



## Leaked documents reveal Reuters helped overthrow Egyptian democracy

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**Reuters served as a channel for the UK Foreign Office to covertly fund an Egyptian outlet that clamored for the overthrow of the country's first democratically elected leader, leaked documents show.**

This July 3 marks the 10th anniversary of Egyptian army chief General Abdel Fattah Sisi's violent seizure of power in Cairo. The first democratically elected leader in 5000 years of Egyptian history, Mohamed Morsi, was swept from office, his supporters were massacred by the hundreds, and he ultimately died in prison. With US and UK support, Sisi quickly reversed any tentative democratic gains made during the country's brief, difficult transition from the rule of longtime Western-backed autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

In the decade since Sisi's coup, his government has systematically crushed opposition to his rule. Political parties and critical media have been banned en masse, activists, journalists, and civil society actors harassed, disappeared, tortured and jailed, and prisons transformed into hotbeds of systemic sexual violence, and other horrific abuse. It is estimated that half of Egypt's 120,00 inmate population are currently incarcerated for political reasons, one of the highest rates in the world.

The circumstances of Morsi's forced ejection from office, and of Egypt's regression to one of the most repressive countries on Earth under Sisi's rule, have been well-documented, despite many NGOs and news outlets fleeing the country over the years. Yet, there is a crucial component of the historical record that has not been revealed until now.

Leaked documents reviewed by The Grayzone reveal that the media giant Reuters worked closely with the British Foreign Office to drive the fateful events of July 3 2013. What follows is the story of how Cairo's first democratically elected government in history was undermined, Sisi's blood-spattered coup whitewashed, and the military entrenched in power, through covert propaganda funded in secret by London.

## British spies strike secret deal with Reuters

In the wake of Egypt's revolution in February 2011, chaos reigned untrammelled. What path the country should take, whether and when free elections would be at last held, and if so who would be entrusted by the public with governing Cairo moving forward, was far from clear.

Large-scale protests against the interim military administration following Mubarak's departure were an almost daily occurrence, as were violent and sometimes fatal clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Along the way, protesters ransacked and occasionally occupied the offices of local police forces and intelligence services, attacked foreign embassies, and torched government buildings.

Against this tumultuous backdrop, Egypt prepared for its first free parliamentary vote in October 2011. Though many citizens welcomed the elections, officials across the West openly angsted about the popular Muslim Brotherhood emerging victorious and pursuing an independent path. Such fears were particularly pronounced in Britain, Cairo's former imperial master, and its largest investor today.

As if on cue, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), the "charitable" arm of the Thomson Reuters global news conglomerate, established Aswat Masriya, an ostensibly independent media outlet, to cover Egyptian affairs. Unbeknownst to the Egyptian public, the effort was wholly funded by the British Foreign Office. By the time Aswat Masriya closed, a staggering £2 million had been pumped into the initiative by London.

The FCO has contracted the Thomson Reuters Foundation to support *Aswat Masriya*, an independent news platform in Egypt, as detailed below. Total contract value £2,085,161.

Period	Contact amount
November 2011 to March 2012	£119,000
April 2012 to March 2013	£348,310
April 2013 to March 2014	£440,297
July 2014 to March 2015	£263,173
July 2015 to May 2016	£415,007
June 2016 to March 2017	£499,374

"[Aswat Masriya] became Egypt's leading independent local media organisation until its closure...Its content was offered for free syndication across the region," a leaked TRF document boasts. "In 2016, [it] became one of the top 500 most visited websites in Egypt."

Reuters' Cairo offices "provided payroll, human resources, and security support" to Aswat Masriya, and the outlet was based there for its duration. A since-deleted online profile states 300 Egyptians were trained via the project, a veritable army of journalists generating over 300 stories each and every week in English and Arabic. These were then recycled by over 50 media outlets worldwide, including Reuters.

London's rationale for kickstarting Aswat Masriya was clear. Establishing a local news platform granted the Foreign Office an unparalleled degree of on-the-ground narrative control as events unfolded in Egypt, both domestically and internationally. British intelligence has established a long record of funding news outlets overseas for this precise purpose – including Reuters.

Fourthly we would propose the establishment in Ukraine of an independent temporary news platform by Thomson Reuters Foundation, timed for the run up to the 2019 elections. A lack of in-depth, independent news coverage is particularly problematic at key political junctures such as elections, especially when vested interests seek to influence particular outcomes. At present, we are only proposing this for Ukraine, but if the approach is successful and additional limited funding are available, we could look to replicate in Georgia in 2020. This platform would publish independent and vetted news content, freely syndicated to local and national media. Staffed entirely by local editors and journalists, it would provide a vital service, and encourage fairer reporting in general. TRF has experience of establishing such platforms, including Aswat al-Iraq in 2004, the award-winning Aswat Masriya, established in 2011 in the run-up to the first free elections in Egypt, and Myanmar Now, established in Myanmar in 2015 in the run-up to the country's first free elections. We would measure performance of this platform by the number of stories/videos published in Russian and local languages, how widely this material was syndicated, and the estimated reach of this syndicated material.

During the late 1960s, London financed the creation of Reuters' Middle East service. The outfit provided slanted stories about local and world events for reuse by journalists elsewhere, in English and Arabic – in the precise manner of Aswat Masriya.

"There is reason to believe Reuters are receptive to the idea they would have to give something in return...What [British intelligence] might secure, in effect, is the chance to influence in some measure the whole Reuters output," a declassified Foreign Office file states. "There is an opportunity here to evolve a relationship [with] Reuters... [British] interests should be well served by the new arrangement."

**2.2.3. Demonstrate media expertise across a number of international markets.** We have extensive experience in developing and managing strategic communication tools, including the knowledge management hub of the £140 million UK Department for International Development-funded [Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters \(BRACED\) programme](#), and the Omidyar Network-funded [Property, Land, Access, Connections, and Empowerment \(PLACE\) innovative platform](#) that boosts coverage of land and property rights, one of the most under-reported issues linked to conflict worldwide. We have developed a “fit-for-purpose” approach to designing, developing and running communication platforms in environments hostile to free and independent press, which target industry influencers, media practitioners or citizens at national levels. In recent years, we developed two award-winning platforms [Aswat Masriya](#) (Egypt) and [Myanmar Now](#) (Burma), in conducted in partnership with local organisations with sustainability in mind. We offer ongoing professional development support to maintain high standards of integrity and enable the platforms to gain credibility and legitimacy. See images at the end illustrating samples of our platforms.

## Reuters inflates protest numbers at army’s command

In late 2012, Morsi enacted a Constitutional Declaration, under which he temporarily assumed sweeping executive powers, prompting small protests to break out. Aswat Masriya [led the charge](#) in condemning the decision, portraying it as a scheme by the president – and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood – to gain total, permanent control over all Egypt’s branches of government.

[In reality](#), the Declaration was scheduled to only last three weeks, and had been enacted due to Cairo’s powerful, heavily politicized judiciary repeatedly attempting to impede Egypt’s democratic transition. By that time, judges had already dismissed the country’s first constitutional assembly and elected parliament once, and threatened to do so again, as the country’s new draft constitution strictly limited military power in politics. But the fear driven by outlets like Aswat Masriya and Western media had [incited](#) masses of demonstrators back into the streets.

Though Morsi moved to hold fresh parliamentary elections and a referendum on the new constitution, negative coverage of the declaration and the smattering of demonstrations convinced opposition politicians to [begin holding](#) confidential meetings with army chiefs, discussing ways of unseating the President, as the Wall Street Journal reported.

Fast forward to April 2013, when a mysterious youth group called Tamarod suddenly materialized to collect signatures demanding Morsi’s removal by June 30th. Meanwhile, opposition leaders clamored for mass demonstrations across Egypt, especially in front of the Presidential Palace. Aswat Masriya granted the new movement [blanket coverage](#). While [contemporary polling](#) indicated 53% of the public still supported President Morsi, the outlet served as a non-stop megaphone for the opposition.

By June 30th, the streets of Cairo and other major Egyptian cities were filled with protesters as Morsi refused to resign. Military sources [told Reuters](#) that as many as 14 million people, or almost 17% of the country’s population, had come out to demonstrate. While the news agency acknowledged the figure “seemed implausibly high,” it reassured readers the army had “used helicopters to monitor the crowds.”

The 14 million claim was [duly recycled](#) by news organizations the world over – [including Aswat Masriya](#). Sisi exploited the international outcry and internal upheaval to remove Morsi from power, and suspend the recently passed Constitution. Opposition figures went on to inflate the total number of protesters ever-further. A particularly popular fantasy sum was 33 million, given it was higher than the total number of Egyptians who’d voted for Morsi in the first place.

[Subsequent investigations](#) revealed there were between one and two million protesters at the absolute most. As The Grayzone’s Max Blumenthal [wrote at the time](#), “the stunning crowd counts [Egypt’s opposition] spread across the world do not seem to hold up against critical scrutiny. And as the mirage of a 30-million-person march evaporates, an unsavory military coup stands exposed.”

[Leaked recordings](#) released in the wake of the coup subsequently exposed that Tamarod was financed by the United Arab Emirates, another former British imperial holding. It further showed how high ranking military officials – who also drew from that slush fund – had openly discussed using protests to rid themselves of the meddlesome Morsi.

## Aswat Masriya whitewashes reality of Sisi’s Egypt

Neither Aswat Masriya nor Reuters ever mentioned these bombshell disclosures. The former was also by-and-large silent when in August 2013, Egyptian security forces under Sisi’s command [brutally crushed](#) a protest in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in Cairo, slaughtering at least 817 people. Human Rights Watch dubbed the bloodshed “perhaps the largest mass killing of protesters on a single day in modern history.”

“Using armoured personnel carriers, bulldozers, ground forces and snipers, police and army personnel attacked the makeshift protest camp and gunned down protesters,” the organization [recorded](#).

Nonetheless, Aswat Masriya [published](#) an official investigation into the massacre which blamed the gross death toll on protesters themselves, claiming they “initiated” attacks on security forces. Amnesty International’s contention that the probe was a concerted whitewash, specifically set up to shield security forces from censure, was mysteriously omitted from its coverage.

Perhaps predictably, the outlet [uncritically](#) reported Sisi’s “landslide” election victory in May 2014, when he the army general received 96.91% of the vote, in no small part due to most other candidates either dropping out of the race, or being jailed before polling day.

Cairo had already slipped back into dictatorship by that time, and would only fall further into autocracy in the years to come. Not a trace of this reality would ever be reflected on the pages of Aswat Masriya, though. Fittingly, in November 2016 the publication uncritically reported Sisi explaining to US lawmakers that human rights in Egypt should not be perceived from “a Western perspective,” due to “differences in challenges and local and regional circumstances.”

The situation in Egypt had grown so dire by 2017 that the British Foreign Office could no longer ignore it. In February of that year, [London designated](#) Cairo a “human rights priority country.” An accompanying factsheet noted that “reports of torture, police brutality, and forced disappearance” had ratcheted in recent years, and so too had restrictions “on civil society” and “freedom of expression,” while “a number of prominent human rights defenders were banned from travelling.”



A month later, Aswat Masriya closed its doors permanently. An accompanying [press release](#) noted that TRF was unable to “find a sustainable source of financing for the platform.” It is uncertain why the British stopped supporting the outlet, although it had clearly fulfilled its purpose of helping ensure a suitably malleable, friendly government was safely installed in Cairo, and was likely surplus to requirements as a result.

themes such as investigative journalism and modern slavery. We have spearheaded quality journalism by **establishing independent news services** in countries where press freedom is under threat, including Iraq, Myanmar, Egypt, and Zimbabwe. Funded by the UK FCO, [Aswat Masriya](#), an independent Egyptian news service established by TRF in 2011, became Egypt’s leading independent local media organisation until its closure in 2017. It provided free, reliable, engaging and objective news of an international standard to the Egyptian public, and its content was offered for free syndication across the region. In 2016, Aswat Masriya became one of the top 500 most visited websites in Egypt. We have launched similar platforms in Zimbabwe ([www.source.co.zw](http://www.source.co.zw)) and Myanmar (<http://www.myanmar-now.org>), and are providing long-term professional development assistance to the journalists who work there to provide free, accurate and unbiased news for their fellow citizens. We work directly with journalists and media practitioners to develop their investigative skills and enhance ethical standards such as our NORAD-funded Wealth of Nations (WoN) programme, where TRF works with newsrooms across Africa and in Iraq to investigate dirty money flows and improve oil reporting. In the 2013-2015 period, WoN worked with 190 journalists and 25 newsrooms from 36 countries which delivered policy changes illustrated in the box below.

When the UK media [exposed](#) Reuters’ clandestine Cold War-era relationship with British intelligence in January 2020, a spokesperson for the news agency claimed such an “arrangement” was “not in keeping with our Trust Principles” and “we would not do this today.”

“Reuters receives no government funding, supplying independent, unbiased news in every part of the world,” they added.

What the Reuters flack neglected to acknowledge was that only three years before, his organization still served as a financial channel for the Foreign Office to an Egyptian outlet which incited the overthrow of the country’s first democratically elected government. Whether the London-based media giant is involved in similarly covert, state-backed machinations today is anyone’s guess.