



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy



Press Freedom in Egypt



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Summary

- Reporters Without Borders ranked Egypt 161st out of 180 countries for press freedom in 2017, citing campaigns by security forces to marginalize dissenting media opinions and the passage of a law that created a monitoring body with the power to fine or suspend media outlets.
- Tactics including imprisonment of individual journalists, media blackouts, channel closures or blockages, and laws criminalizing “false news” have been used to **stifle** both independent and, increasingly, even pro-regime media.
- President Abdel-Fattah El Sisi ratified a restrictive media law in August 2018, which sets forth extensive restrictions that empower state authorities to prevent outlets from publishing certain content. The law also establishes burdensome licensing regulations for press entities to become recognized by the state; already, at least one online news website has been forced to suspend its operations in the wake of the law’s implementation.

Overall Situation

Egypt today is among the world’s worst offenders against press freedom. While Egypt’s **current constitution** enshrines a free press, bans censorship, and ensures press independence, these rights are not protected in practice. The government has frequently imprisoned journalists or blocked them from reporting; with 28 journalists in jail, Egypt was **ranked** as the third-worst jailer of journalists worldwide in 2017 by the Committee to Protect Journalists. The government has additionally targeted critical or independent news **outlets** for **closure**. The country was **ranked** 161st of 180 coun-

tries surveyed for press freedom by Reporters Without Borders' 2017 report, which was released a few weeks after *al-Bawaba*, a daily publication, had [two days](#) of print runs confiscated for being critical of the security services. In late 2017, the independent media outlet Mada Masr reported on the General Intelligence Directorate's acquisition of a media conglomerate that owned OnTV, *al-Youm al-Sabaa*, and five other media outlets.

This situation has deteriorated in 2018, with reporting on the controlled nature of the election period or coverage not absolutely favorable to Sisi facing hostility. At least 17 media workers were arrested in 2018, Sisi ratified a restrictive new law governing media institutions, journalist Bel Trew of the *Times* of London was expelled, the number of blocked websites by government authorities has exceeded 500, and the outlets Masr al-Arabia and *al-Masry al-Youm* were ordered to pay hefty fines for reporting on alleged illegal government activity during the presidential election..

Background

Under former president Hosni Mubarak, journalists were [pressured](#) out of work, [attacked](#) by security forces, [detained for their reporting](#), and arrested for covering sensitive issues or government decisions. Despite a temporary opening of media space in 2011, the Egyptian state's violations of press freedom following the January 25 Revolution include outlet closures as well as the [deaths](#), [arrests](#), and [sentencing](#) of Egyptian and foreign journalists, particularly after the Raba'a al-Adaweya Square dispersal in August 2013. Photojournalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid, known as Shawkan, was detained while covering the events at Raba'a, and spent over two years in pretrial detention (in violation of legal limits) before being formally charged. Shawkan, who was given the International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2016, was [issued](#) a five-year sentence in September 2018 in the Raba'a sit-in dispersal case. Despite having already served the entirety of his five-year sentence, Shawkan remains in prison today because he and other defendants have been ordered to pay financial compensation for damages incurred during the Raba'a protest and dispersal. The case of three Al Jazeera journalists—Peter Greste, Mohamed Fahmy, and Baher Mohamed—arrested in December 2013, also [grabbed](#) international headlines when the men were originally [found guilty](#) of spreading false news and aiding the Muslim Brotherhood and [sentenced](#) to between seven and 10 years in prison. Following an international outcry, Australian Greste was deported; Fahmy and Mohamed were [pardoned](#) by Sisi in September 2015.

Security forces have also targeted journalists for organizing as part of the Journalists Syndicate, as was the case with Mahmoud al-Sakka and Amr Badr, who were arrested in May 2016 from the union's headquarters during a demonstration protesting the cession of the Tiran and Sanafir Islands. Former syndicate chairman Yehia Qallash and two board members were later [sentenced](#) to two years in prison for “harboring fugitives” in a related case (though the decisions were [suspended](#)). Yet the syndicate has grown increasingly supportive of government policies in light of the tightening space for media. Syndicate Secretary-General Hatem Zakariya, also a member of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation, and Chairman Abdel Mohsen Salama are [preparing](#) separate amendments to the Law Regulating the Journalists Syndicate at the behest of an undisclosed state institution.

The government has also moved to [ban](#) privately owned and international news outlets, including Al Jazeera and the BBC, for coverage it views as biased or inciting violence. Egypt's State Council administrative court similarly [ordered](#) in 2013 the closure of four television channels—Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr, Ahrar 25, al-Quds, and al-Yarmuk—pegged as sympathizers with the now-banned Muslim Brotherhood. In January 2015, Sisi [issued a decree](#) giving the prime minister the power to ban any foreign publication “offensive to religion.” Following a BBC report documenting human rights abuses under Sisi, government officials motioned to suspend the media outlet's operating license for disseminating false news, though Egypt's Court for Urgent Matters [ruled](#) the case inadmissible. The government has also extended its censorship policies to include reasons of “morality,” as when the

Supreme Council for Media Regulation **banned** four different entertainment programs in February 2018, including SNL Arabia.

Censorship of existing media is a common occurrence. Over 500 websites are currently **blocked** in Egypt, which security agencies **justify** by claiming that these institutions support terrorism and spread lies pertaining to the government. Katib, a news website that reported on rights issues, was **blocked** by Egyptian authorities in June 2018 nine hours after its website launched. Faced with the requirement to pay a licensing fee of 50,000 Egyptian pounds (LE) and submit paperwork under the 2018 media law, Katib decided to suspend its operations in November 2018, as the Supreme Council for Media Regulation could not guarantee that the blocking of Katib's website would be lifted or that its paperwork would be accepted despite its willingness to participate in the registration process. Media **gag orders** are similarly used to prevent reporting on sensitive issues, and the 2015 Counter-terrorism Law **forbids** journalists from publishing information that contradicts official government accounts of security data. Self-censorship is also common, and as early as 2014 a group of Egyptian newspaper editors signed a **statement** pledging to limit criticism of state institutions.

The presidential election period witnessed an intense crackdown on the media. Six reporters were arrested in the week following the voting period for reporting on a *New York Times* article detailing vote buying. While the specific charges for each journalist varied, a common component was the charge of "spreading false news in an attempt to defame the state." Similarly, *al-Masry al-Youm* newspaper and *Masr al-Arabia* were fined LE150,000 and LE50,000, respectively, for publishing reports pertaining to the *New York Times* article, while the editors-in-chief at both publications were investigated. *Al-Masry al-Youm* **replaced** its editor-in-chief, Muhammad Sayyid Saleh, in April 2018, while Masr al-Arabia Editor-in-Chief Adel Sabry has been detained by security forces since April 2018 because of the report. Prior to the election, authorities arrested, threatened with military trial, and ultimately expelled the *Times* of London reporter **Bel Trew** for reportedly not possessing the proper credentials as a foreign correspondent. The crackdown during this period reached supporters of the government, as pro-state TV host Khairy Ramadan was **detained** for what he described as the grand sacrifices of police forces in comparison to their low salaries.

Government officials and politicians in Egypt have rejected accusations that the state is targeting press freedom, yet the state fails to protect that same freedom. In August 2018, Sisi **ratified** a restrictive media law, known as the Supreme Council for Media Regulations Law (SCMR Law), that limits the operational capacity of media institutions and instills burdensome registration requirements for entities seeking to be recognized by the state. The SCMR Law **prevents** print or online media outlets from publishing or broadcasting content in violation of the constitution, public morals, and public order, among other criteria. The law also **prohibits** the publication of "false news" and designates any online account with over 5,000 subscribers as official members of the media for this specific false news prohibition. Both the Journalists Syndicate and the State Council **opposed** numerous portions of the law during the drafting process and review, yet there is no indication that any of their objections were addressed in the final version of the law. Also in August 2018, Sisi ratified the Cybercrime Law, which requires internet providers to store user data for 180 days; this data can be accessed upon request by state authorities. The law also **permits** state authorities to block websites without judicial approval if content on a website is deemed threatening toward national security, constituting yet another source of potential infringement upon the ability of outlets to publish freely.

In terms of judicial proceedings, Sisi has often **refused to pardon** journalists, arguing that his government "will not interfere in judicial rulings," and instead should "respect judicial rulings and not criticize them." In August 2015, Sisi **stated** after a meeting with editors of various African newspapers that no journalists in Egypt are being jailed for crimes related to publishing. Egypt's foreign minister **declared** in August 2015 that no journalists are in jail in Egypt for doing their job and claimed that all detained journalists have been implicated for terrorist activities or have broken the law.

Analysis and Areas of Concern

While suppression of press freedoms was common under Mubarak, it has become systemic under Sisi, especially as he attempts to strengthen his control of public forums after securing a second term. Arrests of individual journalists, targeting of independent news outlets, censorship, and the passage of increasingly restrictive legislation are all designed to suppress independent news voices and criticism of state policies. Assurances by Egyptian officials that there is no targeting of independent media ring hollow when the country ranks third internationally for the number of jailed journalists. Independent media outlets have been increasingly brought under state control, whether through the aforementioned coercive tactics, the military intelligence's acquisition of a large media conglomerate, or through the creation of a climate of fear in which journalists are forced to choose between self-censorship or sanction.

TIMEP Coverage

- “Egypt’s New Media Regulations: Legislating State Control over Information” ([TIMEP Commentary](#))
- “In an Election Vacuum, It’s Tough Being a Journalist” ([TIMEP Commentary](#)).
- Pulling Back the Curtain: Dynamics and Implications of Egypt’s Elections Period ([TIMEP Project](#))
- “TIMEP Condemns Storming of the Egyptian Press Syndicate and Arrest of Two Journalists” ([TIMEP Press Release](#))



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