appoints the cabinet and all 26 provincial governors. The first multicandidate popular election for the presidency was held in 2005, and Mubarak's main challenger, Ayman Nour, was jailed on dubious charges soon after the vote. It was unclear in 2010 whether Mubarak, who was rumored to be ill, would run in the 2011 presidential election, or would instead be replaced by his son Gamal or another NDP stalwart. This uncertainty was the source of great tension within the party and among the Egyptian public, and it reportedly fueled the government's tightening of restrictions on political rights and civil liberties during the year.

The 518-seat People's Assembly (Majlis al-Sha'b), the parliament's lower house, exercises only limited policy influence, as the executive branch initiates almost all legislation. Ten of its members are appointed by the president, and the rest are popularly elected to five-year terms, with 64 new seats set aside for women. The November 2010 elections for the People's Assembly did not meet international standards. Massive crackdowns started before the official campaign period and included clashes between security forces and opposition candidates and supporters, severe curbs on mass communication through SMS (text messaging), and the arbitrary arrest of more than 1,200 people, including at least 700 Muslim Brotherhood supporters. The government barred international observers from the elections, and domestic observers were hamstrung by registration and election-day access restrictions. Informal monitors reported that security forces prevented people from voting, sometimes closing polls completely, and noted the widespread occurrence of vote buying, ballot stuffing, intimidation, and police violence. Opposition supporters were harassed and arrested for disseminating information and collecting signatures for political petitions. After the announcement of a sweeping first-round victory for the NDP, the opposition withdrew from the December runoff, denouncing it as completely fraudulent.

The 264-seat upper house, the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), functions solely in an advisory capacity. The president appoints 88 of its members, and the rest are elected to six-year terms, with half up for election every three years. The most recent elections for the Consultative Council were held in June 2010 and, like the subsequent People's Assembly elections, showed increased manipulation on behalf of the government. Abuses included violent clashes between security forces and opposition supporters, the obstruction of election observers, vote rigging, and harsh campaigning restrictions, particularly for the Muslim Brotherhood. The final results gave the NDP all but seven of the seats up for renewal.

The 2007 constitutional amendments allow citizens to form political parties "in accordance with the law," but no party can be based on religion, gender, or ethnic origin. New parties must be approved by a presidentially appointed committee according to very restrictive yet vague criteria. Religious parties had long been banned, and while Muslim Brotherhood candidates have competed as independents, rigging ensured that none won seats in the 2010 elections. Indeed, the government had waged a vigorous

crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood since 2006. Members and supporters have regularly been detained on questionable charges, and senior Brotherhood officials are sometimes charged in military courts. A political party must have been continuously operating for at least five years and occupy at least 5 percent of parliamentary seats to nominate a presidential candidate, making it nearly impossible for any opposition candidate to participate in the 2011 presidential election.

Corruption remains pervasive at all levels of government. Egypt was ranked 98 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of the press is restricted in law and practice. The state dominates the broadcast media and exercises influence over all privately owned publications through its printing and distribution monopoly. The three leading daily newspapers are state controlled, and their editors are appointed by the president. Foreign publications and Egyptian publications registered abroad are subject to direct government censorship. Foreign journalists are sometimes harassed or expelled. Several privately owned Egyptian satellite television stations have been established, but their programming is subject to state influence, which was particularly strong during the 2010 election season. The popular political talk show *Al-Qahira al-Youm* was cancelled after a dispute with a government-owned production studio, which claimed that the show had failed to pay its studio rental fees; the show's cohost argued that the cancellation was a move by the government to tighten control of political coverage. Similarly, Ibrahim Eissa was fired as editor of the independent newspaper *Al-Dustour* shortly after publishing an editorial that was critical of the military. The newspaper's owner, a close ally of the NDP, claimed that Eissa was fired for incompetence, but others pointed to the editor's frank coverage of corruption and the political succession question as the real reason behind his dismissal. Other signs of stricter government control over the Egyptian media in 2010 included the cancellation of numerous political columns and shows, the closing of four independent television channels, and widespread arbitrary arrests of journalists before and during the election campaign.

Films, plays, and books are subject to censorship, especially for content deemed contrary to Islam or harmful to the country's reputation. A number of books and movies have been banned on the advice of the country's senior clerics.

Authorities use an array of security-related and other laws to curb independent reporting. A 2006 law abolished custodial sentences for libel, but increased the possible fines, and journalists are still jailed for other offenses. The authorities also routinely use *hisba* lawsuits, in which a defendant is charged with blasphemy or other supposed religious violations, to intimidate bloggers and journalists.

Blogger Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman was released in November 2010 after serving a four-year prison sentence for criticizing Islam and the president, but internet journalists and bloggers continue to face severe repression. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists ranks Egypt as one of the ten worst countries in which to be a blogger, and reports that the authorities monitor internet traffic to gather information on potential targets for legal action.

Islam is the state religion. The government appoints the staff of registered mosques and closely monitors the content of sermons in thousands of small, unauthorized mosques. Most Egyptians are Sunni Muslims, but Coptic Christians form a substantial minority, and there are a very small number of Jews, Shiite Muslims, and Baha'is. A March 2009 ministerial decree recognized the right of adherents of "nonrecognized" religions to obtain identification papers, effectively ending the policy of forcing Baha'is to identify as Muslims or Christians. Separately, a 2008 court ruling found that Christian converts to Islam were free to return to Christianity. Despite these positive developments, anti-Christian employment discrimination is evident in the public sector, especially the security services and military, and the government frequently denies or delays permission to build and repair churches. When clashes between Christians and Muslims occur, the authorities generally attempt to downplay the religious nature of the strife.

However, interreligious bloodshed has been increasing, with Coptic Christians suffering the brunt of the violence. Tensions continued to rise in 2010, particularly following the drive-by shooting of six Coptic Christians and one Muslim after a Coptic mass in January. The attack was purportedly a response to the alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Christian man months earlier. In July, Camilia Shehata, a Coptic priest's wife, was apprehended by police after leaving her husband. Demonstrations ensued in both Christian and Muslim communities after rumors arose that Shehata had been kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam and, conversely, that the Coptic Church was holding her against her will to prevent such a conversion.

Academic freedom is limited. Senior university officials are appointed by the government, and the security services reportedly influence academic appointments, censor the curriculum, and monitor classroom discussion. University professors and students have been prosecuted for political and human rights advocacy outside of the classroom.

Freedoms of assembly and association are heavily restricted. Organizers of public demonstrations must receive advance approval from the Interior Ministry, which is rarely granted. The Emergency Law allows arrest for innocuous acts such as insulting the president, blocking traffic, or distributing leaflets and posters. Authorities have cracked down more zealously on protesters and labor activists in recent years. In 2010, the government routinely arrested civilians who were protesting police brutality and demanding political reform, holding them without charge.

The Law of Associations prohibits the establishment of groups "threatening national unity [or] violating public morals," bars NGOs from receiving foreign grants without the approval of the Social Affairs Ministry, requires ministry approval of members of NGO governing boards, and allows the ministry to dissolve NGOs without a judicial order. Security services have rejected registrations, decided who could serve on boards of directors, harassed activists, and intercepted donations.

The 2003 Unified Labor Law limits the right to strike to "nonstrategic" industries and requires workers to obtain approval for a strike from the government-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation. Though strikes are often subject to violent police repression, a wave of wildcat strikes that began in 2006 continued through 2010.

The Supreme Judicial Council, a supervisory body of senior judges, nominates and assigns most members of the judiciary. However, the Justice Ministry controls promotions and compensation, giving it undue influence over the courts. The 2006 Judicial Authority Law offered some concessions to judicial independence, but fell short of Judges' Club recommendations.

Egypt's Emergency Law, in effect since 1981, was again renewed in 2010, despite Mubarak's 2005 promise that it would be replaced with specific antiterrorism legislation. Under the Emergency Law, "security" cases are usually referred to executive-controlled exceptional courts that deny defendants many constitutional protections. Special courts issue verdicts that cannot be appealed and are subject to ratification by the president. Although judges in these courts are typically selected from the civilian judiciary, they are appointed directly by the president. Political activists are often tried under the Emergency Law. The 2007 constitutional amendments essentially enshrined many controversial aspects of the Emergency Law, such as the president's authority to transfer civilians suspected of terrorism to military courts.

Because military judges are appointed by the executive branch to renewable two-year terms, military tribunals lack independence. Verdicts are based on little more than the testimony of security officers and informers, and are reviewed only by a body of military judges and the president. Legislation passed in 2007 allows for limited appeal of military court decisions, but opposition figures denounced it as an inadequate attempt to bolster the rights guarantees of that year's constitutional amendments.

The Emergency Law restricts many other basic rights, empowering the government to

tap telephones, intercept mail, conduct warrantless searches, and indefinitely detain suspects without charge if they are deemed a threat to national security.

Prison conditions are very poor; inmates are subject to torture and other abuse, overcrowding, and a lack of sanitation and medical care. Police brutality appeared to be on the rise in 2010. In one high-profile case in June, Alexandria-based blogger Khaled Said was beaten to death in public by security forces after he posted a video recording of police sharing the spoils of a drug bust. Widespread riots over the killing seemed to have no deterrent effect, as at least one other civilian, Ahmed Shabaan, was found beaten to death in October after being detained in the same police precinct as Khaled Said.

Although the constitution provides for equality of the sexes, some aspects of the law and many traditional practices discriminate against women. Job discrimination is evident even in the civil service. Muslim women are placed at a disadvantage by laws on divorce and other personal status issues, and a Muslim heiress typically receives half the amount of her male counterparts. However, Christians are not subject to such provisions of Islamic law. Domestic violence is common, as is sexual harassment on the street. Spousal rape is not illegal, and the penal code allows for leniency in so-called honor killings. The government has been involved in a major public-information campaign against female genital mutilation, but it is still widely practiced.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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