

Freedom of the Press—2009

Egypt

Status: Partly Free

Legal Environment: 21

Political Environment: 21

Economic Environment: 18

Total Score: 60

Survey Edition	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Total Score, Status	76,NF	68,NF	61,NF	62,NF	59,PF

Press freedom in Egypt did not improve in 2008. The Emergency Law, the Press Law, and other provisions of the penal code circumscribe the media, despite constitutional guarantees of freedoms. Even after the 2006 amendments to the Press Law, dissemination of “false news,” criticism of the president and foreign leaders, and publication of material that constitutes “an attack against the dignity and honor of individuals” or an “outrage of the reputation of families” remain criminal offenses that are prosecuted opportunistically by the authorities. Penalties include fines ranging from EGP5,000 to EGP20,000 (US\$900 to US\$3,600) for press infractions and up to five years imprisonment for criticizing a foreign head of state or the president. Journalists have few professional protections and remain vulnerable to prosecution under these laws. Egyptian journalists still spoke out but were confronted by arrests, lawsuits, and state-sponsored assaults.

In May, Parliament agreed to extend the Emergency Law enacted after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981. This law gives the president powers to suspend basic freedoms, enables authorities to detain people for prolonged periods without trial, and allows officials to censor or close newspapers in the name of national security. In June, the government submitted to parliament a new broadcasting bill introducing penalties ranging from one month to three years in prison for the crimes of “attacking social peace, national unity, public order and society’s values.” The bill also provides for the creation of a national broadcasting regulatory agency to be headed by Information Ministry officials and members of the state security services. The agency would be empowered to withdraw news outlets’ licenses arbitrarily.

The Information Minister Anas al-Fiqi introduced a pan-Arab regulatory framework for satellite television stations entitled “Principles for Organizing Satellite Radio and TV Broadcasting in the Arab Region.” In February it was successfully adopted by the Arab League’s council of information ministers. The framework targets independent stations that have been airing criticism of Arab governments by forbidding content that would have a “negative influence on social peace and national unity and public order and decency.” The document calls on each of the member states to take “necessary legislative measures to deal with violations,” steps which can include confiscation of broadcast equipment and the withdrawal of licenses.

In keeping with this new framework, there were several cases of Egyptian broadcast outlets being targeted by the government in 2008. In April, police raided the offices of the Cairo News Company (CNC), which provides technical support to broadcasters, and confiscated its

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transmission equipment. The raid came after Al-Jazeera broadcast CNC footage of social unrest in Mahalla al-Kobra, including scenes of protesters tearing down posters of President Hosni Mubarak. On October 26, the Court of Misdemeanors sentenced Nader Gohar, CNC's owner and director and fined him EGP50,000 for possession of satellite broadcast equipment and another EGP100,000 for operating an "unauthorized telecommunication network." The court also ordered the confiscation of all of CNC's equipment found during their search of the company's headquarters. Also in April the government-owned satellite transmission company, Nilesat, stopped carrying Al-Hiwar TV. Al-Hiwar featured talk shows such as "People's Rights," which focused on human rights activists who had been harassed or persecuted by Arab governments, and "Egyptian Papers," which hosted prominent Egyptian government critics. In a similar case, police raided the Cairo office of the Iranian state-owned Al-Alam Television in July and confiscated broadcast equipment. The raid coincided with the release of an Iranian film depicting the assassination of former president Sadat in a positive light. On August 28, the government ordered the Cairo Video Sat production company to cancel the recording of two programs about youth and politics for Al-Hurra, an Arabic-language TV station funded by the US government.

A series of high-profile legal cases against independent and opposition journalists over the course of the year served to threaten and penalize the media for taking journalistic and editorial risks. The Supreme Press Council revoked the licenses of at least 14 news publications and in February, a Cairo appellate court upheld the conviction of an Al-Jazeera journalist, Howayda Taha Matwali, charged with harming Egypt's reputation for her work on a documentary about torture. The court struck down her six-month prison sentence while leaving intact an EGP20,000 fine. In March a Cairo court sentenced Ibrahim Issa, editor of Al-Dustur newspaper to six months in jail on charges of "publishing false information and rumors" about President Mubarak's health. He was however pardoned by the president in October. Also in October, a criminal court in Al-Geeza ordered El-Fegr editor Adel Hammouda and writer Mohamed Al-Baz to pay fines of EGP80,000 each for defaming cleric Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, after their newspaper published a satirical article claiming Tantawi was planning to visit the Vatican. In November, a Cairo court banned media coverage of the murder trial of Hisham Talaat Moustafa, an Egyptian billionaire accused of ordering the murder of his reputed mistress, Lebanese pop singer Suzanne Tamim. Some news outlets defied this ban and their reporters were briefly arrested as a result.

In addition to legal and regulatory harassment, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information reported an increase in physical assaults and abductions of journalists in 2008. In one high profile case of assault, Rahmaniya police officers Mohammed Badrawy, Amr Allam, and Mohamed Basiouni arrested Kamal Murad, a journalist for El-Fegr newspaper, for reportedly taking photos of police beating farmers in Ezbat Mohram in order to coerce them into signing leases with a local businessman. The officers allegedly beat Murad, and seized his notes and mobile phone memory card.

Although there are more than 500 newspapers, magazines, journals, and other periodicals in Egypt, this apparent diversity disguises the government's role as a media owner and sponsor. A majority of the print press is still in the hands of the state, including Egypt's three largest newspapers, Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar and Al-Gomhorya, whose editors are appointed by the president. On June 8, the Higher Press Council gave licenses to five privately-owned

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newspapers. However strict regulations still limit the freedom of the independent media to operate. All land-based TV channels—two national and 6 regional—are owned and operated by the government. There are, however, several privately-owned satellite and pan-Arab stations that attract wide viewership. While the state radio monopoly ended in 2003, the handful of private radio stations operating in the country concentrate on music and entertainment programming. Thanks in large part to government efforts to aggressively promote internet use, the number of Egyptians with access to this medium has more than quadrupled over the past several years and the internet was accessed by 12.9 percent of the population in 2008. Despite this encouragement, the government continued to block Islamist and secular opposition websites and arrests of bloggers critical of the government were not uncommon. In August, the government imposed a new measure requiring internet cafés to gather and keep personal information from visitors who use their services. The information collected includes the names, e-mail addresses and telephone numbers of customers. Reflecting the rising influence of online reporting and commentary, more internet journalists suffered government harassment. Esraa Abdel Fattah, a young blogger who with her friends created the Facebook group “6 April: A Nationwide Strike” calling for peaceful strikes across the country to protest rising food prices, was arrested along with fellow bloggers on the day of the planned strike. On July 21, Mohamed Refaat, editor of the blog Matabbat, was arrested and charged with “joining a banned group” (the Muslim Brotherhood) and “inciting to strike on the occasion of 23 July”; he was released in September. Christian blogger Hani Nazeer was arrested on October 3, under emergency law, after he criticized the novel, *Azazil*, a book perceived by many in Egypt’s Christian minority as an attack on their faith.