

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Egypt

Egypt | [Freedom of the Press 2012](#) |

Status change explanation: Egypt improved from Not Free to Partly Free as a result of the flourishing of new, independent media outlets, less self-censorship, and some loosening of centralized editorial control over state media after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011 after nearly 30 years in power. However, by year's end there were worrying indications that these gains were being reversed.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign on February 11, 2011, after nearly 30 years in power, a result of 18 days of popular protests against his authoritarian regime. Mubarak's government had attempted to crack down on the protests, including stepping up repression of the press and briefly shutting down the country's internet and mobile phone network. After Mubarak stepped down, a military council, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), took over, leading to widespread openings in the legal, political, and economic environment for the media. However, the SCAF's attempts to postpone the transfer to civilian rule led to further protests later in the year, and there were troubling signs that the military rulers were employing some of the Mubarak government's methods to control and crack down on the press.

On March 30, 2011, the SCAF adopted a provisional constitution, but the existing press laws, penal code, and Emergency Law remained in effect at year's end. Article 12 of the provisional constitution guarantees freedom of expression and opinion "within the law," but at the same time recognizes that criticism contributes to national development. Article 13 provides for freedom of the press and outlaws censorship—including administrative actions such as stopping or preventing publication—with the exception of threats to national security, and during states of emergency and times of war. Egypt's press laws remained in place and unchanged from the Mubarak era, including more than 30 articles that allow journalists to be prosecuted for their reporting. Although there were efforts by civil society to amend these laws, criticism of the military government remained off-limits.

Egypt had been under a state of emergency since 1981, and one of the central demands of the revolution leaders was the lifting of the Emergency Law, which allows Interior Ministry officials to indefinitely detain people without charge or trial. The SCAF not only kept the law in place, but also expanded it to include "the spreading of false information harmful to national security." On June 19, *Al-Fagr* editor in chief Adel Hammouda and reporter Rasha Azab appeared before the military prosecutor on accusations of publishing false information as a result of an article about a meeting between the SCAF and activists campaigning against the use of military trials for civilians. Although they were released, Azab faces a possible prison sentence or fines. Egypt also has a blasphemy law, and a group of lawyers filed a complaint against business and media mogul Naguib Sawiris for posting a picture on his Twitter account in June of a bearded Salafi Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse dressed in a niqab (facial veil).

Licensing of all media was controlled by the government under Mubarak, with

2012 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Partly Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

57

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

20

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

22

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

15

the president leading the newspaper licensing body, the High Press Council. The Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), the government-operated public broadcaster, was under the control of the Information Ministry, and it granted radio and television licenses. In the immediate wake of the February uprising, SCAF licensed 16 new satellite television stations, and said the National Security Agency no longer needed to approve licenses. However, in September it ordered that no new licenses be granted for satellite stations, and threatened to “take legal measures against satellite television stations that jeopardize stability and security.” Since then, several media outlets have been raided for not operating with the proper licenses.

In March, the SCAF sent a warning to editors and journalists against publishing anything critical of the armed forces without prior consultation and permission. The next month, the SCAF appointed a new information minister despite hopes that the ministry would be abolished. And in October, the SCAF appointed a military censor over the press, prompting several popular writers to boycott their columns as an act of protest. Meanwhile, the press syndicate—the journalists’ union—has attempted to exert greater independence and influence in the post-Mubarak era. In December, it held the SCAF responsible for attacks and deaths that occurred during a protest in front of the cabinet building in Cairo, and released a statement exposing and condemning state violence against the media and journalists. Also, civil society and free expression activists formed the National Coalition for Media Freedom in March aimed at coordinating media development efforts by civil society, journalists, and activists interested in the development of Egyptian media. However, these actions prompted pushback from the military government. In late December, security forces raided 17 Egyptian and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose work encompasses advocacy on media and freedom of expression issues.

In the lead-up to the first round of parliamentary elections in November, the SCAF stepped up its campaign against journalists and the media as it sought to consolidate power, including implementing constitutional amendments that would largely free the military from civilian oversight. Dozens of cases were filed against journalists, media outlets, and bloggers, some of which were tried in military courts rather than the civilian system. For example, blogger Maikel Nabil was arrested in March and convicted of criticizing the Egyptian military’s use of force against protesters. He was sentenced by a military court to three years in prison, which was reduced to two years at a retrial in December. He remained imprisoned throughout the appeals process and was refused medicine and independent medical treatment. SCAF loyalists attempted to intimidate the staff of *Al-Fagr* newspaper, which had taken a critical stance toward the military rulers, protesting in front of its offices and making threats against staff members on its Facebook page. There were several other cases of intimidation against the media by SCAF loyalists, including death threats against host Mahmoud Saad of the new satellite station *Al-Tahrir*, and attacks against independent journalists, such as those against an *Al-Badil* editor in early December.

There were countless reports of interference in broadcasts, and several individual shows were canceled or pulled off the air. The live morning radio news show by presenter Ziad Ali was canceled after he read an article critical of the military, and radio presenter Nermeed el-Banby was fired for similar reasons and faces investigation for incitement. Yosri Fouda, the host of a show on the ONTV satellite network and a former *Al-Jazeera* bureau chief, briefly canceled his program following military pressure.

Despite intimidation from the SCAF, many journalists and media outlets covered these cases and continued to produce critical and investigatory reports. Among the most outspoken and independent media outlets were *Al-Tahrir*, ONTV, independent newspapers including *Al-Badil* and *Al-Masry al-Youm*, online news sites and blogs such as *Bikya Masr* and *Misr Digital*, and citizen media outlets. The so-called Maspéro massacre in early October highlighted the stark contrast in coverage between the state-controlled press and private, independent media. In the incident, state media claimed that Coptic Christian protesters had attacked the military and stormed Cairo’s Maspéro building, which houses the state television station. However, footage

aired by independent stations and bloggers contradicted these claims, showing that the security forces cracked down violently on peaceful protesters, resulting in at least 25 deaths.

The SCAF continued the Mubarak tradition of denying detained or imprisoned journalists and bloggers the right to due process, including prosecuting them in military rather than civilian courts. In April, the government fired several state newspaper editors and three top state television officials, including former news head Abd el-Latif el-Menawy. Journalists at the state-run television station had demanded that the executives be fired for failing to cover the anti-Mubarak protests and for broadcasting antirevolution propaganda, and physically assaulted Menawy shortly after he stepped down. The interim cabinet then appointed three prominent news anchors without ties to the former regime to run the station. Similarly, the head of the press syndicate, Makram Mohammed Ahmed, a Mubarak ally, stepped down in February after members of the union revolted against him. In November, *Al-Masry al-Youm* began publishing an English-language edition, but was prevented from publishing its second issue by Magdy el-Galad, editor of the Arabic edition, because of critical articles about the SCAF. El-Galad argued in an op-ed that such criticism was unacceptable.

According to media monitoring reports by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the state press “dealt with the news and issues of SCAF the same way they used to deal with the ousted President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak.” Nonetheless, professional and citizen journalists made significant attempts to counter censorship and shoddy reporting by conducting in-depth investigative reports about instances of violence and setting up public screenings to counter attempts at censorship. In late December, two campaigns, Mosireen (The Insistent) and Askar Kazeboon (Military Liars) organized video screenings of SCAF violations against protesters and civilians aimed at dispelling the propaganda broadcast via state media. Some screenings were held in front of the Maspero building in hopes of shaming the media.

The year was one of the most dangerous in Egypt’s recent history for journalists and bloggers, as they sought to cover the historic uprising and its aftermath. The Mubarak regime had tended to restrict journalistic freedom through censorship, legal maneuvers, and harassment, but there was a marked change in tactics during the 18-day uprising, as pro-Mubarak forces appeared to target journalists and bloggers covering the events. On January 29, Egyptian reporter Ahman Mohamed Mahmoud of *Al-Ta’awun* newspaper was killed by a sniper while filming a confrontation between protesters and security forces in Cairo. The offices of pan-Arab satellite channels Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera were raided, as were those of independent Egyptian outlets such as the newspaper *Al-Shorouk*. There were dozens of reported cases of attacks against journalists, cameramen, and bloggers attempting to cover the uprising. Reporters from the Associated Press, Cable News Network (CNN), Al-Arabiya, Danish TV, the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC), and other national and international outlets were attacked, had their equipment confiscated or destroyed, and in some cases were temporarily arrested. Wael Abbas, one of the leading citizen journalists in Egypt, posted videos of the demonstrations and police abuse of protesters online; he was repeatedly harassed and detained in the weeks prior to Mubarak’s ouster. CBS television journalist Lara Logan was sexually assaulted in Tahrir Square while covering the protests. Activists who had set up impromptu media centers were also targeted by police forces, which raided and confiscated equipment while those in the streets taking pictures were attacked.

Members of the press were also subjected to violence during protests against the SCAF later in the year. There were 50 cases of assaults and detentions of journalists in the months of November and December, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Wael Mikhael, a cameraman for the Coptic Christian Al-Tareeq TV station, was one of the 25 people killed during the Maspero massacre. The editor in chief of the independent online English news site *Bikya Masr*, Joseph Mayton, was detained and assaulted by security forces while attempting to cover the clashes outside the cabinet building in December.

Egypt has more than 500 newspapers, magazines, journals, and other

periodicals, and during Mubarak's rule, the vast majority had been in the hands of the state, which owned 99 percent of newspaper retail outlets. Following the uprising, there has been significant ferment in the media sector as new outlets have proliferated. Editors of Egypt's three largest newspapers, *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Akhbar*, and *Al-Gomhorya*, had previously been appointed by the president. However, in the wake of the uprising there was a reorganization, as Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, with the approval of the Higher Council of the Armed Forces, appointed several new chairmen, editors in chief, and managing editors. However, many had served under Mubarak, prompting discontent. Under Mubarak, all terrestrial television broadcasters—two national and six regional—were owned and operated by the government through the ERTU. However, there were four privately owned, independent satellite channels, and several pan-Arab stations that attracted wide viewership. This number has expanded in the post-Mubarak era, as at least 16 new channels have emerged. The government had supported state media directly and through advertising subsidies and this does not appear to have changed, although it is unclear what types of advertising subsidies remain. Independent media appear to be faring better, as advertisers have felt less pressure from the state and are thus able to run in a greater variety of outlets.

Egypt does not filter internet content. However, from January 27 through February 1 the Mubarak government forced all internet service providers and mobile phone providers to cut service, imposing a virtual internet blackout on the country in a futile attempt to staunch the popular uprising that had started just days earlier. In 2011, 36 percent of Egyptians accessed the internet regularly and nearly 70 percent of them had access to mobile phones. In an effort to crack down on dissent, the SCAF charged several online activists, including blogger and activist Asmaa Mahfouz, who was arrested in August and faced charges in military court for a tweet in which she criticized the SCAF's use of military trials for civilians. She was released four days later following intense public pressure. In October, blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah was imprisoned for two months after objecting to being summoned for questioning by military prosecutors about his coverage of the clashes between security forces and Coptic Christian protesters.

[About us](#)

[Careers](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Credits](#)

[Subscribe](#)

Related websites:

[Democracy Web](#) | [Derecho a Voz](#) | [Family Law - Khaleej](#) |

[Peace in the Caucasus](#) | [Undermining Democracy](#) |

[Voice of Freedom](#)