Freedom on the Net 2009: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media

Egypt

Status: Partly Free
Obstacles to Access: 8 (0–25)
Limits on Content: 11 (0–35)
Violations of User Rights: 26 (0–40)
Total Score: 45 (0–100)

Introduction

While the Egyptian government has aggressively and successfully sought to expand access to the internet as an engine of economic growth, its security services and allied individuals have increasingly attempted to curtail the use of new technologies for disseminating and receiving sensitive political information. This is usually through such "low-tech" methods as intimidation, legal procedures, detentions, and real-world surveillance of online activists.

Egypt first introduced access to the internet in October 1993 through the Egyptian Universities Network and the Egyptian cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC). The prime minister, the minister of communications and information technology, and the heads of the country's leading internet service providers (ISPs) are all graduates of the IDSC, a fact that may explain the civilian government's internet-friendly policy. The public first gained access in 1996, but the technology did not really take off until 2002, when the government introduced a "Free Internet" program, whereby anyone with a telephone line and a computer could access the internet for the price of a local call ($0.15 an hour). Offline repression of online activists is sporadic and keyed to sensitive political events.

Obstacles to Access

Access to digital communications has grown exponentially since it was first made available to the public in 1996, but widespread poverty and poor infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, remain barriers to access. According to government statistics, 0.58 percent of the population used the internet regularly in 1999. By 2008, the figure had grown to 14 percent and 10.7 million users.[1] Broadband internet, while widely available, remains prohibitively expensive for most of Egypt's population, 40 percent of which lives on $2 or less a day.[2] In 2008, just over 1 percent of the population had a broadband connection at home, but internet cafes offering such connections are common, even in urban slums and small villages. In December 2008, an average of 200,000 people a week used these cafes. Also in 2008, 31 million people had a mobile telephone.[3] Later generation mobile phones, such as Apple's iPhone, are available in the country, but without the Global Positioning System (GPS) feature, as the authorities have banned the technology, claiming it would enable terrorists to target military installations.[4] The video-sharing site YouTube, the social-networking site Facebook, and international blog-hosting services are freely available.

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More than 200 ISPs serve Egypt's population of roughly 80 million people, but Link.net and TE-Data are by far the largest.[5] Most ISPs lease bandwidth from these two companies, both of which are run by men with close connections to the government. Three mobile-phone operators—Vodafone, Mobinil, and most recently the Dubai-based Etisalat—serve Egyptian subscribers. All three offer broadband internet connections via USB modems. Mobile-phone services and ISPs are regulated by the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA) pursuant to the 2003 Telecommunication Law. The NTRA's board is currently chaired by Minister of Internet and Communications Technologies Tariq Kamel, but it also includes representatives of the president, the ruling party, the interior and defense ministries, and the country's domestic intelligence service, State Security Investigations.[6] There have been no reported incidents of ISPs being denied registration permits.

Limits on Content

The Egyptian government does not engage in widespread censorship of the internet.[7] Court cases against traditional journalists and "friendly" phone calls from military or security officers to both journalists and activists have established such topics as the military, the president's health, Muslim-Christian tensions, and torture as sensitive topics that must be handled with particular care, if at all. However, online writers routinely disregard most of these "red lines," often with impunity. Some ISPs offer subscribers "family internet" packages that block access to pornography and sites advocating violence, in exchange for a small premium.

In the past four years, Egypt has witnessed the birth of a lively and diverse "blogosphere." Many bloggers have become media celebrities and have won international awards for their work. This in turn may have helped spur interest in blogging among young Egyptians. As the number of blogs has increased, so has the diversity of opinion and content. Lesbian and gay Egyptians compete for space and attention on the internet with activists from the conservative Muslim Brotherhood. Opposition and human rights activists have found innovative ways to use blogs and social-networking sites such as Facebook and Jaiku to call attention to causes and organize protests. In some cases, they have succeeded in doing what traditional activists rarely have. In 2007, a Cairo court sentenced two police officers to three years in prison for beating and raping a microbus driver based on video evidence first obtained by Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas, who posted the video on YouTube.[8] Egyptian bloggers have also played a crucial role in focusing the government's and the media's attention on the problem of sexual harassment of women on the streets of Cairo. The publicity generated by their reporting has given rise to dozens of governmental and civil-society campaigns seeking an end to the problem, and the police have begun to take action.[9]

Violations of Users' Rights

No laws specifically grant the government the power to censor the internet, and authorities have resisted calls to censor websites.[10] Egypt's constitution upholds freedom of speech, and the 2003 Law on Telecommunications as well as guaranteeing a citizens' right to privacy, also requires a judicial warrant for surveillance.[11] However, articles of the penal code and the Emergency Law, which has been in effect without interruption since 1981, give security agencies broad authority to monitor and censor all communications.[12] Amendments to the Press Law

passed in 2006 preserved provisions that criminalize "spreading false news" and criticizing the head of state of Egypt or another country,[13] and courts have ruled that these restrictions apply to online writings.[14] Constitutional amendments passed in 2007 paved the way for future counterterrorism legislation that could uphold Emergency Law provisions allowing for widespread surveillance.[15] Nevertheless, in December 2007 an administrative court judge issued a decision rejecting a request by a fellow member of the judiciary to ban 51 Egyptian websites, including those of several human rights organizations. In his decision, the judge emphasized the importance of respecting freedom of expression, including on the internet.[16]

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Egyptian security services monitor internet and mobile-phone communications, but the surveillance is believed to be far-reaching. Among the evidence pointing to this conclusion are the recent detention of two activists for using Facebook to organize strikes (see below), and the anecdotal reports that police often appear in advance at the sites of protests that were planned by text messages and e-mail. Those speaking on mobile phones to known activists and journalists within Egypt report that they frequently hear a suspicious echo or strange clicks and beeps. The legal environment allows for such surveillance, and indeed the security services have sought to perpetuate the impression that their monitoring is pervasive. At least one security officer has boasted in the press that the internet is monitored in real time.[17] In addition, security services use legal and extralegal means to collect internet and mobile-phone users' records from ISPs, internet cafes, and mobile-phone companies in the course of their investigations.

To date, only one person has been sentenced to prison in Egypt for his online activities, but security services have used detentions and harassment, and in some cases torture, to intimidate online writers. On February 22, 2007, Abd al-Karim Nabil Suleiman (widely known as Karim Amer), then a 22-year-old student of religious law at Al-Azhar University, became Egypt's first blogger to be sentenced to prison for his online writings. A court in Alexandria handed Suleiman a four-year prison term on charges of "insulting Islam" and "insulting the president."[18] On March 10, 2007, blogger Mohammad al-Sharqawi, who had previously been tortured for participating in a street protest, returned home to find that his laptop, which he said contained an unreleased video depicting police abuse, had been stolen, though cash and other valuable items were not taken.[19] On April 14, 2007, security officers arrested Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated blogger and journalist Abd al-Monim Mahmud. He had recently blogged about his experience of torture in 2003. He was held for 47 days on charges of belonging to a banned organization before being released without trial.[20] Security forces arrested Isra Abd al-Fattah for using Facebook to call for a general strike on April 6, 2008. She was held for two weeks, despite a prosecutor's decision to dismiss charges of "inciting unrest," before her eventual release on April 23. And in May, state security officers detained and beat Ahmed Maher, a 27-year-old engineer who had also used Facebook to call for a general strike to mark President Hosni Mubarak's 80th birthday three days prior. The officers released Maher without charge the next night, but warned him that he would be beaten more severely the next time he was detained.[21] Others have received less-publicized threats and low-level harassment. This focus on legal repercussions and extra-judicial intimidation for online activity is the primary method of state control of an otherwise relatively open medium, and although recent, appears set to increase.

[1]   International Telecommunications Union via "Internet world stats": http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Default.aspx, Accessed on March 10, 2009

[2]   World Bank and Ministry of Economic Development poverty assessment update, 2007

[3]   ITU, http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Default.aspx, Accessed on March 10, 2009

[4] *The Telegraph*, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/technology/3687651/Apple-removes-GPS-from-iPhone-sold-in-Egypt-over-security-fears.html , Accessed March 20, 2009.

[5] Ministry of Communications and Information Technology Web site, "Telecom Reform Milestones," http://www.mcit.gov.eg/tele_Mileston.aspx, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[6] National Telecommunication Regulatory Agency Web site, http://www.tra.gov.eg/english/DPages_DPagesDetails.asp?ID=175&Menu=5, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[7] Open Net Initiative, Egypt Country Profile, http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[8] "Egypt: Police Officers Get Three Years for Beating, Raping Detainee," Human Rights Watch, November 6, 2007, http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2007/11/06/egypt-police-officers-get-three-years-beating-raping-detainee?print, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[9] "550 Schoolgirls harassed in one day," Al-Arabiya, November 20, 2008, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/11/20/60477.html, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[10] Report of the State Commissioner Committee, June 2007, in response to Judge Abd al-Fatah Murad's lawsuit demanding the state censor 51 web sites of human rights organizations and blogs on national security grounds, on file with the author. The committee rejected the law suit after government lawyers explained why the government did not want to begin censoring the Internet.

[11] Law 10 of 2003, article 65.

[12] Law 162 of 1958, renewed in 1981.

[13] Law 147 of 2006.

[14] *International Herald Tribune*, http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/02/26/opinion/edblog.php, Accessed March 20, 2009.

[15] "Egypt: Proposed constitutional amendments greatest erosion of human rights in 26 years," Amnesty International, March 18, 2007, http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE12/008/2007/en/dom-MDE120082007en.html, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[16] "Court rejects request to ban 51 websites," Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/89371, Accessed March 25, 2009

[17] Egypt Internet Country Profile, Reporters sans frontieres, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10732, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[18] "Internet Enemies: Egypt," Reporters sans frontieres, 2008, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=26150&Valider=OK, Accessed March 10, 2009.

[19] Interview with the author, March 12, 2007.

[20] Interview with the author, June 15, 2007.

[21] Interview with the author, May 8, 2008.