



**International PEN
NGO in Consultative Status with ECOSOC**

**Contribution to the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism
7th Session of the Working Group of the UPR (February 2010)**

Submission on the Arab Republic of Egypt

August 2009

International PEN welcomes the opportunity provided by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights to comment on the situation in the Arab Republic of Egypt, about which it has significant concerns. This document provides a general comment on the current state of Internet freedom in Egypt and details accounts in which citizens have had their rights to freedom of expression severely restricted.

General Comment

Egypt has six million Internet users and one of the most extensive blogospheres in the Middle East. In spite of this, Internet writers (or bloggers) in Egypt are among the most harassed in the world. Since 2007, the Egyptian government has stepped up Internet surveillance and there has been a wave of web-related searches, detentions and arrests. In 2008, Egyptian security forces reportedly located and arrested scores of Internet writers on grounds ranging from libel or “insulting the president” to “exploiting the democratic climate prevailing in the country”.

Egypt’s Interior Ministry has devoted an entire department to monitoring and curtailing the online freedom of its citizens. Those who seek to express themselves over the Internet in Egypt face government monitoring as well as systematic intimidation and persecution by Egyptian security forces. Internet writers are routinely arrested and held incommunicado. There have been reports of ill-treatment and both mental and physical torture.

The imprisonment of one former law student has become emblematic of the persecution encountered by Internet writers throughout Egypt. Arrested in 2006, he was sentenced to three years in prison for “insulting the president” and one year for “incitement to hatred of Islam.” In his web blog, he promoted human rights and spoke out against religious and political repression. Other university students targeted for their Internet writings have faced academic discrimination or retribution with reports of expulsion as well as the denial of university housing and student government memberships.

Internet writers who have complained about harassment or persecution to authorities have found themselves vulnerable to additional punishment. In one case, an Internet writer returned to his home to find it ransacked and his computer missing. When he went to the authorities to complain he was detained and questioned.

Legal Mechanisms used to Suppress Dissent

This suppression of free expression on the Internet is in direct violation of Egypt's own constitution as well as international covenants and conventions to which it is party. Egypt's constitution specifies in Article 48 the right to freedom of the mass media. In 2004, President Hosni Mubarak made an official announcement informing the public that Egypt would cease to hand out prison sentences for what it deemed press offenses. Unfortunately, however, the government has failed to live up to that important pledge.

In the majority of cases where Internet writers have been arrested, the government has cited its emergency laws. Introduced after the assassination of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, these laws have been extended repeatedly and give the government the power to act outside of its own legislation in cases it deems potentially harmful to national security.

Meant to protect the public from dangerous threats, emergency laws are manipulated to suppress freedom of speech by labeling protected, peaceful political expression as "disturbing public order" or as a threat to "public safety". Recently, several Internet writers have been arrested and charged with "exploiting the democratic climate prevailing in the country".

In other cases, Internet writers have faced jail time and interrogation for expressing their religious beliefs, for allegedly insulting Islam and for atheism.

When arrested, Internet writers face fines far exceeding the yearly wage of the average Egyptian. Fines must be paid in full on the spot. Those unable to pay have subsequently been charged with the crime of being a debtor and detained.

Censorship

Internet users are closely monitored in Egypt, Internet providers continue to be subjected to government regulation and web sites are widely censored. Legislation passed in August 2007 requires all Internet cafés in Egypt to record the names, addresses and phone numbers of its users. Cafés themselves also have reported they are surveilled by the government.

The government has repeatedly forced Internet service providers to block certain sites on the grounds of national security. Officials monitor information being exchanged online and shut down web sites they deem offensive. In 2008, the web site of the opposition group Keyafa was shut down for 12 days following the call for a strike demanding better wages and an end to inflation. Facebook groups have been similarly targeted.

Final Comment

The rapid spread of the Internet in Egypt has turned it into a valuable tool for Egyptian citizens to peacefully seek, receive, and impart information across a wide spectrum of issues as protected by domestic and international laws, including Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which it is a signatory.

International PEN believes that the Arab Republic of Egypt falls short of these commitments made to the international community as well as to its own citizens. It requests the Republic of Egypt to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those held for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and opinion, particularly on the Internet;
- End detentions, intimidation, and surveillance of all those who express dissenting views online, including Internet writers and human rights advocates;
- Revoke all laws that allow for the arrest and imprisonment of any member of the media who is peacefully practicing his or her right to freedom of expression;
- Abolish laws that allow for censorship and restrictions on the Internet in violation of the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers.