



Digital Democracy
Initiative

Strengthening Support Ecosystems for Digital Democracy in Egypt

A Case Study Assessment Report

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Acknowledgments

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DESIGN AND LAYOUT

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Digital Democracy
Initiative

The Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI) is a programme to safeguard inclusive democracy and human rights in the digital age. It focuses on supporting local civil society in the Global South, particularly in countries undergoing democratic regression and where civic space is under pressure. For more information visit digitaldemocracyinitiative.net



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Acronyms

BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DDI	Digital Democracy Initiative
DPI	Deep Packet Inspection
EIPR	Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
ES	Expectation State
EU	European Union
HRD	Human Rights Defender
ICNL	International Center for Not-for-Profit Law
ISP	Internet Service Provider
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
NTRA	National Telecom Regulatory Agency
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
SSFD	Sawiris Foundation for Social Development
UN	United Nations
VPNs	Virtual Private Networks

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● 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of democracy, (Lungu, P.C., 2024). The Internet and associated tools are potent platforms that foster civic engagement, promote transparency, and advocate for human rights. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have emerged as key players in this digital democracy movement, utilising technology to empower citizens, holding governments accountable, and building stronger civic communities, (Poisson M, 2024).

However, not everyone experiences the promise of digital democracy equally. In countries with limited democratic space, such as Egypt where governments restrict civil liberties and political participation, CSOs working on digital democracy encounter significant challenges.

These challenges fall into three broad categories:

- **Legal and Regulatory Obstacles:** Governments often implement restrictive laws and regulations that hinder CSOs' ability to operate freely in the digital space. Governments may enact laws and regulations targeting digital activism. These laws can criminalise online dissent, restrict access to encrypted communication platforms, and impose heavy burdens on CSOs utilising technology for advocacy work. The threat of legal action can create a climate of fear and self-censorship, hindering the effectiveness of digital democracy efforts.
- **Technical and Infrastructure Barriers:** Limited internet access, poor digital infrastructure, and lack of technical expertise can impede CSOs' effective leveraging of digital tools.
- **Security and Privacy Concerns:** CSOs and their members may face surveillance, cyber-attacks, and other digital threats that compromise the safety and security of their data.

These challenges significantly impact CSOs' work promoting digital democracy, particularly in countries such as Egypt with authoritarian tendencies or limited democratic freedoms. Despite these obstacles, many organisations continue to innovate and adapt, finding creative ways to use technology to advance their mission and protect civic spaces in the digital realm.

- **Restricted Operational Environment:** Obstructed, repressed, and closed societies often limit freedom of expression, association, and assembly. This operational environment can make it difficult for CSOs to operate freely, register legally, and raise funds. Governments may also restrict internet access and impose censorship measures, hindering CSOs' ability to use digital tools for their work.
- **Limited Resources and Capacity:** CSOs face scarce funding for digital rights and advocacy work and struggle with restricted access to essential technologies and technical expertise by state actors. Nevertheless, they effectively utilise digital tools for secure communication, data analysis, and online campaigning. Their determination and resourcefulness inspire others as they overcome these challenges. Egypt has experienced a significant contraction of civic space and digital freedoms, creating a challenging environment for CSOs, journalists, and activists. CSOs in Egypt employ creative strategies to maximise their impact, such as:

- Leveraging open-source software and free online platforms to reduce cost
- Collaborating with international partners to access technical expertise, and,
- Conducting grassroots fundraising campaigns to supplement limited funding

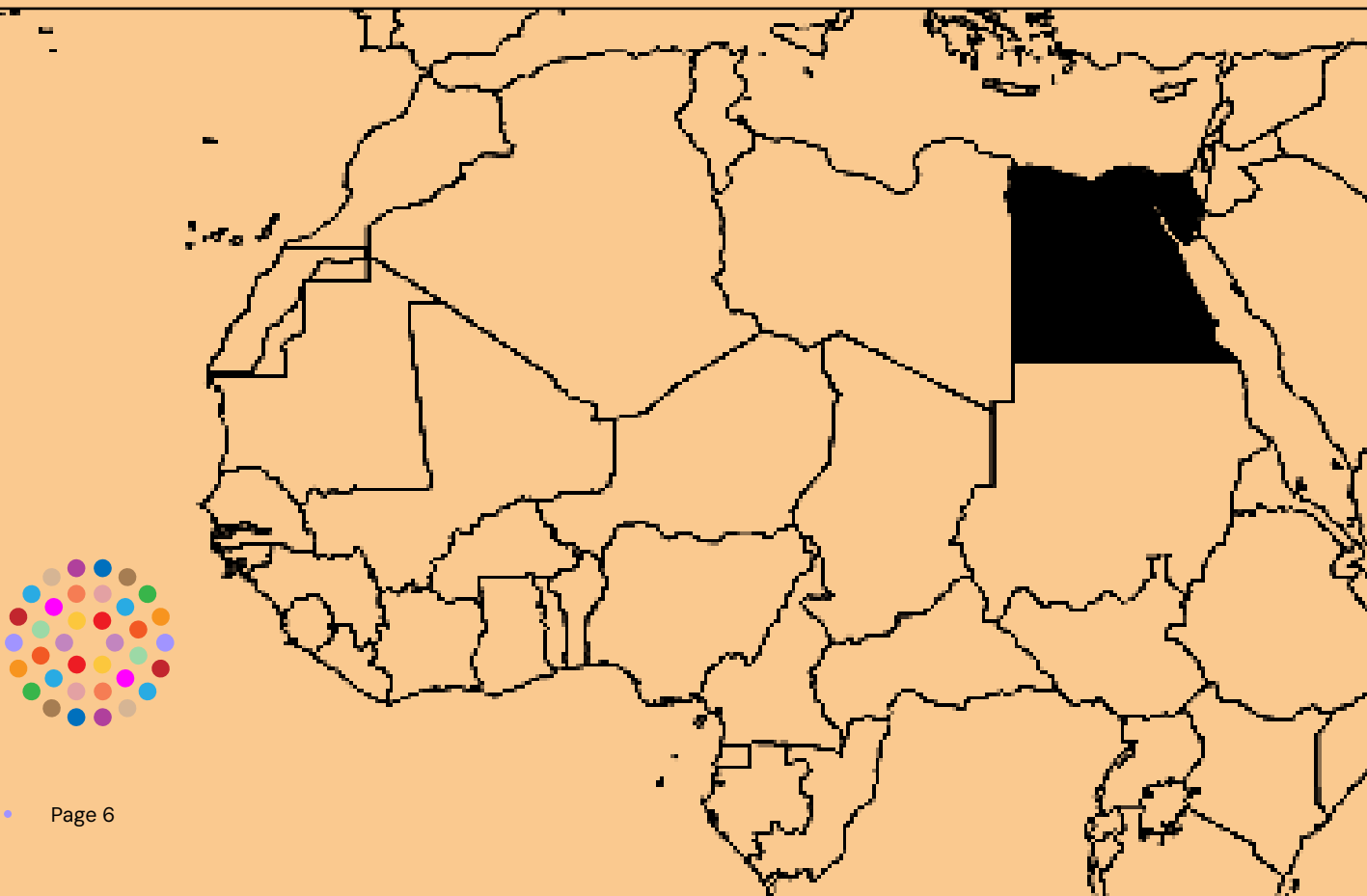
These organisations also prioritise digital security, implementing robust measures to protect their data and communications from potential surveillance or cyber-attacks.

1.2 Overview of Case Study Assessment

Digital technologies are reshaping the global democratic landscape. The internet and social media have become indispensable tools for civic engagement, empowering citizens to access information, voice their opinions, and organise political action. However, the influence of these technologies on democracy is complex and varies across contexts. In countries where democratic freedoms are restricted, and civic participation is limited, the digital democracy landscape is particularly challenging, offering opportunities and obstacles for pro-democracy movements and civil society organisations.

This country's case study documents the support systems available to CSOs in Egypt. It focuses on how organisations champion digital democracy in an environment where authorities significantly curtail civic freedoms. The case study examines the current state of digital democracy in Egypt, highlighting the challenges CSOs face and their strategies to navigate this restrictive landscape. Insights from the country report were used to formulate actionable recommendations for enhancing global support of digital democracy.

The case study assessment involved a comprehensive literature review, data collection through interviews, and document analysis. The case studies analysed the challenges CSOs face working on digital democracy in Egypt, assessed existing support mechanisms, highlighted successful strategies, and provided tailored recommendations. These recommendations have the potential to strengthen the support ecosystems for digital democracy in Egypt..



2.0 Methodology

2.1 Technical Approach

The Case Study Assessment applied aspects of co-design approaches, systems thinking, and human-centred design practice. The methodological approach ensured a thorough, rigorous, and context-sensitive assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing CSOs working on digital democracy in repressed environments.

The technical approach combined data collection methods, robust analysis, and stakeholder engagement to produce actionable insights and recommendations to strengthen digital democracy efforts in Egypt.

2.2 Country Selection and Literature Review

The objective of the country selection process was to inform the identification of three (3) countries classified as 'Obstructed,' 'Repressed' or Closed according to the CIVICUS Monitor data, a widely recognised source of information on civic space and civil society. This data focused on countries within the same region to ensure a broader yet region-specific perspective. Egypt has significant restrictions on online freedoms and civic space and the archetypal digital democracy environments in Egypt are classified as being **Closed**, (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024). This categorisation offers insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting digital democracy in Egypt.

Beyond the identification of a suitable case country, a multi-tier approach was adopted involving a thorough review of data, close collaboration with CIVICUS, and consideration of various criteria to commence the case study assessment process:

- **Data Review:** Analysed CIVICUS Monitor data and other relevant global indices to shortlist potential countries.
- **Consultation with CIVICUS:** Collaborated closely with CIVICUS to ensure alignment with strategic priorities and regional focus.
- **Criteria Consideration:** Digital repression, active CSOs, the political landscape, and data availability.

2.3 Desk Review Process

An in-depth literature review was conducted to establish an informed understanding of the current state of digital democracy, digital repression, and the support ecosystems for CSOs in the selected countries. The review followed these steps:

- **Document Collection:** gathered and reviewed existing literature, including academic papers, reports from international organisations, policy documents, and country-specific case studies.
- **Thematic Analysis:** categorised findings into central themes such as operational challenges, resource limitations, legal frameworks, and successful strategies.

- **Contextual Understanding:** identified specific political and socio-economic factors influencing Egypt's digital landscape. The annexes include a list of reviewed documents.

2.4 Key Informant Interviews

Seven key informants and expert interviews with strategic stakeholders in Egypt were conducted. The challenges encountered in securing interviews and online survey responses further highlight the prevailing concerns among human rights activists and journalists regarding their safety in telling their stories. The research team was only able to engage with these actors through the navigation of trusted networks and respondent referrals.

2.5 Data Analysis and Reporting

The data analysis identified key themes, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening support ecosystems for digital democracy in the selected countries. This mixed methods approach involved both mainly qualitative analysis methods in addition to employing the triangulation verification of multiple data sources highlighted below:

- **Qualitative Analysis:** thematic analysis to identify common patterns and insights from interviews and document reviews. Employed Perplexity AI to organise and analyse qualitative data, ensuring a rigorous and systematic analysis process.
- **Quantitative Analysis:** analysed collated online survey data using statistical tools like SPSS to identify trends and correlations in CSO engagement, challenges, and support needs.
- **Triangulation:** Cross-verified data from sources (key informant interviews, document reviews) to ensure validity and reliability of findings.

The case study assessment report identified existing support mechanisms for CSOs working on digital democracy, highlighting successful strategies and initiatives employed by CSOs to overcome digital repression and strengthen the support ecosystem. The report also offers context-specific recommendations for improving the support ecosystem for digital democracy in Egypt.

3.0 Digital Democracy in Egypt

3.1 Political and Digital Landscape for Civic Engagement

Egypt has employed a range of strategies to restrict civic space, diminish the activities of civil society actors, and exert control over their operations, sometimes compelling them to cease their work to evade targeting. These tactics encompass the criminalisation of public dissent under the guise of national security and counterterrorism, the utilisation of legal reforms and decrees to formalize previously extrajudicial repressive practices, public vilification campaigns, extensive legal measures, and the co-optation of CSOs organisations. Authorities have also employed tactics such as travel bans, asset freezes, and legal harassment against human rights organizations, while local development and civic initiatives face significant challenges in accessing resources for their operations (Brechenmacher, 2017).

The country has been under military rule for the past decade, with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government consolidating authoritarian control and severely restricting civic space. This political environment has had a profound impact on the country's digital democracy ecosystem, which operates under significant constraints. According to key informant interviews conducted for this study, the government has deployed a range of legal, technological, and surveillance tools to suppress dissent, curtail online freedoms, and stifle democratic participation.

The digital sphere has become a critical battleground for civic engagement and human rights advocacy. In Egypt, social media platforms serve as primary tools for disseminating information, documenting human rights violations, and countering government propaganda. However, these platforms are under constant threat from government restrictions, surveillance, and censorship. Interviewees describe the civic space as "totally closed," with no room for political or rights-based discussions. Ground activism, media freedom, and organisational work have been effectively shut down, creating what many consider the worst civic environment in Egypt's modern history.

An interviewee describes the environment as "totally closed," stating that,

"There's no space for political or civic/rights discussions. The civic space, with all its components, is nonexistent. Civic and media spaces are nonexistent, ground activism is nonexistent, and civic space for organisational work is completely closed."

Recent political developments have significantly impacted digital rights and freedoms in Egypt. Specifically, key informants interviewed highlighted several concerning trends:

- **Mass arrests following protests:** in 2024, authorities arrested 120 people following a demonstration they organised against Israel's war on Gaza, (Moussa, M., 2024).
- **Misuse of anti-terrorism laws:** Some human rights activists are still in detention, accused of terrorism and unlawful assembly.
- **Criminalisation of criticism:** Other laws shield public figures and institutions from criticism, (Mohiuddin, A., 2024)

- **Targeting of political opposition:** "Ahmed Tantawi, a political candidate with AL SISI running for president, was targeted by authorities and his supporters. They were arrested and charged with terrorism charges just for supporting another presidential candidate." (Springborg, R., 2021).

3.2 Examining the Shrinking Digital Civic Space

Egypt's political landscape has dramatically transformed over the past decade, and it is now firmly under the grip of a military dictatorship. A human rights defender bluntly puts it, Egypt operates with "almost no civic space at all." This authoritarian consolidation has had a chilling effect on civil liberties, independent media, and the ability of CSOs to operate freely. In the digital realm, the government has deployed a sophisticated arsenal of technological and legal tools to curtail online freedoms.

Delving deeper into Egypt's contextual factors to grasp the complexities of digital democracy shows that authoritarianism and civic space restrictions characterise the political landscape. Egypt's digital rights situation raises alarms, with internet freedom classified as "not free", (Farahat, M., 2021). The state tightly controls the digital landscape, hampering civil society's efforts to promote democratic values. Authorities actively monitor online activities, censor content, and suppress dissenting voices.

This oppressive digital environment stifles free expression, limits access to information, and undermines the potential for genuine democratic participation online. CSOs face significant challenges in navigating this restrictive digital space, as their attempts to foster democratic discourse often meet with swift government opposition.

The government engages in extensive online censorship, blocking websites and social media platforms critical of the regime, (Badr, H., 2020). Surveillance is pervasive, with reports of advanced spyware and technologies like Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) to target activists and journalists. Since 2017, Egyptian authorities have blocked over 600 websites, including independent news outlets and human rights organisations, without any semblance of due process or transparency.

3.2.1 Increasing Authoritarianism and Digital Repression

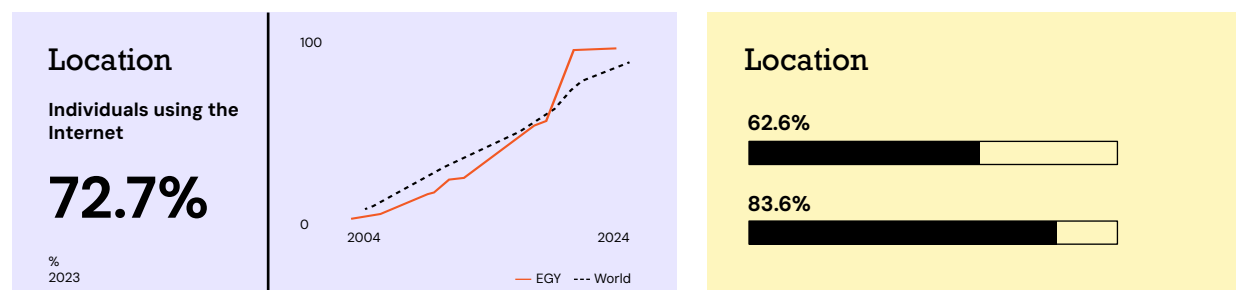
A key informant interviewed for this study highlighted that Egypt's political and digital landscape has significantly changed in recent years, marked by increasing authoritarianism and digital repression. Since 2013, the country has been under military rule, with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government tightening its grip on power and severely restricting civic space. The digital sphere has become a critical battleground for civil liberties. In 2018, Egypt introduced a cybercrime and media regulation law that criminalises various forms of online expression. The government has aggressively wielded these laws to prosecute activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens for their social media posts and online activities, according to key informant interviewee. Over the past decade, the government has severely limited freedom of expression and digital rights. For the last 10 years (2014–2024), human rights defenders have described the country as being under a "military dictatorship," which has resulted in an almost non-existent civic space.

Egypt's government has implemented restrictive laws and policies that severely limit freedom of expression and digital rights. Key informant interviews highlighted that the Anti-Terrorism Law and the Cybercrimes Law have been particularly problematic, as they have been used to suppress online expression and target activists. These legal frameworks have created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among Egyptian citizens and CSOs. A further analysis of these restrictive laws is addressed in sections below.

3.2.2 Digital Divide and Economic Challenges

While Egypt has a higher internet penetration rate of 72.7% (ITU, 2023). Access and digital literacy remain limited, particularly among marginalised groups and in rural areas. Economic challenges exacerbate this divide, with key informant interviews noting that unreliable electricity and affordability issues hinder internet usage.

Figure 1: Internet penetration rate in Egypt, rural and urban availability



As one interviewee mentioned,

"If you don't have affordable electricity, you can't rely on the internet for basic needs, let alone activism."

The digital divide and the unequal online representation reflect who can engage online and who is influencing debates, setting priorities, and developing digital technology policies and digital democratic space. In Egypt, while the internet penetration is steadily rising, a rural-urban gap still persists as shown in the figure, urban is quite accessible with 83,6% while rural is 62.6%. This gap further exacerbates the challenge of representation, particularly ethnic minorities and marginalised communities, who are usually left out in the discourse, knowledge generation, and agenda-setting related to digital technology and democracy.

3.3 Legal and Regulatory Environment

The government has implemented repressive laws and policies that have significantly curtailed online freedoms. The Anti-Terrorism and Cybercrimes Law of 2018 has been particularly problematic as these laws include criminal offences punishable by imprisonment for 'misuse of social media,' 'misuse of websites,' and 'dissemination of information against order, national security or family values'. The Media Regulation Law further restricts content creation online and allows the government to block websites. This section presents some of the laws and their implications to digital democracy.

3.3.1 2018 Cybercrime Law

The Cybercrime Law No. 175 of 2018 includes provisions with significant implications for digital democracy in the country. While the primary objective of this legislation aims to define and criminalise various cybercrimes, including unauthorized access, data breaches, and the dissemination of false information online. Some of its provisions have implications for digital democracy. These key provisions include;

Article 7: Website Blocking, which grants broad powers to investigative authorities and security agencies to order the blocking of websites deemed to constitute a crime or a threat to national

security or the economy. The order is submitted to a court for approval within 72 hours, but in cases of "imminent danger or damage," security authorities can directly order the National Telecom Regulatory Agency (NTRA) to implement the block immediately (Access Now, 2023). Article 7 provides a legal basis for the extensive website blocking that has been practiced in Egypt in recent years. This can severely limit access to information, independent journalism, and critical voices online, hindering open public discourse, a cornerstone of digital democracy (Civicus, n.d.).

Article 2: Data Retention and Surveillance which requires telecommunications companies and internet service providers (ISPs) to retain and store users' data, including communication traffic data, for 180 days. This data can be accessed by national security authorities upon request (Access Now, 2023). The data retention requirements in Article 2 enable comprehensive surveillance of online communications. Knowing that their data is being stored and can be accessed by authorities can create a "chilling effect," discouraging individuals from expressing dissenting opinions or participating in online activism for fear of reprisal (Access Now, 2023).

Article 24, Fake Accounts: this article criminalises the creation of fake accounts, websites, or email addresses associated with individuals or organisations. If such accounts are used in a manner prejudicial to the affiliated person, the penalties increase. Creating an account to insult a public figure can lead to even harsher penalties, (Access Now, 2023). Provisions related to fake accounts can be used to target individuals using pseudonyms online, which are often crucial for activists and those who fear government reprisal for their online activities. This can stifle online dissent and limit the space for critical commentary.

Article 25: Violation of Private Life and Unlawful E-content which punishes the posting of photos, videos, or texts of others without their consent and in violation of their privacy. It also criminalises the posting of content that "violates the family principles and values upheld by Egyptian society. Criminalisation of Socially or Culturally "Unacceptable" Content: Article 25's vague reference to "family principles and values" provides a broad basis for censoring content that the authorities deem inappropriate, potentially targeting marginalised groups or dissenting social views rather than focusing on actual criminal activity.

Article 30: Failure to Implement Censorship Orders imposes penalties on service providers who fail to carry out censorship orders issued by competent authorities. Article 30 makes ISPs complicit in censorship, forcing them to actively implement government restrictions. This undermines their potential role as neutral platforms for information sharing.

3.3.2 Media regulation laws

A key informant interviewee highlighted that the executive regulations made in 2021 by the media regulation law imposed strict administrative requirements for journalists and made it hard to get licenses. In 2024, 15 journalists were imprisoned, facing convictions or investigations related to accusations of "spreading false news," "belonging to a terrorist group," or "misuse of social media." Among them, blogger Mohamed Ibrahim Radwan, known as Mohamed Oxygen, has endured five years of incarceration, during which he has reportedly suffered physical and psychological torture for his coverage of anti-corruption protests (Reporters Without Border 2024).

3.3.3 Penal code provisions

The Penal Code provisions also have implications for digital democracy, primarily by creating an environment where freedom of expression and online civic engagement are curtailed due to fear of prosecution. Several articles within the Penal Code and related cybercrime laws are used to suppress dissent and control online spaces. For instance, provisions criminalising the spread of "false news," "incitement," and vaguely defined offenses against "public morals" or "national security" are often applied to online content. This leads to self-censorship among citizens and activists who fear legal repercussions for expressing critical opinions or sharing information online (Access Now, 2020).

In February 2025, amendments to the Criminal Procedure Law were approved, allowing public prosecutors, with judicial authorization, to monitor communications, social media accounts, and seize digital devices in cases of felonies or misdemeanors punishable by more than three months in prison. These recent amendments allow for the surveillance of phones and social media accounts under judicial authorisation, raising concerns about privacy violations and the potential for arbitrary use against political dissidents and activists.

Individuals involved in online activism or political organizing face the risk of arrest and prosecution under charges related to cybercrime, terrorism, or spreading false information. The government has also treated social media accounts with over 5,000 followers as media outlets, subjecting them to stricter regulations, (Refaei, D., 2022).

Journalists face significant restrictions online, with laws allowing for prosecution for publishing information without government permission or visiting websites considered a threat to national security. This severely impacts media independence and the ability to report freely on issues of public interest.

3.3.4 Anti-terrorism laws

The Anti-terrorism Law in Egypt, enacted in 2015 and amended subsequently, also has implications for an open environment for digital democracy. While the law is aimed at combating terrorism, its broad definitions and provisions have been criticised for stifling freedom of expression, limiting access to information, and undermining digital activism.

The law criminalises a wide range of online activities, including the promotion of terrorist ideologies or the dissemination of information that contradicts official government statements on counter-terrorism operations.. This has led to self-censorship among journalists, bloggers, and social media users who fear prosecution for expressing dissenting views (Freedom House, 2022). The broad definition of terrorism within the law, which can include actions that "disturb public order" or "jeopardise the safety and security of society," further exacerbates this issue, potentially encompassing peaceful political activities and online criticism of the government.

The government has utilised the Anti-terrorism Law to justify the blocking of websites and the monitoring of online content deemed a threat to national security. This restricts citizens' access to information and limits the space for online activism and political organisation. The 2018 amendments to the law allow for the prosecution of individuals who visit websites considered a threat, further chilling online engagement. The government continues to block access to news websites and platforms that are perceived as critical or that do not align with official narratives. While the exact list of blocked sites fluctuates and is not always publicly disclosed, this practice limits the diversity of information available to Egyptian citizens online (Freedom House, 2022).

The law enhances the government's surveillance capabilities over digital communications, citing national security concerns. Amendments to the Penal Code have also criminalised the collection or publication of statistics or data on the armed forces without permission, limiting transparency and the ability of citizens to scrutinise government actions (US State Department, 2021). This environment of surveillance can deter individuals from expressing critical opinions online, hindering open and democratic digital discourse.

Provisions within the law can be interpreted to criminalise legitimate forms of digital activism and the work of journalists. For instance, reporting on counter-terrorism operations in a way that differs from official narratives can lead to hefty fines and professional bans. The law treats social media accounts with over 5,000 followers as media outlets, subjecting them to regulations that can stifle independent journalism and citizen reporting. The requirement for journalists to obtain government permission before publishing certain information further undermines media freedom and the public's right to know. Journalists continue to face restrictions on reporting on sensitive topics, particularly those related to security and counter-terrorism. The threat of prosecution under the Anti-terrorism Law for publishing information that contradicts official statements makes it difficult for independent media to provide comprehensive and unbiased coverage, (Mohiuddin, A., 2024).

3.3.5 Establishment of a Social Media Monitoring Unit -2020

The 2020 establishment of a Social Media Monitoring Unit under the Public Prosecutor's Office in Egypt exemplifies a concerning trend with significant ramifications for digital democracy. The Egyptian case highlights how such measures can undermine the very principles of open online discourse and civic participation. Egypt's intensified focus on monitoring online platforms has led to a significant enhancement of its surveillance capabilities, raising serious concerns about the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and privacy. Reports of plans for "indiscriminate mass surveillance" underscore this heightened focus (Freedom House, 2024).

The legal framework underpinning these surveillance activities remains a critical point of concern. Critics argue that its broad and ambiguously defined nature enables the suppression of dissenting voices under the pretext of national security (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2020). According to (ARTICLE 19, 2025) draft legal provisions in Egypt, could grant authorities overly broad powers to intercept private communications, potentially harming journalists, human rights defenders, and dissenters.

4.0 Challenges faced by CSOs working on Digital Democracy

CSOs in Egypt operate within a complex and challenging environment as they strive to promote digital democracy and protect digital rights. A restrictive political context, coupled with sophisticated digital repression tactics employed by the government, has created a hostile landscape for these organisations. This section examines the key challenges faced by CSOs in Egypt, drawing on evidence of digital repression, resource constraints, the impact of restrictive laws and policies, and specific regulatory obstacles, as well as other salient issues captured through literature and key informant interviews.

4.1 Digital Repression and Surveillance

The Egyptian government's utilisation of advanced technologies, including DPI, has enabled extensive censorship and surveillance of online communications. This has compelled CSOs to adopt and continuously adapt their strategies, frequently employing VPNs and other circumvention tools to access blocked content and maintain secure communications. However, the efficacy of these tools is increasingly compromised, further complicating the efforts of digital rights defenders.

CSOs operate under the persistent threat of surveillance and digital attacks. Since 2017, the government has blocked access to hundreds of websites, including independent news outlets, hindering the dissemination of information and findings. The blocking of websites extends to circumvention tools, as "download websites for VPNs are often blocked" (IEMed, n.d.). This intense surveillance of online activities disproportionately targets activists and journalists, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship. The 2018 amendments to the Criminal Procedures Law, which grant the Public Prosecution broad authority to monitor digital communications, including social media accounts, emails, and phone calls, have further exacerbated this "chilling effect," with activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens facing prosecution for online activities.

A Key informant interviewee revealed that while not a complete, continuous "blockade" in the strictest sense, the Egyptian authorities employ a range of methods to limit access and influence online discourse especially social media like Facebook. Historically, Facebook served as a crucial tool for civic engagement in Egypt, facilitating communication, organisation, and the sharing of information.

4.2 Resource Constraints and Digital Infrastructure

Resource constraints is another critical challenge CSOs face, which impede their ability to counter sophisticated digital repression. Key informant interviews noted a general lack of funding to secure digital infrastructure critical for their work. One interviewee highlighted that there is a "critical need for secure, user-friendly tools tailored to the needs of human rights organisations, such as case management systems and secure communication platforms." However, developing and maintaining such infrastructure is prohibitively expensive for many CSOs, particularly given the funding restrictions imposed by the government. The restricted access to Arabic-language digital tools further underscores the need for modernised digital communication strategies, but the financial burden associated with these tools remains a significant obstacle as noted by a key informant interviewed.

4.3 Impact of Repressive Laws and Policies on CSOs

The broader legal and policy environment in Egypt contributes to a pervasive atmosphere of fear and self-censorship. CSOs and activists operate under the constant threat of surveillance, prosecution, and harassment for their online activities. This climate of intimidation curtails the free flow of information and limits the ability of CSOs to engage in robust digital advocacy.

While social media has emerged as a crucial, albeit imperfect, space for civil society, it is also subject to limitations. As one human rights defender interviewed noted, "Social media in the past years has emerged as the only space that, despite the restrictions and prosecutions, is still relatively free but also important for the dissemination of information and for taking action digitally"

However, CSOs face challenges in building economically viable independent media outlets due to website blockages and algorithmic limitations on social media platforms, further hindering the free flow of information. The authorities also employ various methods, including legal frameworks like cybercrime laws and technical measures, to limit access to and influence online discourse on platforms like Facebook, which historically served as a crucial tool for civic engagement.

4.4 Restrictive Regulations for CSOs

As noted by Zayed (2023), government policies hinder CSOs through restrictive registration requirements, funding restrictions, and administrative oversight. Often CSOs must navigate complex registration processes, facing a choice between registering as non-profit associations under the Ministry of Social Solidarity or as law firms to avoid ministry oversight.

The legal framework governing NGOs in Egypt, while not explicitly banning civil society, grants the Ministry of Social Solidarity and other government agencies "enormous discretionary powers" (ICNL, 2020) to control their operations. This authority has been used to target organizations and individuals that challenge the government's "red lines" in advocating for social reform and political liberalization.

In the words of an Egyptian human rights activist,

“Government policies severely hinder CSOs' use of digital tools. Laws regulate the receipt of donations or external funding, requiring organisations to notify and gain approval from their geographical administrative authority before initiating any project. They have the right to shut the CSOs down and freeze any funding they receive, preventing them from doing research activities and surveys.”

Furthermore, CSOs face significant capacity gaps in digital security and online advocacy. Many lack the technical expertise to effectively utilize online advocacy and civic engagement tools, particularly in reaching younger demographics (IEMed, n.d.). There is a pressing need for more comprehensive digital security training and capacity-building programs. Limited funding exacerbates these challenges, hindering CSOs' ability to adapt to digital activism and keep pace with the government's advanced surveillance techniques. As one interviewee stated, "I think much of what's going wrong in Egypt; what I see for other journalists now is that they do not keep up with digital safety".

Barriers to collaboration also pose a significant challenge. The risk of surveillance and legal repercussions discourages CSOs from working with organisations deemed problematic by the government, both domestically and internationally. This "fear of association with foreign entities" hampers knowledge-sharing and capacity-building efforts, further fragmenting support networks. While some international organizations support digital rights issues, stronger, more coordinated networks are needed to facilitate knowledge sharing and collective action among CSOs.

4.5 Lack of Trust in Digital Platforms

The pervasive surveillance and censorship have eroded trust in digital platforms, making it difficult for CSOs to mobilise citizens and conduct online campaigns effectively. Citizens may be hesitant to engage in online activism or share sensitive information, fearing government monitoring and repercussions. This is compounded by reports of the Egyptian government utilizing sophisticated surveillance technologies to monitor online activity, further chilling citizens' willingness to express dissent or participate in digital activism (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

4.6 Digital Illiteracy

Despite increasing internet penetration, digital literacy rates remain relatively low in certain segments of the Egyptian population. This digital divide limits the reach of CSO initiatives and hinders their ability to engage a broad audience in digital democracy efforts. CSOs often struggle to tailor their online advocacy to diverse levels of digital literacy. According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) (2021), while illiteracy rates in Egypt have decreased over thirty years, a significant portion of the population still lacks basic literacy skills, which can translate to lower digital literacy, hindering the effectiveness of online campaigns.

4.7 Information Overload and Disinformation

The digital space in Egypt is often characterised by information overload and the spread of disinformation, particularly on social media, (Jones, M.O., 2022). This makes it challenging for CSOs to disseminate accurate information and counter government propaganda. The ability to discern credible sources and combat misinformation is a critical but often unmet need for both CSOs and the citizens they serve.

Information overload and disinformation can have several serious implications in the Egyptian context. When citizens are constantly bombarded with conflicting or false information, it can erode their trust in all sources, including credible ones. This can make it more difficult for CSOs to communicate effectively and for citizens to make informed decisions (Freedom House, 2023). Disinformation is often used to sow division and inflame tensions between different groups in society. A key informant interviewed noted that this can lead to increased polarisation and even violence, particularly in an already politically charged environment like Egypt. When disinformation

is spread about human rights abuses or government misconduct, it can make it more difficult to hold perpetrators accountable. This can create a climate of impunity and further undermine the rule of law. The sheer volume of information, much of it trivial or misleading, can distract citizens from more pressing issues, such as economic inequality or political reform. This can hinder CSOs' ability to mobilize support for their causes.

There is evidence that the Egyptian government and its supporters have engaged in spreading disinformation online, particularly through social media. This has included efforts to discredit dissenting voices, spread propaganda about the government's achievements, and create confusion about political events (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a proliferation of misinformation about the virus in Egypt, including false claims about its origins, spread, and treatment. This misinformation, which was sometimes amplified by state-affiliated media, made it more difficult for CSOs to promote public health measures and counter the pandemic's spread. CSOs and activists have also been targeted by online disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting their work and undermining their credibility. These campaigns often involve spreading false accusations, fabricating evidence, and manipulating social media to create the impression of widespread opposition to their activities.

4.7 Targeted Harassment and Violence

CSOs and activists, particularly those involved in digital rights advocacy, are increasingly facing targeted harassment and violence, both online and offline. This includes cyberattacks, doxing (the public release of private information), online smear campaigns, and physical threats. Such tactics create a climate of fear and deter CSOs from pursuing their work. In recent years, the targeting of CSOs and activists in Egypt has become increasingly sophisticated and pervasive. Examples of such harassment and violence include online smear campaigns that are coordinated spreading false or misleading information about activists and organizations through social media, often with the aim of damaging their reputation and inciting violence against them (Amnesty International, 2023).

In addition, some members of the public also release activists' private information, such as home addresses or phone numbers, and the use of hacking and other cyberattacks to disrupt their work and expose them to further risk (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The use of vaguely worded laws to criminalise legitimate online activities is also common, leading to the arrest and detention of activists for their peaceful expression (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). In some cases, activists have been subjected to physical attacks, threats, and intimidation, often with impunity for the perpetrators.

4.8 Internet Shutdowns

The Egyptian government has a history of implementing internet shutdowns during times of political unrest or protest. The most notable instance was during the 2011 revolution, when the government ordered a near total internet blackout for several days in an attempt to quell protests and suppress dissent.

While the 2011 shutdown was particularly severe, it's important to note that large-scale shutdowns of this nature have not happened in recent years. However, the threat of localised disruptions or throttling of internet service during sensitive times remains a concern. Even though complete shutdowns may be less common now, the legacy of that event and the potential for future disruptions continue to affect the calculations of CSOs and activists operating in the digital space. The government's continued investments in surveillance and control technologies also suggest that the capacity for such measures remains in place.

4.9 Algorithmic Manipulation

Social media algorithms can be manipulated to suppress the reach of CSO content and amplify pro-government narratives. This algorithmic bias limits the visibility of CSO voices and hinders their ability to engage in effective online advocacy. Understanding and countering these manipulative techniques requires significant technical expertise and resources. Research by independent media watchdogs indicates that social media platforms in Egypt are susceptible to manipulation, affecting the visibility of certain viewpoints (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

Summary of Key Challenges



Website Blocking: Since 2017, the Egyptian government has illegally blocked hundreds of websites, including independent news outlets and VPN services. This restriction has severely limited access to information and hindered civil society organisations from reaching their audience.



Restrictive Laws: These laws allow for imprisonment for 'misuse of social media' and 'dissemination of false information,' creating a chilling effect on digital activism, a state of fear and self-censorship that hampers the free exchange of ideas and stifles online advocacy.



Surveillance and Prosecution: Human rights defenders, journalists, and activists face constant threats of surveillance and prosecution for their online activities. This situation has led to self-censorship and reduced civic participation.



Restrictive Registration Requirements: Organisations must navigate complex registration processes, often choosing between registering as non-profits or law firms to avoid excessive oversight.



Funding Restrictions: Limited access to funding, particularly from foreign sources, hampers the development of secure digital infrastructure. This may limit organisations' ability to invest in necessary digital infrastructure and tools.



Capacity Gaps: One key informant interviewed mentioned that many CSOs lack the expertise to effectively use digital tools for advocacy and engagement, particularly in reaching younger demographics. In addition there is a need for more comprehensive digital security training and capacity-building programs.



Collaboration Barriers: Fear of surveillance and legal repercussions discourages collaboration with other organisations, both domestically and internationally.



Fragmented Support Networks: While some international organisations support digital rights issues, stronger, more coordinated networks are needed to facilitate knowledge sharing and collective action among CSOs

5.0 CSOs Response and Adaptation Strategies

5.1 CSOs Employing Digital Tools

In the increasingly constricted digital sphere of Egypt, CSOs have displayed notable adaptability and ingenuity in sustaining their crucial operations. Despite the significant constraints imposed by Case 173/2011, commonly known as the "NGO Foreign Funding Case," and other suppressive measures, CSOs have cultivated inventive strategies to navigate this challenging environment.

Case 173/2011 represents a pivotal moment in the Egyptian government's approach to regulating and restricting the activities of non-governmental organizations. Initiated in 2011, the case investigated the foreign funding received by numerous Egyptian CSOs, leading to accusations of operating without proper authorization and posing threats to national security (Human Rights Watch, 2016). This legal action fostered a climate of fear and uncertainty within the civil society sector, resulting in asset freezes, travel bans, and the prosecution of human rights defenders (Amnesty International, 2018). The case is frequently referenced as a stark example of the Egyptian government's efforts to curtail independent civil society and limit external influence. Its enduring impact lies in the chilling effect it has had on the operational capacity and autonomy of CSOs within the country, making it a key point of reference when discussing the restrictive digital and civic space in Egypt.

The situation in Egypt offers compelling insights into the resilience of civil society in the face of digital repression, providing valuable lessons for activists globally. Their resourcefulness and adaptability in such adverse conditions are truly significant.

Activists and technology experts based outside Egypt have played a crucial role in developing and disseminating circumvention tools, alongside providing essential training and support to CSOs operating within the country. Organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have consistently highlighted internet censorship and surveillance in Egypt and advocated for the rights of CSOs and journalists to access information freely, (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

Egyptian CSOs have leveraged social media platforms as indispensable tools for their work. Platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) serve as critical channels for these organisations to disseminate information and challenge government narratives in a context where traditional media is heavily controlled by authorities.

As one interviewee described, social media acts as their "digital megaphone," enabling them to reach a broad audience despite limitations on physical gatherings.

These platforms have evolved into virtual public spaces, facilitating the sharing and debate of ideas and fostering a sense of community among those advocating for change. For instance, during the arrests of activists following protests in October 2024, CSOs utilised social media to document the detentions, share testimonies, and coordinate legal support for those affected (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Furthermore, many CSOs have become adept at utilising VPNs and other circumvention technologies to bypass state imposed internet restrictions. A key informant detailed their organisations' routine "digital drills" to ensure all staff can swiftly access secure networks if their primary communication channels are blocked. This technological proficiency has enabled organisations to maintain communication lines and access vital information, even as the government intensifies its efforts to control the digital landscape.

5.2 Collaborative Advocacy

Collaborative advocacy efforts have gained increased significance within this restrictive environment. CSOs have cultivated strong alliances with regional and international partners, amplifying their voices on the global stage. Interviewed key informants noted how these partnerships provide not only moral support but also practical assistance, such as secure hosting for sensitive data and legal expertise to challenge restrictive laws. For example, in response to the renewed crackdown on human rights organisations in 2024, a coalition of Egyptian and international CSOs issued a joint statement condemning the government's actions and calling for international intervention.

5.3 Shifting Towards Digital Documentation

CSOs in Egypt have been strategically pivoting towards digital documentation and communication. This digital shift continues to offer enhanced resilience against state surveillance and interference, providing essential avenues for engagement and impact where traditional physical spaces remain heavily constrained.

The adoption of digital strategies has enabled Egyptian CSOs to foster virtual solidarity among marginalised communities and human rights defenders, facilitating advocacy efforts despite ongoing limitations on physical assembly. Innovative uses of digital tools, including secure messaging applications and targeted social media campaigns, allow for community building and information dissemination with a degree of circumvention of direct government control. For instance, during periods of intensified security measures or arrests of activists, encrypted communication channels have reportedly been crucial for coordinating support and disseminating information discreetly (Amnesty International, 2021).

Despite persistent internet censorship and the blocking of numerous websites, social media remains a significant, albeit challenging, channel for information dissemination. As noted by various human rights monitors, these platforms offer a relatively more accessible space for communication compared to state-controlled traditional media, albeit under constant surveillance (Freedom House, 2023).

Organisations like the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) continue to utilise platforms like Twitter and Facebook to disseminate crucial information on human rights violations, legal developments, and advocacy initiatives directly to their audiences, adapting their strategies to navigate increasing digital restrictions (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 2023).

Egyptian CSOs are increasingly employing sophisticated and adaptive strategies to navigate algorithmic constraints and evade government surveillance. This includes the nuanced use of language, leveraging visual content, and strategically timing online activities to maximise reach while minimising the risk of detection by automated monitoring systems.

Social media remains a vital tool for the real-time documentation and reporting of human rights violations in Egypt. Activists and citizen journalists continue to utilise platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to share firsthand accounts and visual evidence of alleged abuses,

contributing to digital archives that can serve as crucial records for advocacy and potential future accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In a context where traditional avenues for victim support remain heavily restricted, digital platforms offer crucial channels for CSOs to connect with individuals in need. Organisations are adapting their outreach strategies to:

- Primarily rely on encrypted messaging applications like Signal and Telegram for confidential communication and support provision (Amnesty International, 2023).
- Utilise private groups on social media platforms with strict membership criteria to offer discreet assistance and peer support
- Develop secure online forums and resource repositories accessible through password-protected websites or shared secure cloud drives

CSOs are strategically leveraging social media to challenge official accounts and offer alternative perspectives on human rights issues. This involves disseminating fact-checked information, amplifying the voices of victims and marginalised communities, and creating engaging digital content to foster critical thinking and public awareness.

5.4 Fact-Checking and Debunking Misinformation

A key strategy involves actively monitoring state media and official statements for inaccuracies and misleading information. CSOs dedicate efforts to fact-checking these claims, often using open-source intelligence and cross-referencing data with independent sources. They then disseminate their findings through social media and their websites, aiming to correct the record and provide the public with more reliable information (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2022).

CSOs also actively work to amplify the voices and experiences of victims and marginalized communities that are often excluded or misrepresented in state-controlled media. This includes sharing personal accounts (with informed consent and ensuring anonymity where necessary), highlighting their situations, and advocating for their rights through compelling narratives and multimedia content on social media platforms (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Recognising the need to break through information barriers and capture public attention, CSOs invest in creating engaging and shareable digital content. This includes visually appealing infographics, short videos, and impactful social media campaigns that present complex human rights issues in an accessible and relatable manner. The goal is to create content that resonates with a broader online audience and encourages sharing, thus expanding the reach of alternative narratives, (Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, 2021).

CSOs often initiate and participate in strategic hashtag campaigns to draw attention to specific human rights concerns or government policies. These campaigns aim to foster online conversations, mobilize public opinion, and exert pressure on authorities. They also facilitate online discussions and Q&A sessions with human rights experts and activists, providing opportunities for public engagement and critical thinking (Amnesty International, 2023).

5.5 Summary of Creative Civil Society Response and Adaptation

CSOs in Egypt are demonstrating remarkable resilience, adapting and finding innovative ways to continue their work in the digital sphere:



Social Media Focus: Organisations like the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) have shifted to social media as the primary platform for advocacy and engagement with young people. CSOs have harnessed social media as a critical lifeline. Facebook and Twitter serve as vital channels for these organisations to disseminate information and counter government narratives in a country where authorities tightly control traditional media. A young activist interviewed described social media as their "digital megaphone," enabling them to reach thousands of supporters despite physical restrictions on gatherings. These platforms now function as virtual town squares, allowing activists to share and debate ideas and fostering community among those advocating change.

CSOs have crafted innovative strategies to overcome algorithmic constraints and government surveillance. They employ coded language and euphemisms to discuss sensitive topics, ensuring their messages reach their intended recipients while evading detection.



Digital Security Measures: Civil society groups increasingly adopt digital security tools and practices to protect themselves and their beneficiaries. According to a digital expert interviewed, there's a growing emphasis on developing and using secure digital tools for internal communication and case management. Many Egyptian CSOs have become accustomed to using VPNs and other circumvention tools. The use of secure cloud services is also growing among CSOs. The interviewed expert also highlighted the use of Signal for phone calls being considered as secure with improved encryption capabilities. This technological savvy has allowed organisations to maintain lines of communication and access critical information, even as the government attempts to tighten its grip on the internet.



International Advocacy: Some organisations are leveraging international platforms, such as the European Union (EU) and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, to advocate for digital rights in Egypt. Key informant interviews noted that some CSOs have forged strong alliances with regional and international partners, amplifying their voices on the global stage. Sampled key informants observed how these partnerships provide moral support and practical assistance, such as secure hosting for sensitive data or legal expertise to challenge repressive laws.



Collaborative Advocacy: CSOs increasingly engage in joint advocacy efforts through regional and international human rights mechanisms. This collaborative approach allows them to amplify their voices beyond national borders and apply pressure on the Egyptian government through international forums. One interviewee noted that activists and tech experts based abroad have also played a key role in developing and distributing circumvention tools and providing training and support to CSOs within Egypt. Organisations like the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders have consistently raised awareness about internet censorship and surveillance in Egypt and advocated for the rights of CSOs and journalists to access information freely.



Digital Documentation: Organisations have adapted their research and documentation processes to leverage digital evidence-gathering and secure storage tools. Activists and citizens use these platforms to share eyewitness accounts and video evidence of violations, create digital archives of abuse that might otherwise go unrecorded, and amplify the voices of victims and marginalised communities. This documentation serves as a record of abuse and crucial evidence for future accountability efforts.

Various social media channels have become invaluable for CSOs in identifying and documenting human rights abuses in real-time. This documentation serves as a record of abuse and crucial evidence for future accountability efforts. Activists and citizens use these platforms to share eyewitness accounts and video evidence of violations and create digital archives of abuse that might otherwise go unrecorded.



Creative Strategies: A digital security interviewed for this study mentioned that Egyptian CSOs actively employ ingenious tactics to overcome algorithmic constraints and evade

government surveillance. Some are utilising coded language and euphemisms to address sensitive subjects, effectively sidestepping detection. CSOs also harness the power of visual content, conveying messages that might trigger text-based flags.



Countering Government Propaganda: As the government tightens its grip on traditional media outlets, CSOs have used social media to challenge official narratives and provide alternative perspectives on human rights. Their efforts include fact-checking government statements, disseminating accurate information, and amplifying diverse voices and experiences contradicting state propaganda.



Victim Outreach and Support: key informants interviewed noted that organisations have adapted their outreach strategies to establish secure communication channels through encrypted messaging apps and promote private groups and direct messaging features to offer discreet assistance. Creating online support networks and peer-to-peer aid systems can be an effective victim outreach support mechanism.

Traditional channels for victim support are often restricted or monitored, so social media has emerged as a lifeline for CSOs to connect with those in need. These digital connections have allowed CSOs to provide vital legal, medical, and psychological support to victims who might otherwise remain isolated and vulnerable.



Online Feminist and Queer Initiatives: Some groups have pioneered innovative digital activism strategies, particularly in the realm of feminist and queer rights. These initiatives often operate anonymously on social media platforms, allowing activists to organise and advocate while minimising personal risk.

6. Digital Democracy Ecosystem Support to CSOs

6.1 Ecosystem Support Opportunities

The support ecosystems surrounding CSOs influence their effectiveness, either empowering their efforts or hindering their progress. Authorities impose stringent regulations, conduct surveillance, and sometimes use intimidation tactics. These actions directly impede the organisations' ability to operate freely and effectively. The Egyptian civil society ecosystem comprises diverse local and international organisations that address various social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Despite navigating a complex regulatory environment, these organisations are crucial in promoting human rights, democratic values, and sustainable development in Egypt. There are a few foundations that offer a range of digital democracy ecosystem-tailored support to CSOs highlighted in the sections below:

6.1.1 Ford Foundation

The Ford Foundation provides several areas of support to CSOs in Egypt that contribute to strengthening support ecosystems for digital democracy:

- **Capacity Building and Technical Support:** The Ford Foundation has launched the Global Network for Social Justice and Digital Resilience, which aims to increase the technical capacities of civil society organisations across the Global South, including Egypt. This initiative supports organisations that provide technical support to CSOs in areas like digital security and infrastructure. It helps CSOs leverage technology's benefits better while minimising harm, such as online surveillance, censorship, and misinformation. The initiative also fosters South-to-South peer learning among organisations working to strengthen digital infrastructure and resilience.
- **Funding and Grants:** The foundation offers grants to Egyptian CSOs to implement projects in various developmental areas. While not exclusively focused on digital democracy, these grants broadly support civil society activities, including digital rights and democracy initiatives.
- **Promoting Democratic Values:** The Ford Foundation supports civil society groups working to advance democratic and accountable government and fundamental human rights and facilitate access to services like healthcare and education. These efforts aim to help overcome social, economic, and cultural marginalisation hindering democratic participation.
- **Strengthening Institutional Capacity:** The foundation has supported national institutions in Egypt that play key roles in setting the development agenda, including The National Institute of Planning, the National Center for Translation, and the Information and Decision Support Center of the Cabinet of Ministers. This institutional support can indirectly create an enabling environment for digital democracy.
- **Fostering Government-Civil Society Cooperation:** The Ford Foundation has made grants to support partnerships that improve services at the local level, enhancing cooperation between government and civil society. This collaboration can be crucial for effectively implementing digital democracy initiatives.

- **Supporting Academic Institutions:** The foundation has maintained relationships with academic institutions like Cairo University and the American University in Cairo, supporting programs that can contribute to research and education on digital rights and democracy.

While the Ford Foundation's support in Egypt does not exclusively focus on digital democracy, its multifaceted approach to strengthening civil society, promoting democratic values, and enhancing technical capacities contributes to creating a more robust ecosystem for digital democracy initiatives.

6.1.2 Drosos Foundation

The Drosos Foundation provides several areas of support to CSOs in Egypt that contribute to strengthening support ecosystems for digital democracy. However, their focus is not explicitly on digital democracy. The foundation's efforts in Egypt include:

- **Digital Skills and Empowerment:** The Arab Digital Expression Foundation supports projects like "Nitrous 2.0" implemented by the Giza Systems Education Foundation, which likely involves digital skills training for youth. Funding initiatives such as "Youth Digital Empowerment" also promote digital skills among young people.
- **Economic Independence and Entrepreneurship:** The foundation supports projects like "ERADA" by the Association for Women's Total Advancement and Development, which may include digital entrepreneurship components. The foundation continues to support "Helm Academy SEED" by Helm Inclusion Solutions, potentially fostering digital inclusion and entrepreneurship for people with disabilities.
- **Creative Skills Development:** Funding projects like "Quintet: Art as a tool for personal and community development" by Wekalet Behna for Arts, which may incorporate digital arts and expression. The foundation also supports the SETI Centre's "See, Know, Include-SKI," which could involve digital inclusion and creative expression tools.
- **Capacity Building for CSOs:** Provides organisational development support to partner organisations, which can enhance their ability to leverage digital tools for their work.
- **Promoting Innovation:** Supporting social innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives that may include digital components or address digital challenges.

While the Drosos Foundation does not explicitly focus on digital democracy, its support for digital skills, creative expression, economic empowerment, and civil society capacity building contributes to creating an ecosystem where CSOs can better engage with and utilise digital tools for democratic participation. The foundation's approach of working with local partners and investing in organisational development also helps build a stronger civil society ecosystem that can support digital democracy initiatives.

6.1.3 The Sawiris Foundation for Social Development

The Sawiris Family established an Egyptian charity organisation in 2001, which has become a prominent economic and social aid institution. Many consider it "Egypt's first modern family grant-making foundation." While the Sawiris Foundation for Social Development (SFSD) does not explicitly focus on strengthening support ecosystems for digital democracy in Egypt, it does offer some support to Egyptian CSOs that may indirectly contribute to this area.

- **Capacity Building for NGOs:** SFSD has a capacity-building program to strengthen Egyptian civil society organisations. This program includes providing training and knowledge sharing to improve NGO effectiveness, offering best practices and know-how to catalyse developmental work, and building a supportive ecosystem for civil society actors.
- **Grants to Civil Society Partners:** The foundation provides grants to Egyptian NGOs to implement projects in various developmental areas. While not explicitly focused on digital

democracy, these grants broadly support CSO activities.

- **Collaborative Approach:** SFSD emphasises collaboration with civil society partners by working with a network of implementing partners and grassroots NGOs, striving for mutual benefit and symbiosis with the Egyptian civil society ecosystem, and offering resources to evidence-based interventions proposed by CSOs.
- **Research and Knowledge Generation:** The SFSD Foundation collaborates with research institutions and think tanks to produce robust evidence that guides policy decisions and grant allocations for research studies that may encompass topics related to digital democracy.

While SFSD's work does not directly target digital democracy support ecosystems, its capacity-building, grant-making, and collaborative approach with Egyptian CSOs provide some foundational support that could indirectly benefit organisations working in this space. The foundation's primary focus areas are poverty reduction, economic empowerment, education, and social development rather than democracy or digital rights.

6.2 Existing Support Mechanisms

Some support mechanisms that exist for CSOs in Egypt include:

- **International donors:** Some initiatives funded by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) offer capacity building, incubation, and training to CSOs in Egypt. However, the interviewees highlight that the restrictive environment limits these efforts.
- **Capacity building programs:** Organisations like HuMENA offer online training programs, including "Capacity building for human rights defenders, covering topics such as the foundations of human rights and international mechanisms and building networks of defenders through virtual training sessions."
- **Legal aid:** Some organisations, like the Egyptian Front for Human Rights, support individuals facing digital threats or prosecution for online activities.
- **Regional networks:** While not extensively discussed, the interviewees mention the importance of maintaining and building regional networks to support digital rights work.

6.3 Gaps and Needs in the Ecosystem

The landscape of digital democracy in Egypt is riddled with critical gaps. Insights gleaned from key informant interviews reveal a complex web of challenges hindering the realisation of digital democracy full potential. These gaps, spanning issues of access, literacy, security, and civic engagement, underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to foster a more inclusive and effective digital space for democratic participation.



Arabic-Language Digital Infrastructure: One interviewee mentioned the pressing need for user-friendly, secure digital tools and platforms in Arabic for case management, whistleblowing, and public engagement.



Funding for Digital Innovation: All key interviews mentioned limited financial resources hindering the development and maintenance of the necessary digital infrastructure for civil society organisations.



Capacity Building: Many organisations lack the expertise to fully utilise digital tools for advocacy and engagement, particularly in reaching younger demographics.



Legal and Technical Support: Civil society groups require ongoing legal and technical support to navigate the complex and restrictive digital landscape.

6.4 Future Trends and Opportunities

Key informant interviews highlighted some positive trends and emerging opportunities within the Egyptian context. While obstacles persist, these glimmers of progress, ranging from burgeoning grassroots digital initiatives to evolving governmental approaches, offer fertile ground for strategic intervention. This section highlights some of these identified positive trends and opportunities;



Youth Engagement: Young Egyptians increasingly rely on digital platforms for information and activism, allowing civil society to engage with this demographic.



Mobile-First Approach: The rise of mobile internet usage in Egypt necessitates a shift towards mobile-friendly tools and applications for civic engagement.



Emerging Digital Initiatives: New online feminist and queer initiatives are utilising social media and the internet for organising, often anonymously, demonstrating innovative approaches to digital activism.

7. Conclusion

In assessing the digital democracy initiatives across challenging environments. The situation in Egypt presents a complex and multifaceted landscape for CSOs working to promote digital rights and freedoms. A stark dichotomy characterises the Egyptian context: on the one hand, there is a vibrant, tech-savvy youth population eager to engage in civic discourse; on the other, there is an increasingly repressive government apparatus determined to stifle dissent and control the digital sphere.

This tension has created a unique ecosystem where innovation and resilience clash with oppression and censorship. Egypt's digital democracy landscape faces severe challenges, with CSOs operating under intense repression and surveillance. Despite these obstacles, activists find innovative ways to advocate for human rights and democracy, often at significant personal risk. The need for international support, capacity building, and legal reforms emerges as a key theme for strengthening digital democracy initiatives in the country.

In the words of an Egyptian digital rights activist,

“As long as there is imagination, there are going to be ways of creating and reciting, constructing and deconstructing and then reconstructing something for ourselves. This resilience and creativity offer hope for the future of digital democracy in Egypt despite the current obstacles”

Egypt's digital democracy landscape faces severe challenges, with CSOs operating under intense repression and surveillance. However, through innovative strategies, international support, and persistent advocacy, these organisations continue to fight for digital rights and freedoms, often at significant personal risk.

7.1 Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Despite challenges, Egyptian CSOs have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and creativity in maintaining a digital civic space. A prominent human rights defender poignantly notes, "Social media in the past years has emerged as the only space that, despite the restrictions and prosecutions, is still relatively free". This sentiment encapsulates the critical role that digital platforms play in sustaining civil society activities in Egypt.

CSOs have leveraged social media as a megaphone and a multifaceted tool for documenting human rights violations, providing discreet support to victims, and countering government propaganda. As CSOs in Egypt continue to utilise various social media platforms to navigate a digital repressive environment, this situation has fostered a sense of community and solidarity among activists.

7.2 The Double-Edged Sword of Technology

However, the same digital tools that offer opportunities for civic engagement also present significant risks. The government's sophisticated use of surveillance technologies and restrictive cybercrime laws has created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship. As one activist shared during a focus group, "Every tweet, every Facebook post feels like a potential prison sentence". This precarious environment has forced CSOs to become digital security experts out of necessity. The creative use of VPNs, encrypted communication channels, and anonymous online initiatives demonstrates the ingenuity of Egyptian civil society in the face of digital repression.

7.3 A Call for Sustainable Support

The challenges faced by Egyptian CSOs underscore the critical need for a more robust and adaptive support ecosystem. Analysis shows that several key areas targeted interventions could significantly enhance the resilience and effectiveness of digital democracy initiatives. For example, securing Arabic-language digital infrastructure through leveraging flexible long-term funding mechanisms. Adopting comprehensive digital security training programs can further strengthen regional and international solidarity networks.

In the words of a young Egyptian digital rights activist,

"We're not just fighting for our right to tweet or post – we're fighting to exist, be heard, and shape our future. This spirit of determination gives me hope for the future of digital democracy in Egypt despite the many challenges."

7.4 Looking Ahead

The future of digital democracy in Egypt is delicately balanced. The passion and creativity of young activists, coupled with the determination of established CSOs, offer hope for a more open and inclusive digital civic space. However, realising this potential will require sustained effort, innovation, and support from the international community.

As CSOs move forward, it's crucial to recognise that Egypt's struggle for digital rights is not isolated but part of a global movement for online freedoms. Strengthening the support ecosystem for Egyptian CSOs is not just investing in one country's future—we're contributing to the broader fight for digital democracy worldwide.

8. Recommendations

This section presents the recommendations to strengthen the support ecosystem for digital democracy in Egypt. Instead of solely focusing on direct technical assistance, a broader approach could involve cultivating a vibrant community of practice. This could be achieved by facilitating regular convenings of CSOs, tech developers, academics, and policymakers to foster knowledge sharing, collaborative problem-solving, and the co-creation of digital democracy tools tailored to the Egyptian context.

Further, prioritising the development of localised digital literacy and civic education programs is crucial. These initiatives would empower citizens with the skills and understanding necessary to effectively engage with digital platforms and participate meaningfully in democratic processes online. This includes not only technical skills but also critical thinking about online information and responsible digital citizenship.

Another crucial avenue involves supporting independent media and fact-checking initiatives. By bolstering the capacity of these actors, they can contribute to a more informed online public sphere, mitigating the risks of disinformation and promoting evidence-based civic engagement. This can involve providing training, resources, and platforms for collaboration.

Playing a catalytic role in fostering dialogue and partnerships between government entities and CSOs regarding digital democracy initiatives is essential. By creating spaces for constructive engagement, we can help build trust and ensure that digital democracy efforts are inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with the needs and aspirations of Egyptian citizens.

More specific recommendations include;

- **Develop secure, Arabic-language digital infrastructure:** Invest in creating open-source, user-friendly digital tools tailored to the needs of Egyptian CSOs. This digital infrastructure would be necessary to promote knowledge sharing by establishing platforms for Egyptian CSOs to share best practices and lessons learned with counterparts in other challenging environments.
- **Establish a Digital Rights Innovation Fund:** Create a dedicated funding mechanism to support developing and maintaining digital infrastructure for CSOs. The fund can enhance digital literacy by supporting initiatives that improve it among the general population, empowering citizens to protect their digital rights better. Such training support can also extend to supporting initiatives that enhance digital literacy among marginalised communities to bridge the digital divide and expand civic participation.
- **Enhance digital security training:** CSOs must expand and intensify their training programs, focusing on emerging threats and advanced circumvention techniques. These organisations should increase investments in comprehensive training programs tailored to the Egyptian context. Such efforts should include strengthening capacity-building initiatives, particularly in proposal writing, digital activism, and cybersecurity while offering journalists and activists digital safety and security training.
- **Foster tech-CSO collaborations:** Tech experts and CSOs must partner to develop innovative solutions for bypassing censorship and protecting online privacy, which will strengthen regional

digital rights networks. These digital support networks could contribute to robust regional networks focused on digital rights advocacy and knowledge sharing. Relevant stakeholders should accelerate this tech-CSO collaboration approach by actively seeking collaborations with international partners. Encourage partnerships between Egyptian CSOs and international organisations to leverage shared resources and expertise. It will also improve big tech companies' content moderation, safety measures, and support by providing affordable, secure digital tools for CSOs and journalists.

- **Enhance legal advocacy:** Support CSOs in advocating for legal reforms to create a more enabling environment for digital rights and freedoms. Advocacy efforts should, therefore, advocate for legal reforms to intensify international advocacy efforts calling for repealing repressive cybercrime and media laws in Egypt. For example, creating an advocacy platform to amplify and connect CSO voices with international donors can be explored. Such a platform could foster international solidarity and networks to support local activists.

An immediate engagement area can be advocating for reviewing and improving legal frameworks to protect citizens' rights. This advocacy campaign focus can be an opportunity to strengthen international mechanisms for holding Egypt accountable to its human rights commitments.

- **Support alternative funding models:** CSOs should explore innovative funding mechanisms to maintain financial sustainability in a restrictive environment. CSOs can leverage these alternative funding models to strengthen emergency response mechanisms. For example, CSOs can develop rapid response protocols to support fellow organisations and activists during crackdowns or emergencies. This approach could enhance CSOs' ability to react swiftly and effectively in challenging situations. Such efforts can extend to creating targeted, short-term projects that provide immediate results and skills through small grants (\$10,000–\$15,000) to help CSOs implement digital transformation strategies.
- **Invest in innovative technologies:** Promote developing and adopting decentralised communication platforms and mesh networks to maintain connectivity during internet shutdowns. Any investment in innovative technologies should consider modernising digital communication strategies to provide capacity-building support to CSOs in digital storytelling, social media engagement, and online campaigning to reach younger audiences better.

With these targeted recommendations, the international community can help create a more resilient and effective support ecosystem for digital democracy in Egypt. This improved ecosystem would empower CSOs to navigate the challenging political landscape and continue their vital work promoting human rights and civic engagement in the country.



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Defining Digital Democracy and Digital Repression

This section presents the theoretical definition of Digital democracy and digital repression. Digital democracy signifies using digital technologies to bolster and enhance democratic values and practices. It is a dynamic concept encompassing a range of activities and principles to foster citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in the digital age. The critical components of digital democracy include but are not limited to the following:

- **Online Participation:** Citizens can engage in political processes and decision-making through digital platforms, such as online voting, e-petitions, public consultations, and online forums for deliberation and debate. The "Digital Democracy" (2022) report highlights that digital media can facilitate dialogue between governments and citizens, improve institutional trust, and enable engagement between diverse groups.
- **Access to Information:** The availability and accessibility of information online enable citizens to make informed decisions and hold their governments accountable, which includes access to government data, public records, and independent media sources. The "Digital Authoritarianism and Democratic Participation in Africa (2022) policy brief emphasises the importance of access to information for meaningful citizen participation. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, the lack of a developed Access to Information law, as noted in the "Côte d'Ivoire – Media Landscape" report (2023), hinders the free flow of information and limits citizens' ability to make informed decisions.
- **Transparency:** Digital technologies enhance government transparency by enabling the publication of official data, live-streaming of parliamentary sessions, and disclosure of public expenditures. These technologies facilitate greater openness and visibility of government actions and decision-making processes. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2024 Country Report on Côte d'Ivoire criticises Côte d'Ivoire's lack of transparency in budget planning and implementation, particularly regarding the military's economic enterprise.
- **Accountability:** Citizens' ability to hold their elected officials and government institutions accountable for their actions through digital means, such as online monitoring of government performance, reporting corruption, and demanding transparency. The "Digital Authoritarianism and Democratic Participation in Africa" (2022) notes that digital tools can be used for "naming and shaming" tactics, holding government actors accountable.
- **Digital repression** is "using information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state" (Feldstein, 2021, p. 25). Regimes can use digital repression to maintain power and, more generally, to undermine democratic values and human rights worldwide. To counter this, rights-respecting technology frameworks are viewed as opportunities to strengthen democratic values in digital societies (Wainscott et al., 2021).

Support Ecosystem in Egypt

Name of Organization	Description	Areas of Support
The Sawiris Foundation for Social Development	Charity organisation providing economic and social aid.	
The Ford Foundation	Supports human rights, democratic governance, social justice, and economic development.	
The Drosos Foundation	Focuses on social inclusion, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainable development.	
Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies	Promotes tolerance, non-violence, and human rights.	
Appropriate Communication Techniques for Development (ACT)	Works on media development, freedom of expression, and access to information.	
Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE)	Defends freedom of expression and combats censorship.	
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)	Promotes and protects human rights in Egypt and the Arab region.	
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)	Conducts research and advocacy on human rights issues.	
Nadeem Center	Provides support and rehabilitation for victims of torture and violence.	
Nazra for Feminist Studies	Promotes gender equality and women's rights.	
The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)	Conducts research and advocacy on political and social issues in the Middle East.	
Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR)	Focuses on economic and social rights, including labour rights and access to essential services.	
Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)	Monitors and documents human rights violations in the Arab world.	
Egyptian Foundation for the Advancement of Childhood Rights (EFACR)	Promotes and protects the rights of children in Egypt.	
Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF)	Documents human rights violations and provides legal aid to victims.	
National Council for Human Rights (NCHR)	The government-affiliated body that monitors and reports on human rights in Egypt.	
Zawia_3 https://zawia3.com/en/	'Zawia3' translates to 'Third Angle,' and they represent A New Dawn for Investigative Journalism.	
HuMENA https://humena.org/about/	HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement is dedicated to advancing the rights and empowerment of communities across the MENA region through strategic activism, advocacy, and collaboration.	Knowledge Production, Advocacy, Capacity Building, Supporting Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), Monitoring and Reporting, Partnerships and Collaborations
Egyptian Front for Human Rights https://egyptianfront.org/	The Front is an independent European Organisation working to improve the human rights situation in Egypt.	Research, advocacy and legal work, specifically in criminal justice.

Egypt Infographic

Case Study Snapshot of Strengthening Ecosystems for Digital Democracy in Egypt



Egypt Country Context Political Landscape Overview

“Egypt for the last 10 years has been under a military dictatorship with not just a restricted civic space but almost no civic space at all.” The authoritarian consolidation has severely restricted civil liberties, independent media, and civil society organizations.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who took power in a 2013 coup, governs Egypt in an authoritarian manner. Meaningful political opposition is virtually non-existent, as expressions of dissent can draw criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Civil liberties, including press freedom and freedom of assembly, are tightly restricted. Security forces engage in human rights abuses with impunity. Discrimination against women, LGBT+ people, and other groups remains a serious problem, as do high rates of gender-based violence.

The digital sphere has emerged as a critical battleground, with the government employing sophisticated technological and legal tools to curtail online freedoms. Since 2017, Egyptian authorities have engaged in widespread website blocking, targeting over 600 sites without any legal process or transparency. This digital repression extends to social media platforms, which have become “the only space that, despite the restrictions and prosecutions, is still relatively free but also important for the dissemination of information and for taking action digitally.”



POPULATION

111,000,000

GLOBAL FREEDOM SCORE 18/100



Classified as NOT FREE

INTERNET FREEDOM SCORE 28/100



Classified as NOT FREE

Digital Infrastructure and Access

FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Egypt	28 /100
A. Obstacles to Access	14/25
B. Limits on Content	9/35
C. Violations of User Rights	5/40

Source: Freedom House



72.2%

Individuals using the Internet

<https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=EGY>

Digital Democracy Status



NETWORKS RESTRICTED

NO



SOCIAL MEDIA BLOCKED

YES



WEBSITES BLOCKED

YES



PRO-GOVERNMENT COMMENTATORS

YES



USERS ARRESTED

YES



Source: Civicus Monitor (2024)



Digital Democracy
Initiative

