

'Fake news' becomes tool of repression after Egypt passes new law

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'Broadcasting false rumours' criminalised as government imprisons journalists and bloggers to stifle dissent

When officers from Egypt's National Security Agency came crashing into Amal Fathy and Mohammed Lotfy's house on a pre-dawn raid in early May, there was little mention of the words "fake news".

The couple were taken to the local police station along with their infant son, who was released together with his father several hours later.

It was only the next day, when Fathy was taken to see the local prosecutor, that the charges were revealed. They included "spreading false news" with intent to topple the Egyptian regime, as well as "damaging public order and harming the national interest," membership of a terrorist organisation and using the internet to "promote ideas and beliefs calling for terrorist acts".

Fathy's alleged crime was making a video criticising the prevalence of sexual harassment in [Egypt](#), and posting it on Facebook.

"The government looks down at critical opinions and labels them fake news affecting the national interest, in order to detain opposition or critics," said Lotfy.

Donald Trump's cries of "fake news" may be well received by the US president's supporters, but in Egypt the phrase is now a powerful tool of government repression. The country's president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, recently [said](#) the government faced "21,000 false rumours in three months," warning that it is spreading instability.

Fathy's case is a grim new norm, after Egypt's parliament passed a [sweeping new media law](#) criminalising the spreading of "false news" for anyone with more than 5,000 social media followers.

While the first case was the prolonged trial and imprisonment of three al-Jazeera journalists in 2013, the Egyptian authorities have in the past few months stepped up their crusade, with at least eight journalists and bloggers arrested in a spate of accusations over fake news.

Among them was blogger Wael Abbas, who was also arrested in a dawn raid, freelance photographer Fatma Diaa Eddin, who was detained with her husband and child, and journalist Moataz Wadnan, who went on a hunger strike to protest against his solitary confinement.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [documented](#) two cases of other journalists now in hiding and Lebanese tourist Mona el-Mazbough was this month [sentenced](#) to eight years in prison for "deliberately broadcasting false rumours which aim to undermine society and attack religions," after

she posted an angry online video describing sexual harassment on her Egyptian holiday.

The legislation offers no definition of what constitutes fake news, but permits the blocking of websites alleged to have published offending material.

In March, Egypt's public prosecutor set up a [hotline](#) for citizens to report "fake news and rumours".

Shortly after Sisi's re-election in March, Egyptian police [raided the offices](#) of news website Masr al-Arabia and arrested the editor-in-chief after it republished a New York Times piece on vote-buying. He was later accused by Egypt's Supreme Council for Media Regulation of publishing "false news". Their website is one of [more than 500](#) currently blocked in Egypt, which [ranks](#) 161 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index released annually by Reporters Without Borders.

Many observers believe that Trump's fondness for lashing out at the press has empowered his allies to do the same. The spokesman for Egypt's ministry of foreign affairs even imitated Trump's language when angered by CNN's coverage in November last year, referring to the network as "deplorable" in a [tweet](#), a day before the Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Shoukry [appeared](#) on the network.

"Every morning when I hear the words 'fake news' here in the US, it's like a punch in the stomach thinking about it in an Egyptian context," said Sherif Mansour, CPJ's coordinator for the [Middle East and North Africa](#).

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