

EGYPT: CRACKDOWN AGAINST PEACEFUL CRITICS SET TO WORSEN IF CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS ARE PASSED

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Egypt's authorities must end their crackdown against critics who oppose amendments to the Egyptian constitution, proposed by members of parliament, that will strengthen impunity for human rights violations, said Amnesty International. Many of those who have criticized the changes have been arrested or publicly vilified in the media.

The organization is today publishing an [analysis of the constitutional amendments](#) which are currently being discussed by the Egyptian parliament. If passed, these measures will undermine the independence of the judiciary, expand military trials for civilians and could allow President Abdel Fattah to stay in power until 2034.

“If passed, these constitutional amendments would worsen the devastating human rights crisis Egyptians are already facing. They would grant President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and security forces free rein to further abuse their powers and suppress peaceful dissent for years to come,” said Magdalena Mughrabi, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

“The Egyptian parliament has a responsibility towards Egyptians to preserve what remains of the country's judicial independence and adherence to international law and reject the proposed amendments.”

A parliamentary vote on the amendments is due in the coming weeks and if passed – the new draft constitution will be put to a public referendum.

“Since President al-Sisi came to power human rights in Egypt have catastrophically deteriorated. Egypt's international allies must not stand by silently as the Egyptian authorities push through these amendments while bullying anyone who dares to criticize the changes into silence. In particular, the US authorities should use President al-Sisi's visit to Washington DC this week to publicly condemn the proposed changes.”

President al-Sisi is due to meet with President Donald Trump during a visit to Washington DC on 9 April.

In its analysis Amnesty International expresses concern that the amendments would strengthen the influence of the Egyptian military over government, remove the requirement for judicial review of draft legislation, as well as expanding notoriously unfair military trials for civilians and granting the President sweeping powers to manage judicial affairs and appoint senior judges.

Other amendments that have drawn criticism from opponents are the plans to extend the presidential term to six years and introduce a provision allowing President al-Sisi to run for two further presidential terms.

Crackdown targeting critics

The amendments have attracted considerable criticism including from a number of [public figures](#), [human rights organizations](#), [political parties](#) and the [State Council Judges Club](#). The authorities have responded by intensifying their crackdown on freedom of expression, targeting people who have voiced opposition to the amendments with arbitrary arrest and detention, defamation and even cyber-attacks.

More than 57 people have been arrested so far in 2019, with Egyptian [NGOs](#) citing [higher](#) figures, for peacefully expressing their opinions or merely being perceived to do so – at least [four](#) of them for expressing their opposition to the constitutional amendments on social media.

The arrests have followed a pattern repeatedly documented by Amnesty International whereby the victims are arrested without warrants in the early hours of the morning, before being forcibly disappeared for several days. They later reappear before a state security prosecutor who orders their detention pending investigation on charges of “membership in terrorist groups” and “disseminating false information”.

Several public figures – including some members of parliament - who have expressed their opposition to the amendments have been widely criticized in public and private media and been subjected to smear campaigns. Some opponents have faced homophobic slurs, as well as calls, including from [fellow](#) members of parliament, for their [prosecution](#) for “treason” and for their Egyptian nationality to be [revoked](#) .

Amnesty International has also [documented](#) a wave of phishing attacks, that likely originated from government backed bodies, targeting independent media organizations and human rights defenders who reported on the authorities, including the role of the General Intelligence Service, in pushing for the constitutional amendments.

[Last week, on 28 March](#) , a court prevented activists from the Civil Democratic Movement, an opposition movement, from holding a protest against the constitutional amendments in front of parliament. Egypt’s Minister of Interior filed a request asking the court not to grant permission for the protest on the basis that it could “threaten public peace and security”. The court decision cited concerns that “anti-state elements may infiltrate the protest and assault the protestors, in order to frame security forces as assaulting protestors”.

“The intimidation and harassment of people who peacefully express their opinions, including those critical of the constitutional amendments, has to end now,” said Magdalena Mughrabi.

“Instead of stepping up this vicious crackdown against peaceful critics, Egypt’s authorities should scrap these amendments and ensure that any proposed future changes do not violate the country’s human rights obligations under international law.”

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