IFLA/FAIFE
World Report:
Libraries and
Intellectual Freedom

Egypt

Population:	63,271,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	$ 1,080 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	Arabic
Main religions:	Islam (Sunni) - Orthodox Christianity
Literacy:	51% (1995)
% of population online:	0,65 (March 2000)

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Egypt has had a distinctive experience in regard to Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (IFLA/FAIFE). This experience has varied during the last 40 years because of the political situation which changed from a socialist system during the time of Nasser to a capitalist system during the time of Sadat and Mubarek.

It is clear now that the tight control of freedom of information and expression started to ease after the first period during Nasser's rule, prior to the Egyptian Revolution which overthrew King Farouk in 1952.

During the time of Nasser's rule, 1954 to 1970, the situation was worse and nobody had the right of freedom to access any type of information or freedom of expression in any form: by talk, writing or demonstration or even silent obstruction. The prisons were full of writers, journalists, Artists even religious persons or thinkers who had not any interest in politics.

The situation became more open after Nasser's death, during Sadat's period from 1970 to 1980, and to be more flexible during Mubarek's time from 1980 to now.

Current Situation

The current situation of freedom of access information and freedom of expression is expected to move towards full democratic openness within the next decade.

There are about 15 daily and weekly newspapers in Egypt. They have the right to criticize and discuss any events whether political, economic or social. The journalists have full freedom to discuss any aspect of the government except the President himself or his family, as it is forbidden to touch the symbol of the country or his family. Although this requirement is not mentioned in the country's constitution, most writers and journalists agreed to it. Its reality was demonstrated when a Saudi newspaper called *Alsharek Alawsad* (which means "Middle East" in English) published an attack on President Mubarek's son because he was using his influence to make business and profits. Distribution of the newspaper was forbidden in Egypt, its office was closed, and it was brought before an Egyptian court. The situation was resolved when the chief editor of the newspaper apologised and the journalist who wrote the news item was dismissed from the newspaper.

Intellectual Freedom Legislation

Obtaining a license to publish a newspaper involves very long and complicated procedures, and at the end of these long procedures refusal of the license is the normal result. The control of licenses is completely in the hands of government, from the ministry of Culture to the Senators Cabinet to the security intelligence.

National deposit legislation is working well for the National Library of Egypt for published books, reports, or any other form of publishing.

Those seeking a license to distribute any electronic media also face many long procedures in Egypt, whether imported or local production.

In order to import electronic media, the importer must include, in the import documentation, a "Certificate of Origin" accredited by the Egyptian Consulate of the country of export. On arrival in Egypt at an airport or marine port, each title needs to be considered for censorship and can be released for distribution only after long and bureaucratic procedures.

Locally produced electronic media be licensed by the Department of Censorship on Intellectual Works and Arts in the Ministry of Culture. This department asks for many documents until it approves the license for distributing the media. It also has the right to check and enter shops or bookshops which distribute electronic media and ask for the license. In cases in which there is no license they close the bookshop or the shop dealing in the media and impose a penalty or take the owner to court.

Censorship

Censorship has a key role in all underdeveloped countries, including Egypt. Any cultural materials in any media imported to Egypt must be considered for censorship on arrival.

Book Censorship
Most of the censorship of books concentrates on pocket books, which include romantic fiction and some which deal with sex or religion from different angles. They may contradict the Islamic religion and are therefore censored. Sometimes there is censorship of special writers whose writings contradict social traditions and customs or religion, such as Salman Rushdie for Islamic religion. Last year the censor stopped many titles from distribution because they were romantic, writing about sex, or horror fiction.

Newspaper Censorship
Foreign newspapers experience severe censorship with the banning of distribution of any issue if they touch the principles of the country, including political, social or economic principles. Local newspapers have some freedom from censorship because if they make a mistake the law will take further steps towards them.

Electronic Media Censorship
All media imported or produced locally and needing to be distributed must have a license for distribution: one of the main documents to gain the license is censorship approval.

Electronic media related to the Islamic religion, especially "QURAN", "PROPHET" and on the religion's main principles, must have the approval of the high authorities of the Islamic religion organization, called "AL – AZHAR".

Access To Information
The information situation in Egypt is poor although, of course, it has developed in the last ten years to be better than in the seventies or early eighties.

Now in Egypt in the nineties, the Internet has proved to be a major contribution to development: the number of subscribers grows every day, to several hundreds. Most of the universities have Internet for their educational staff and main bodies of the university. The same situation applies to governmental organizations.

The private sector is leading the battle to develop the information infrastructure of Egypt in hardware, software and communication facilities and networking.