

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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EGYPT

FIGHTING CORRUPTION AS A WAY OF LIFE...



ArabDev

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Introduction

As an Egyptian I was intrigued and overwhelmed by GISWatch's 2012 theme. Egypt was, and still is, in deep transition after its 25 January 2011 revolution – the revolution which was triggered by decades of corruption that had spread like a fatal cancer permeating all public, and many private, aspects of life. Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perception Index ranks Egypt 112 out of 183 countries.¹ In Egypt's case corruption began with the political and business elite and ended by becoming a way of life for nearly everyone, which means that bribery and petty corruption at the administrative and business levels had become a daily incident, the absence of which was the anomaly. The fact that corruption has become so prevalent and an integral fibre of life is why fighting it will need a thorough restructuring of nearly every sector in the country.

Alaa Al-Aswany's best-selling novel *The Yacoubian Building*² bases its plot on this pervasive and insidious corruption. The novel, published in 2002, has been a revolutionary act of free speech that was amplified when it was turned into a film featuring some of the most prominent Egyptian actors. Though this report focuses on the internet's role in furthering and/or obstructing transparency, film is briefly mentioned as an important vehicle to transmit messages, especially in a country with a 66.4% adult literacy rate.³

The use of internet tools for better governance has prompted questions like: How does government itself become an open platform that allows people inside and outside government to innovate? And how do you design a system in which all of the outcomes are not specified beforehand, but instead evolve through interactions between the technology

provider and its user community?⁴ This report uses Global Integrity's⁵ definition of "open government", which is based on:

- Information transparency: the public understands the workings of their government.
- Public engagement: the public can influence the workings of their government by engaging in governmental policy processes and service delivery programmes.
- Accountability: the public can hold the government to account for its policy and service delivery performance,⁶ and the internet can be used for increased governance accountability and transparency.

This definition is just one of many that try to outline the meaning of Gov 2.0, according to the Gov 2.0 Summit held 9-10 September 2009 in Washington, DC. It is notable that most definitions come from the first world, the US in particular.⁷ As the definition of Gov 2.0 takes shape it will be crucial that developing countries participate in shaping the definition from their experience and needs. In particular, how and to what extent are governments willing to be publicly accountable and transparent by posting raw data and information online pertaining to all government and public sector organisations? The Open Government Platform (OGPL) to Promote Transparency and Citizen Engagement⁸ is currently one of the few platforms that have been developed.

The role of ICTs and accountability in Egypt

In Egypt, the e-government portal,⁹ a compilation of services offered by various ministries, is a leading example of what could constitute Gov 2.0. It provides public information, downloadable forms, e-services like notarisation and the issuing of personal papers (birth, marriage, divorce certificates, etc.), train ticket reservations, billing inquiries, and a complaints site,

1 cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011

2 Al-Aswany, A. (2002) *The Yacoubian Building*, American University in Cairo Press. For a synopsis see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Yacoubian_Building

3 UNDP (2011) Egypt Country Profile: Human Development Indicators. hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/EGY.html

4 O'Reilly, T. (2009) Gov 2.0: The Promise of Innovation, *Forbes.com*, 10 August. www.forbes.com/2009/08/10/government-internet-software-technology-breakthroughs-oreilly.html

5 Global Integrity: Innovations for Transparency & Accountability. Definition of open government. www.globalintegrity.org/blog/working-definition-opengov

6 Ibid.

7 www.gov2summit.com/gov2009/public/content/gov2-video

8 www.opengovtplatform.org

9 www.egypt.gov.eg/english

among others. It was established under the Hosni Mubarak regime, starting in 2002, and has continued to be operational. The Ministry of Administrative Development¹⁰ is the main manager and procurer of these e-services. But that is where “information transparency” begins and ends – the simple sharing of regulations and administrative steps taken, rather than the sharing of vital information and data, some of which might not shed a favourable light on government activities. It is furthermore questionable how useful online payment options are in a country that is cash based and where credit cards are only for the restricted few. This raises the question of for whom these services and e-government portals are made, and if citizens are actually using them.

“Public engagement”, taken from the example of the e-government portal, is focused on some forms of service delivery which may bypass issues of petty bribery, but does not offer a way of significantly circumventing it. There are also few government services that could be completely managed through an online interface. As for “accountability”, there were no examples given in the media or anywhere else of the results of complaints that were filed through the complaints pages of ministries.

This lack of transparency is underscored by the findings of Global Integrity,¹¹ a report that assesses indicators of corruption globally. The report¹² found that there is no public access to information regulations in Egypt. On the contrary, there are laws depriving the public from accessing key government records and information. An example is the Illegal Profiting Apparatus (IPA) law 2/1977 that imposes penalties on “false” corruption charges, or charges that were made with “bad intentions”.

The report further specifies that “citizens often face challenges to posting content online through government censorship (there is a separate government unit in the Ministry of Interior charged with combating crimes related to computers and the web). Indeed, there has been a significant decline in the Egyptian media’s ability to freely report on corruption since Global Integrity’s last report in 2008. Effective conflicts of interest safeguards covering senior officials remain elusive, as does transparency in the budget process.”¹³

A private online initiative for public engagement and government accountability is “Zabatak”¹⁴ – meaning “You have been caught” – which has been built using the Ushahidi platform.¹⁵ The website encourages the submission of anonymous complaints that range from stolen cars and violations of building permits to complaints about government corruption. However, it is not clear to whom these complaints are directed. Or are they meant to be shown as a visual representation of the “crime” and “where” it was cited only? It is also not clear how credible anonymous complaints are. Furthermore, the timelines of the complaints seem to have some software glitch as there are complaints dated December 2012. Here again it is not clear how Zabatak is contributing to accountability.

In Egypt there are no particular examples of corruption cases that have been fought or uncovered using internet tools. The internet, through blogs, Facebook, Twitter and email, has been and is being used to spread information, to gather people around a cause and to discuss different viewpoints regarding particular corruption issues. However, aside from using Twitter to alert the media, the online content has not shaped up into particular advocacy flagship issues. Often concerns regarding specific corruption cases were aired to encourage participation in mass demonstrations. This momentum has ebbed after the elections.

The revolution is the example that has been cited to show the power of ICTs to assist in regime change. The Dubai School of Government has issued the Arab Social Media Report,¹⁶ which gives a quantitative snapshot of the rising popularity of social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, in Egypt and the region. According to the report, 5% of the Egyptian population joined Facebook between 5 January and 1 October 2011, with youth being the predominant users.¹⁷

The increase in Facebook members, however, does not reflect how active or not they are in fighting corruption online. It is hard to get a content overview on Facebook because many of the more meaningful discourses happen in private spaces that are not publicly accessible. A content analysis of Facebook was made to find out if there are specific discussion threads and groups in Egypt focused on its various corruption issues. Facebook had four specific groups, but most were not active beyond a few posts.

10 www.edara.gov.eg/Templates/Default.aspx?NRMODE=Published&NRNODEGUID=%7B2B82B630-61D7-456D-B716-CA4BF373F1D9%7D&NRORIGINALURL=/Default&NRCACHEHINT=NoModifyGuest

11 www.globalintegrity.org/report

12 Global Integrity Report, Egypt 2010. www.globalintegrity.org/report/Egypt/2010

13 Ibid.

14 www.zabatak.com

15 ushahidi.com

16 www.dsg.ae/en/asmr3/ASMRGeneralFindings3.aspx

17 Ibid.

Nevertheless, corruption is an ongoing discussion among Egyptians, online and off. Some of the most pertinent exchanges occur in discussions and venting between friends, families and special interest groups. The discussions are as widespread and diverse as the sources of corruption themselves (e.g. they range from discussions about whom and how to persecute, ways to recover stolen and smuggled assets, security, crime and petty crime, political corruption of the military, fair elections, foreign involvement in the country's affairs and the instigation of political corruption). There are also more localised corruption discussions that focus on and occur in specific regions, sectors, universities, or companies – though it seems that many of these are more geared towards venting and only in some cases towards organising strikes or peaceful demonstrations.

Twitter, which had 215,000 active users in Egypt in March 2012,¹⁸ has been more specifically used to organise demonstrations and strikes, and to share events with national, regional and international media. Tweets were made predominantly in English. Twitter added support for Arabic only in early March 2012.¹⁹ TweetDeck²⁰ offered Arabic support for those who knew how to enable it – it was not set by default. The content of tweets is harder to survey as the content of Twitter messages is not searchable (i.e. there is no search function that would allow one to read all the tweets concerning “corruption” in Egypt). The content is archived by tweeter, and with an estimated 55 million tweets a day,²¹ one can only follow a relatively limited amount of #tags. From a limited content analysis, corruption tweets did not differ in content from the exchanges made on Facebook. There were some tweets that were oriented to the international media. Otherwise, social network sites thrive on short messages that are mostly geared towards a specific incident or cause that is related to a specific moment. Many corruption exchanges were coloured by the moment – they followed the main political and business news on a particular issue at a particular time – in that they were reactions to happenings and not longer-term considerations of anti-corruption efforts.

Until now Facebook and Twitter have been spared in Egypt the challenges they are facing in the US, Canada, Europe and Russia, where users are being tracked for business reasons and employers plough through social network content to gather information on their employees.²² However, social networks are being trolled by law enforcement, like in every other country, and this has sometimes brutally compromised freedom of speech.²³ It needs to be seen how long the commercial and business pressures keep their distance from social networks in Egypt and the region.

Has the emergence of the internet made a difference to transparency? The internet in Egypt has been used as a whistleblower and a vehicle to transmit news instantaneously among interested members of the public. It was also pivotal in alerting regional and international media to abuses. Though this has proven crucial during national uprisings, it is not the same when it comes to fighting the longer-term battle of deep-seated corruption. A sure sign of the degree of opacity in Egypt is that there are no notable examples of information leaks. This absence of “hidden” information appearing in the public domain has continued post-revolution.

As far as collaboration with foreign donors goes, many of the e-government portal initiatives in Egypt were funded by bilateral and multilateral donors. Immediately after Mubarak stepped down, UK-based Chatham House organised the Defining and Tackling Corruption Workshop in February 2012²⁴ in an attempt to categorise corruption in Egypt, and offer case studies from Georgia and Kenya of how other governments addressed corruption. One important workshop recommendation was to introduce freedom of information legislation. References to this workshop were found both on Twitter and Facebook, though it is not clear whom the stakeholders in this workshop were and how legitimate the workshop is for present decision makers.

Setting up the legal, institutional and enforcement capacities for freedom of information and speech will be a priority. The Egyptian parliament has proposed a draft law to create an independent corruption-fighting government authority. This new authority is to supersede the Administrative Control

18 Ibid. Tweeters making up 0.26 percent of the total population in Egypt.

19 www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/twitter-right-to-left-languages_b19241

20 www.tweetdeck.com

21 Cochran, S. (2010) Library of Congress Acquires Twitter Archive, Yahoo Voices, 19 April. voices.yahoo.com/library-congress-acquires-twitter-archive-5862272.html?cat=15

22 www.insidefacebook.com/2011/06/12/facebook-sees-big-traffic-drops-in-us-and-canada-as-it-nears-700-million-users-worldwide

23 Hassanin, L. (2009) Egypt: Access to Online Information and Knowledge, in GISWatch 2009. www.giswatch.org/country-report/20/egypt

24 www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/0212egyptsummary_corruption.pdf

Authority created during the Gamal Abdel Nasser regime, but with the difference that the former shall be affiliated with the People's Assembly, the parliament, rather than the Prime Minister's Office, as was the case with the latter.²⁵

This might be a good start, although, due to the pervasiveness of corruption – one article referred to it as “Egypt marinated in corruption”²⁶ – one of the main roles of any new Egyptian regime is to be seen as a “clean” role model, a model that eschews corruption in government, public and private sector dealings. That is, a place where politicians are transparent and honest. This model then needs to be enhanced by offering means of transparent public participation in an effort to be vigilant about corruption – and the internet is one of the most democratic tools to offer citizen participation in rebuilding a more honest and law-abiding community and country.

It remains to be seen how much transparency will emerge out of the present transition. For now, Facebook and Twitter are telling us that there is more transparency needed from the budding government. May the internet continue to be used in Egypt – as it has been recently – as a forum to get honest feedback from citizens. This is the cornerstone of any freedom of expression and freedom of information law.

Action steps

As Egypt is undergoing major structural power changes, it is important to build in transparency and accountability tools from the start, the internet being a primary tool to enhance the citizen-government communication channel. To do this it is recommended that:

- Citizens negotiate and demand an open government platform that enables the transparent online publishing of government and public sector data and information across diverse sectors and at various departmental levels.
- The platform should have citizen spaces that allow open debate regarding the information and data made available, especially where it becomes an issue of governance and/or safety.
- Citizens push for the creation of an open government law and an independent authority that is fully accessible to all citizens for recourse to uphold and enforce the law.

Most importantly, a working example of the open online sharing of government data and information and an honest interaction with citizens regarding this data are indispensable as a starting point for making government transparency and accountability a reality in Egypt. ■

²⁵ Egypt Independent (2012) Parliament considers fighting corruption with new authority, *Egypt Independent*, 7 June. www.egyptindependent.com/news/parliamentary-committee-assigned-mull-establishment-authority-fighting-corruption-nehal-news-1

²⁶ Cockburn, P. (2010) Egypt: Marinated in Corruption, *Counterpunch*, April. www.counterpunch.org/2012/04/02/egypt-marinated-in-corruption/