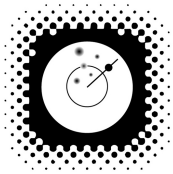
Internet Filtering in

Egypt



OpenNet Initiative

Overview

There is no evidence of Internet filtering in Egypt, although a small group of politically sensitive Web sites have been blocked in the past. The authorities have increased their crackdown on online writers and bloggers and have harassed and detained them for their activities online and offline. Surveillance efforts have also increased.

Background

Egypt has taken several steps toward greater political freedom since the beginning of President Hosni Mubarak's administration in 1981, including amending its constitution to allow multiple candidates to run in presidential elections.[1] However, an emergency law in force since 1981 gives authorities the power to make arrests and detentions without court supervision, and criminal charges have repeatedly been brought against journalists and others for political reasons.[2] Still, journalists now openly criticize the regime's policies, and both independent and opposition media have started to act in defiance of government and economic pressure.[3]

Egypt was listed by the Committee to Protect Journalists as one of the ten worst countries to be a blogger in 2009. Authorities monitor Internet activity on a regular basis and have detained a large number of active bloggers (more than 100 in 2008 alone) for open-ended periods.[4] Still, Egyptian bloggers and online activists have managed to utilize the power of the Internet to organize street protests and to expose human rights violations in Egypt. For example, two government officials were arrested and imprisoned for torturing prisoners after video clips of their actions were posted on the Internet by online activists.[5]

Internet in Egypt

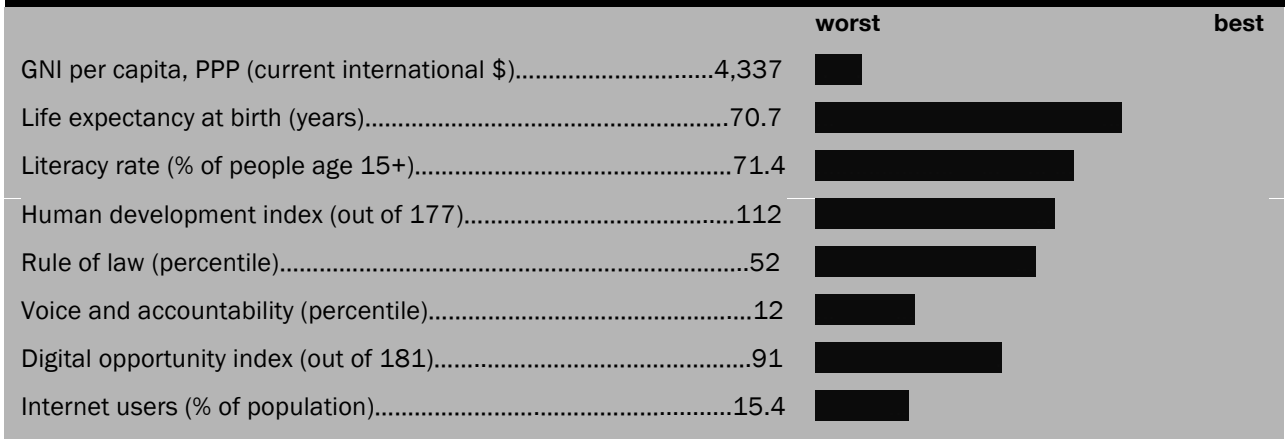
With an Internet penetration rate of 15.4 percent, Egypt is ahead of most of Africa, though it lags behind many Middle Eastern countries.[6] Also, unlike in many Arab countries, the international bandwidth market and VoIP Internet telephony have been liberalized. More than 200 Internet and data service

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social	●				
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency				●
Consistency				●

KEY INDICATORS



providers operate in Egypt, making ADSL services among the cheapest in Africa.[7] As the information and communications technology (ICT) sector continues to grow, Egypt's spending on ICT reached $9.8 billion in 2008 and is expected to increase to $13.5 billion by 2011.[8]

As part of the Egyptian government's ambitious program to expand access to ICT, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA), Egyptian National Post Organization (ENPO) and Computer and Software Department at the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce signed an agreement to spread personal computers for every home in August 2008. The agreement is the second phase of a 2002 initiative and is part of the MCIT's strategy of increasing ICT use throughout Egypt, focusing on socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. The initiative includes offering discounts on computers and 512 kbps ADSL subscriptions for three years.[9]

Telecommunications companies also work to enable users to access Internet content. For example, Egypt's Vodafone, which has 15 million subscribers, announced in August 2008 that it will buy a majority share in Sarmady Communications (Sarcom), an online and mobile content provider. The move was widely seen as part of a wider strategy to dominate Egypt's Internet market by providing both Internet service and content to customers.[10]

Telecom Egypt, which has a monopoly in the fixed-line telephone sector, owns a 45 percent stake in Vodafone Egypt and had 11.3 million fixed-line subscribers at the end of June 2008. Telecom Egypt leases parts of its network to other Egyptian mobile operators, who use it to provide calls between mobile to fixed-line phones, as well as international calls.[11] In 2008 the government announced it would sell a second fixed-line license, ending Telecom Egypt's monopoly, but plans to do so have repeatedly been delayed.[12]

Almost a million Egyptian households have access to broadband, thanks to sharing of ADSL lines. Of these, 63.4 percent share the connection with their neighbors; 81.9 percent of households that share lines share them with more than three other households. Egypt had more than 400,000 ADSL lines by the end of 2007, 75 percent of which are residential. More than one fourth of Egyptian Internet users visit Internet cafés to get online.[13]

The number of blogs in Egypt has risen from just 40 in 2004 to an estimated 160,000 in July 2008, according to a

report released by the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC). More than three fourths of Egyptian bloggers write in Arabic only, 20 percent write in both Arabic and English, and nearly 10 percent write in English only. More than 30 percent of Arabic-language blogs are Egyptian. Most Egyptian bloggers are young men in their 20s, while just over one fourth are female. More than half of Egyptian bloggers are between the ages of 20 and 30.[14]

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The government continues to stifle freedom of the press and restrict the flow of information. For example, its July 2008 bill on audio-visual media bill requires journalists and broadcasters to "avoid damaging 'social peace,' 'national unity,' 'public order,' and 'public values.'" Violators of the rules face imprisonment, cancellation of broadcasting licenses, the confiscation of equipment, and fines.[15] The bill will create a National Agency for Regulation of Audio and Visual Broadcast, which will comprise national security and military intelligence representatives, to enforce the implementation of the proposed rules. The bill coincided with an increase in government's closure of TV channels.[16]

Under the pretext of protecting public security, the Egyptian government asked mobile phone companies to block service to anonymous subscribers in May 2008. [17] According to *Reuters*, "the move comes as Egypt tries to combat a wave of public discontent over rising prices and low wages that have sparked a series of labor and anti-government strikes, organized largely by mobile phone and over the Internet."[18]

The Egyptian government raided the offices of a Cairo broadcasting company and charged its owner with "importing and owning television equipment and transmitting television broadcasts without permission" after the company aired footage of anti-government demonstrations in April 2008.[19] The company was later shut down. The incident occurred a few weeks after three other satellite channels were dropped by Egypt's state-controlled Nilesat satellite.[20]

As the Egyptian blogosphere continues to grow, so does the government's crackdown on bloggers and Internet users. For example, blogger Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman Amer ("Kareem Amer") was sentenced in February 2007 to four years in prison for "incitement to hatred of Islam" on his blog and for insulting the president.[21] He has since become the symbol of online repression for the country's bloggers. Other Egyptian bloggers have also been arrested for their online activities, and some have been sentenced to prison. One of the most recent examples is blogger Mohamed Refaat, editor of the blog Matabbat (matabbat.blogspot.com), who was arrested in August 2008 under the state emergency law. [22] He was charged with "offending the state institutions, destabilizing public security, and inciting others to demonstrate and strike via the Internet."[23]

In a landmark legal case, an administrative court rejected in December 2007 a lawsuit brought by a judge calling for the banning of 49 Web sites in Egypt. The court emphasized the support for freedom of expression as long as such Web sites do not harm the beliefs or public order.[24] However, in May 2009, a Cairo court ruled that the Egyptian government must ban access to pornographic Web sites because they are deemed offensive to religion and society's values.[25] The suit was filed by a lawyer who pointed to an Egyptian man and his wife who were sentenced to prison for starting a swingers club via the Internet as

an example of "the dangers posed by such offensive Web sites."[26] It remains to be seen whether the authorities will enforce this court order.

Surveillance

Despite the government's initiatives to encourage Internet use, the Egyptian authorities continue to place restrictions on how Egyptians use the Internet. For example, in February 2005, Egypt's Ministry of Interior ordered Internet café managers and owners to record their customers' names and ID numbers and threatened to close the cafés if they refused to comply. This kind of action was condemned by a Cairo-based human rights group, which described it as "a gross violation to the right to privacy."[27] In August 2008, Egyptian authorities increased the level of Internet surveillance by demanding that Internet café customers must provide their names, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers before they can use the Internet. Customers will then receive a text message on their cell phones with a pin number that they can use to access the Internet.[28]

Egypt has witnessed an increase in the use of Facebook for social activism, which alerted the government to the potential force of the site.[29] As a result, there were rumors that it might be blocked, especially after a group of activists managed to recruit supporters using Facebook for a general strike that took place in April 6, 2008 protesting against rising food prices and President Hosni Mubarak's government.[30] Another opinion suggested that the authorities would rather leave Facebook accessible so that they can trace back the online activities to the individuals behind them and then punish them.[31] Because of the increasing use of Facebook for political activism in Egypt, activists have reported that the government has started to monitor the social network site for any possible activities organized online by Egyptian users similar to that of April 6. Some also believe there is a special division called the State Security Investigation Police for Facebook.[32]

In addition to the monitoring of online activism, a constitutional reform approved by parliament in March 2007 gave the authorities power to spy on the mail of suspected terrorists and tap their phones without judicial approval.[33] Vodafone revealed in February 2009 that it handed over communications data to the Egyptian authorities that may have been used to help identify rioters who were protesting during the April 2008 bread crisis. Many protesters used cell phones to call friends and send text messages during the demonstrations. In December 2008, 22 people were convicted in connection with the riots.[34]

Egypt's Minister of Telecommunications and Information Technology publicaly admited that he allowed the security offices to monitor, record and overtap fixed and mobile phones. A parlimanet member considered this access unconstitutional and a vilation of human rights.[35]

The Egypt Telecommunication Law mandates that telecom operators and service providers provide at their own expense all equipment, systems, software and communication services needed by the Armed Forces,and National Security Entities to exercise their powers within the law.[36]

ONI testing results

ONI conducted testing in 2008-2009 on two ISPs, Link Egypt and TEData. ONI found no evidence of Internet filtering in Egypt, confirming results from 2006-2007.

In 2005, most ISPs blocked the official

site of the Muslim Brotherhood (http://www.ikhwanonline.com), Egypt's largest opposition movement. At one time, the popular ISP LINKdotNET blocked http://www.alshaab.com, the Web site of the Labor Party's biweekly newsletter, but ONI testing revealed that both sites are accessible at the time of writing.[37]

A number of ISPs offer optional filters to block pornography; TEData offers Internet services with "content control" which eliminates "all of the Internet's indecent content that might affect your children."[38]

Conclusion

Egyptian Internet users enjoy unfiltered access to the Internet, though the May 2009 court order to block access to online pornography may result in a shift in filtering policy. The government monitors online activities and has increased its surveillance efforts. Egyptian bloggers continue to use the Internet for online activism, which continues to result in government harassment, arrests, and intimidation. Current laws allow jail terms for journalists, editors, and online writers, including bloggers.

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