

BRIEFING PAPER

Universal Periodic Review

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THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN EGYPT

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In its November 2014 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Egypt accepted 225 of 321 recommendations made by States. It accepted 5 recommendations focusing on human rights defenders (HRDs) and 25 recommendations on the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of association and peaceful assembly, including several calling for the protection of individuals who exercise these rights; and for the definition of laws that enable civil society organisations (CSOs) to work without undue interference. Four years on, attacks on these freedoms persist through an intensified crackdown against all forms of peaceful dissent and unprecedented policies aiming to close off civic space entirely.

RISKS FACING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

- Human rights defenders face arbitrary arrests, detention, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, judicial harassment, travel bans, closure of NGO offices, restrictive legislation among other threats. They often face charges of alleged association with a banned organisation, spreading false news, and threatening national security. Trials are marred by violations of due process and lack of evidence of their involvement in alleged criminal activities.¹
- Defenders and NGOs working on documenting torture and enforced disappearances have increasingly been targeted. In September 2017, the authorities attempted to close the office of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms.² At least 31 staff members of the Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms were arrested in November 2018 which led the organization to suspend its work.³ In February 2017, the offices of El Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture were closed by an administrative court order citing breach of licence conditions.⁴
- At least 37 human rights organisations are being investigated since 2011 in Case no. 173 (also known as the foreign funding cases). Investigative judges summoned at least 28 additional human rights defenders and NGO staff for interrogation in 2018, bringing the total to 66 people summoned or investigated in the case. They are facing charges of “receiving foreign funding to harm national security”.⁵ According to CIHRS’s latest tally, at least 31 defenders are banned from travelling, seven human rights organizations and 10 defenders had their assets frozen. Defence lawyers reported due process violations including being unable to view complete case files.
- In May 2015, two judges, Hisham Raouf and Assem Abdelgabar, were referred to the Competency Council after they participated in the drafting of anti-torture law and attended a panel organised by human rights lawyer Negad El Borei to discuss the draft.⁶
- The NGO law, or the “Law Governing the Work of Associations and Other Foundations Working in the Field of Civic Work,” (no. 70/2017)⁶ violates Egypt’s Constitution and its international human rights commitments. The law imposes restrictions on NGOs such as a ban on field research and surveys without government permission, government approval before receiving foreign funding, creation of the National Agency to monitor the work of foreign NGOs, and forcing NGOs to adapt their activities to government priorities. The law also authorizes the Ministry of Social Solidarity to dissolve NGOs, dismiss their board if it fails to inform the Ministry in advance of a move to new premises. It includes hefty fines and imprisonment sentences for NGO staff based on vague terms such as “harming national security and disturbing public order”.⁷
- The Counter-terrorism law no. 94 of 2015 and state of emergency laws and courts are used to criminalise the work of journalists, defenders, and peaceful government critics. The law criminalises a wide range of acts including publishing or promoting news about terrorism if it contradicts official statements. Those arrested under this law include blogger Wael Abbas, satirist artist Shady Abou Zeid and woman human rights defender Amal Fathy.⁸
- In September 2014, President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi issued an amendment to Article 78 of the Penal Code which increased the penalty to life imprisonment for vague charges that include receiving money from abroad with the aim of harming national interest, destabilising general peace or the country’s independence and unity.⁹
- In February 2018, the Ministry of Interior amended the prison regulations to allow long periods of solitary confinement. A practice that can amount to torture and have also been used against defenders and journalists. Ahmed Douma spent his third year in solitary confinement in Tora Prison, confined to his cell for at least 22 hours a day.¹⁰
- On 18 August, 2018, President Sisi ratified the Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law (Cybercrime Law). Granting the government new

OFFICIAL RESTRICTIONS ON THE SPACE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

powers to restrict digital rights and interfere with activists' freedoms online. A month earlier, the parliament also passed the Media Regulation Law that would place anyone with a social media account that has more than 5,000 followers under government regulation and supervision as member of the media.¹¹

INTIMIDATION AND REPRISALS FOR ACCESSING INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL MECHANISMS

- Egypt was cited in the 2014, 2017 and 2018 annual reports by the Secretary General on reprisals and intimidation.¹² In September 2017, Ibrahim Metwally was arrested from Cairo airport en route to meeting with the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. He was subjected to enforced disappearance, torture and remains in detention on charges of "establishing an illegal organization", "communicating with foreign entities to harm state security" and "disseminating false news"¹³. Cofounder of the Association of the families of the disappeared Hanan Badr El-Din Othman, who had documented cases for the Working Group, remains in pre-trial on charges of "membership in a banned group".¹⁵
- In March 2017, Ahmed Shawky Amasha was allegedly abducted by police officers in Cairo, and subjected to torture and ill-treatment during his secret detention. He was charged with belonging to a banned group under the counter-terrorism law. Four mandate holders expressed serious concern that the acts committed against him constitute reprisals for documenting cases of enforced disappearances for special procedures.¹⁶
- CIHRS staff Mohamed Zaree was banned from travelling under the 'foreign funding case' and was accused of intending to harm Egypt through his role in preparing for the universal periodic review in 2014. CIHRS director Bahey el Din Hassan was subjected to death threats on television, as a result of a memo sent on behalf of 7 Egyptian NGOs to the UN Secretary General.¹⁷

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACING PARTICULAR RISKS

- In January 2017, a North Cairo criminal court ordered the freezing of the assets of the NGO Nazra for Feminist studies and its Executive Director Mozn Hassan. The charges faced by Hassan in the concerned case include: "inciting and calling for the irresponsible liberation of women".¹⁸
- LGBTI defenders face specific risks such as subjection to forcible anal examinations and sexual harassment. Transgender persons in particular face risks of their physical integrity and psychological wellbeing while in detention as they could be detained in prisons not confirming with their gender. On March 6, trans activist Malak Al-Kashif

was arrested on 6 March 2019 for reportedly calling for peaceful protests. She was subjected to forcible anal examination and charged with "aiding a terrorist organisation" and "misusing social media to commit a crime punishable by law". Al-Kashif has not been able to obtain official papers reflecting her gender, despite attempting to do so for nearly three years. She is therefore treated as a male in all official papers, which means that she could soon be detained in the men's prison. In October 2017, LGBT activists Sarah Hegazy and Ahmed Alaa were arrested for allegedly raising a rainbow flag at a concert in Cairo. They were charged with joining an illegal group and promoting its ideas (debauchery). They were released on bail in January 2018.¹⁹

- In May 2018, woman human rights defender Amal Fathy, who is also the wife of the executive director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, Mohammed Lofty, was arrested after she published a personal video on Facebook critical of the government's role in failing to prevent sexual violence in Egypt. She was charged with "publication of false news, undermining national security, possession of indecent material and publicly insulting the state". Fathy was conditionally released from prison on probation in December 2018 but the Court rejected her appeal and confirmed the first-instance sentence of two years imprisonment.²⁰
- In March 2019, Photojournalist Mahmoud Zeid was released after spending more than 5 years in prison. He was arrested at the Rabaa al-Adawiya protest in Cairo in August 2013 while covering the protests. He was charged with 24 offences including murder and was convicted in a mass trial with over 700 individuals. He is now required to spend 12 hours of each day at a police station from 6pm to 6am for the next five years, as part of his probation measures.²¹

THE RESPONSE OF THE STATE REGARDING THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

- President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi announced on November 5, 2018, that he welcomed revisions to Law 70, which he signed into law in May 2017. Despite assurances from the Egyptian government that the NGO law has yet to be implemented pending regulations and further review, the law remains a threat to NGOs' ability to function, with many organizations self-censoring, or closing their doors to avoid prosecution and intimidation, or because of an inability to access funding.
- On December 20, 2018, a Cairo court acquitted 43 civil society defendants in the "NGO foreign funding case."²² However, the second part of the case involving national NGOs is still ongoing (see above).

- In November 2018, the government established the Permanent Committee for Human Rights. It is headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and includes representatives of several ministries and institutions such as Military Intelligence, Ministry of

Defence and the National Council for Women, but not the National Human Rights Institution. The Committee is mandated, among other things, to develop a strategy and action plan on human rights, prepare the State UPR report and implementation of recommendations.²³

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF EGYPT:

- Desist from restricting or criminalising the work of human rights defenders (HRDs) and immediately and unconditionally release all HRDs detained in association with the exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association or peaceful assembly, and drop all charges against them.
- Ensure effective, credible and impartial investigations into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment against HRDs and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable.
- Close case no. 173/2011 and end all measures restricting civil society, HRDs and journalists such as the travel bans, assets freeze and closure of offices.
- Refrain from criminalising the legitimate activities of HRDs and repeal all laws and policies that restrict their activities and rights such as Law no. 70/2017 (NGO law), Counter-terrorism law no. 94 of 2015, Article 78 of the Penal Code, Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes Law (Cybercrime Law), and Media Regulation Law.
- Enact laws and policies that give full force and effect to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, safeguard the right to safe and unhindered access to international human rights mechanisms, and prohibit acts of intimidation and reprisals against HRDs who engage with the UN and regional human rights systems, and investigate all acts of reprisals and intimidation, and hold all perpetrators accountable
- Publicly affirm the legitimate role of women human rights defenders and those working on women's rights and ensure that they can carry out their work without hindrance.
- Issue a standing invitation to the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, as well as relevant regional mandate holders, and specifically invite and facilitate visits from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of HRDs, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, and the African Commission Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and Focal Point on Reprisals in Africa.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING PAPER

ISHR, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and Committee for Justice encourage States to consult UPR submissions by local activists and make recommendations to Egypt regarding the protections of HRDs. This paper is a result of compiling public information and direct contact and experience in the protection of HRDs. Readers should consult sources provided for additional information.

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⁵ CIHRS, 'Egypt: Imminent risk of prosecution of HRDs accused of committing human rights work' <https://bit.ly/2UcNONn>

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⁹ EIPR joint NGO paper, Background on Case No. 173 - the "foreign funding case", <https://eipr.org/en/file/906/download?token=91GRM9mA>

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¹² OHCHR, 'Reporting mandate of the Secretary-General on intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the UN in the field of human rights,' <https://bit.ly/2tLPUbb>

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¹⁷ UN SG annual 2018 annual reprisals 2018, <https://bit.ly/2H7Dgmr>

¹⁸ Nazra for Feminist Studies, 'The Summon of Feminist and Woman Human Rights Defender Mozn Hassan to Investigation within the Context of the NGO Foreign Funding Case', <https://bit.ly/2U8DBkN>

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²³ In Arabic, Decree no. 2396/2018 (Official Gazette, issue no. 45(B), issued on 14 November 2018.