

[ecoi.net - European Country of Origin Information Network](#)

[EN](#) | [DE](#)

- **Source:**
Freedom House
- **Title:**
Freedom of the Press 2016 - Egypt
- **Publication date:**
27 April 2016
- **ecoi.net summary:** Annual report on press freedom (covering 2015) [ID 323445]
- **Countries:**
Egypt
- [Original link](#)

Recommended citation:

Freedom House: Freedom of the Press 2016 - Egypt, 27 April 2016 (available at [ecoi.net](#))
http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/323445/449342_en.html (accessed 28 September 2016)



Freedom of the Press 2016 - Egypt

Year:

2016

Press Freedom Status:

Not Free

PFS Score:

77

Legal Environment:

25

Political Environment:

35

Economic Environment:

17

Overview

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's efforts to silence dissent and shutter outlets affiliated with the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood have produced a media environment in which most public and private outlets are firmly supportive of the regime. In 2015, authorities continued to employ a variety of tools against journalists and media outlets that strayed from officially sanctioned narratives, including legal prosecution, gag orders, and the outright halting of operations. Dozens of journalists were physically assaulted during the year by both security agents and civilians.

Key Developments

- Egypt was the world's second-worst jailer of journalists in 2015, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), with 23 reporters behind bars as of December.
- A new counterterrorism law banned the dissemination of material that contradicts Defense Ministry accounts of militant attacks, severely curtailing journalists' ability to report on national security topics.
- The already high rate of media freedom violations spiked during the parliamentary election period, which lasted from October through early December.
- The struggling public broadcaster continued to lose viewership during the year, as audiences turned to private channels based both in Egypt and abroad.

Legal Environment: 25 / 30 (↓1)

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

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

Moreover, the existing press laws and penal code remained in place, including an array of articles that can be used to imprison journalists. For example, defamation is a criminal offense, and sentences of up to five years in prison can be imposed for blasphemy, or "exploiting religion in spreading, either by words, in writing or in any other means, extreme ideas for the purposes of

inciting strife, ridiculing or insulting [the Abrahamic faiths] or a sect following it, or damaging national unity.”

The authorities continued to arrest and prosecute journalists during 2015, subjecting them to deeply flawed legal proceedings that disregarded their fundamental rights. According to CPJ, 23 journalists were behind bars in Egypt as of December, with the number reaching 36 at its highest point during the year. In April, 13 journalists were sentenced to life in prison, and one was sentenced to death, following convictions for plotting against the state during a 2013 sit-in at Cairo’s Raba’a Square, which ended when a violent crackdown by security forces killed hundreds of civilians. After months of delays and obstructions in the appeals process, Egypt’s Court of Cassation granted the journalists a retrial in December, though they remained in custody. In January 2015, an appeals court granted a retrial to three employees of Qatar’s Al-Jazeera television network who were detained in late 2013 and subsequently sentenced to lengthy prison terms for supposedly spreading false news and aiding the Muslim Brotherhood, now deemed a terrorist organization. One of the reporters, Peter Greste, an Australian citizen, was deported in February 2015. The others—Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, an Egyptian-born Canadian citizen, and Baher Mohamed, an Egyptian national—were released on bail later that month but convicted again at their retrial in August, along with Greste in absentia. In September, Fahmy and Mohamed were released under a presidential pardon. A number of other journalists faced the imminent threat of detention in connection with pending charges or convictions in absentia.

Authorities restricted reporting on security issues through a variety of means during 2015. Among them was a new counterterrorism law, issued by al-Sisi in August, that prohibits journalists from publishing information related to militant violence if it contradicts official government accounts. Violations can result in heavy fines and a one-year ban from the practice of journalism. The measure makes it extremely difficult for journalists to freely report on areas affected by terrorism and insurgency, particularly the Sinai Peninsula.

In November, Hossam Bahgat, a prominent journalist with the online newspaper *Mada Masr*, was detained in connection with an article on the August convictions of 26 military officers charged with plotting to depose al-Sisi. Bahgat was released after two days in detention, during which time he was interrogated by military intelligence officers and charged with disseminating false information and endangering national security; at year’s end it was unclear whether the charges had been dropped. Also in November, investigative journalist Ismail Alexandrani was arrested by security forces upon his return to Egypt from Berlin; Alexandrani, whose work focuses on jihadist movements in the Sinai Peninsula, was later charged with disseminating false information and belonging to a terrorist organization, and he remained in custody at year’s end.

Al-Sisi’s administration made no progress on draft freedom of information legislation that was initially debated in 2013.

Licensing and registration processes are often arbitrary and opaque, with formal regulations weakly or unevenly enforced. Decisions on media operations are frequently made according to political or security concerns rather than impartial regulatory mechanisms. Despite this lack of standardized procedures, journalists and media outlets that fail to toe the government line regularly face accusations of failing to secure proper registration. In July 2015, for example, security officials arrested Yahya Khalaf, director of the independent online news network Yaqeen, during a raid of its offices; he was accused of possessing video editing equipment without a proper license, in addition

to more serious allegations of illegally operating a media wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Khalaf was released on bail in September. Licensing violations were also among the crimes that Fahmy, Mohamed, and Greste of Al-Jazeera were convicted of in August.

The 2014 constitution calls for an independent media regulator, but it has yet to be established. The Ministry of Information performed this function previously, but the relevant department began to be phased out in 2014, when the position of information minister was abolished. Subsequently, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), Egypt's public broadcaster, was tapped to manage a transitional process during which a new regulatory body would be established. In 2015, proposals began to emerge concerning the regulator's formation, structure, and authority, but no comprehensive plan was adopted by year's end. Among the proposals was a draft media law developed by Egyptian media professionals, in consultation with government officials, on the regulation of print and digital media outlets. The proposed legislation contained a provision setting very high capital requirements for the establishment of new outlets.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to protecting journalists' rights and freedom of expression have long been subject to restrictive laws that apply to all civil society groups. In 2014, al-Sisi signed a decree that amended the penal code to ban the receipt of foreign funding for activities that "harm the national interest," potentially affecting NGOs. Violations of the law can be punished with life imprisonment and fines of nearly \$70,000, and the death penalty would apply if the offender is a public servant or linked to terrorism.

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

Political Environment: 35 / 40 (↓2)

Following the 2013 coup that brought al-Sisi to power, the authorities began to purge the media of any support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Any strong criticism of al-Sisi was also sidelined or suppressed. This process continued in 2015, with public and private outlets broadly embracing pro-Sisi and anti-Muslim Brotherhood narratives and expressing strong support for the security forces. Al-Sisi himself frequently convenes private meetings with prominent newspaper editors and television presenters, during which he has discouraged critical reporting and called on journalists to produce material aimed at inspiring national unity.

As in previous years, state media generally displayed a progovernment bias. Journalists at public outlets can face disciplinary action for straying from government narratives. In November 2015, a prominent ERTU television host, Azza al-Hanawy, was suspended after calling on al-Sisi to address government corruption; the broadcaster's head, Essam al-Amir, said al-Hanawy was suspended because she "went off the script" and demonstrated a lack of neutrality. She was allowed to return to work later that month.

There are virtually no private stations based in Egypt that oppose the government. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist opposition elements have moved their affiliated media operations abroad, primarily to Turkey, where they established satellite television and online outlets. Many such outlets feature inflammatory political and sectarian rhetoric. While some Egypt-based reporters at private outlets criticized government agencies during 2015, such outlets generally refrain from criticizing al-Sisi, and reporters who do can face pressure from owners and management. The Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate documented numerous cases of managers at private outlets suspending television programs or withdrawing print or online articles for crossing certain redlines in their reporting. In April 2015, the Saudi-owned Egyptian television station MBC Masr suspended the news program of Ibrahim Eissa after he criticized the Saudi government, a close ally of al-Sisi's regime. The same month, the controversial talk show *With Islam*, broadcast on the privately owned satellite channel Al-Qaherah wal Nas, was canceled following pressure from the powerful grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque, who opposed its programming. In May, Islam al-Beheiry, the show's host, was convicted of blasphemy in connection with its content and sentenced to five years in prison, though in December the term was reduced to one year.

In addition to editorial pressure at public and private outlets, direct censorship was a problem in 2015, with the government or judicial officials issuing multiple gag orders to restrict media coverage of sensitive issues. One such order prohibited reporting on a September incident in which an Egyptian military helicopter mistakenly fired on a group of Mexican tourists and their Egyptian police escorts, killing 12 people.

Journalists frequently face interference in the course of their work. Domestic media rights organizations documented numerous cases of obstruction of coverage, illegal detention, and outright attacks in 2015, and the rate of violations spiked in the last quarter of the year, during and after parliamentary elections. Many such incidents also took place during January 2015 demonstrations marking the fourth anniversary of former president Hosni Mubarak's ouster; numerous journalists were assaulted, detained, or had their equipment confiscated while covering the events. The Association for Free Thought and Expression (AFTE), an Egyptian NGO, documented dozens of physical attacks against journalists in 2015, committed by both security forces and civilians.

Journalists have been detained for long periods of time without charge, and some have reported torture or other mistreatment in custody. According to an August 2015 Amnesty International report, Mahmoud Abu Zeid, a freelance photojournalist who has been held in pretrial detention since August 2013, said he was tortured by security agents and has been denied medication necessary to treat hepatitis.

Economic Environment: 17 / 30 (↓1)

Egypt has more than 500 newspapers, magazines, journals, and other periodicals, and the state retains ownership of several important titles. However, print media have limited circulation. In a country of 89 million people, the largest newspapers, including *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Masry al-Youm*, have circulations of less than a million.

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

Some 32 percent of Egyptians accessed the internet regularly as of 2014, and nearly 70 percent had access to mobile telephones. Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, play an important role in diffusing news and information. By 2015, 28 million Egyptians were on Facebook, accounting for roughly 30 percent of all Facebook users in the Arab world.

Authorities sometimes interfere with media production and distribution. In August 2015, the newspapers *Al-Mesryoon*, *Al-Sabah*, and *Sawt al-Ummah* were stopped from printing issues or had pressruns destroyed before distribution due to state objections to their content, resulting in financial damage to the outlets.

Trends in media ownership, spending, revenues, and advertising are difficult to assess given the industry's opacity. The government supports state media directly and through advertising, although it is unclear what types of advertising subsidies exist. The country's weak economy has forced both state-owned and private outlets to slash their budgets. Shutdowns, layoffs, and cuts to content were common across the media industry in 2015.

published on

[Disclaimer](#) | [Imprint](#)

                                                                                          