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World Report 2022 - Egypt

In 2021, authorities escalated the use of the abusive Emergency State Security Courts to prosecute peaceful activists and critics who joined thousands of dissidents already in Egypt’s congested prisons. Courts issued death sentences in mass trials, adding to the sharply escalating numbers of executions.

The government in January issued implementing regulations for the 2019 NGO law that codified draconian restrictions on independent organizations. The authorities failed to appropriately investigate a high-profile gang-rape, and key witnesses remain under extrajudicial travel bans after being jailed for months in apparent retaliation for coming forward.

The army continued to impose severe restrictions on movement and demolish hundreds of buildings in North Sinai in the name of fighting *Wilayat Sina*, a local affiliate of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). These demolitions likely amount to war crimes.

Egypt’s prolonged human rights crisis under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s government was subject to rare international criticism at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Police and Security Forces Abuses

In 2021, Interior Ministry police and National Security agents arbitrarily arrested dozens, [likely hundreds](#), for peaceful activism, [forcibly disappearing](#) many for days or weeks. National Security officers [also routinely required](#) newly released activists to report to their offices regularly, in addition to other forms of extrajudicial coercion and summons. On February 1, police arrested [Ahmed Samir Santawy](#), a Central European University student, and held him incommunicado for five days during which, his lawyer said, he was severely beaten.

Authorities failed to investigate incidents of torture and mistreatment, which remain widespread. On April 18, security forces arrested the mother, father, and sister of jailed dissident [Abdelrahman Gamal Metwally al-Showeikh](#) after his family filed a complaint about al-Showeikh’s alleged torture and sexual assault in a Minya prison. His mother, [Hoda Abdel Hamid](#), remained in pretrial detention in a Cairo prison as of October, deprived of seeing her family or lawyers, after prosecutors accused her of “spreading false news” and “joining a terrorist organization” because of [the video](#) she posted on Facebook detailing the alleged torture of her son.

Security forces [intimidated and harassed families of dissidents](#) who live abroad. On February 13, authorities raided the homes of six members of the extended family of Mohamed Soltan, a US-based human rights advocate. They arrested two of his cousins and another relative at their homes. They were released five days later. Soltan’s father, Salah, jailed since 2013 in several cases for opposing the military removal of former President Mohamed Morsy, has been held in incommunicado detention since June 2020 in reprisal for Mohamed Soltan’s human rights advocacy in Washington.

The National Security Agency in recent years killed dozens of alleged “terrorists” across the country in extrajudicial executions the authorities contended were “shootouts.” A Human Rights Watch report released in September 2021 [found](#) that the alleged armed militants killed posed no imminent danger to security forces or others when they were killed, and in many cases had already been in custody.

The army continued to impose severe restrictions on freedom of movement in North Sinai, where the military has for years been battling the armed group *Wilayat Sina*, an ISIS affiliate. Despite an apparent decrease in violent attacks by armed militants, the army demolished hundreds of homes and razed [most of the farmland](#) in the governorate. The government failed to compensate thousands whose houses and livelihoods were destroyed in the name of creating buffer zones. The massive demolitions, including over 12,300 buildings, likely amount to war crimes, absent in many cases evidence of an “absolute” military necessity.

President al-Sisi [issued a decree](#) on October 2 transferring unchecked powers to the Defense Ministry in North Sinai, including the power to evict residents from any areas, impose curfews, and ban transportation or communication. The six-month decree can be renewed indefinitely as long as the government claims a continuing “terrorist” threat.

Prison Conditions and Deaths in Custody

The dire conditions in Egyptian prisons and detention centers remained shielded from independent oversight. Authorities [routinely deprived](#) sick prisoners from access to adequate health care. According to the Committee for Justice, an independent organization, 57 prisoners, most of them jailed on political grounds, died in custody in the first eight months of 2021.

On July 25, the family of 69-year-old Abd al-Moniem Abu al-Fotouh, the former presidential candidate and leader of the Strong Egypt Party, [said](#) he had suffered symptoms resembling a heart attack while in prolonged solitary confinement in Cairo’s Tora Prison. Abu al-Fotouh, unjustly detained without trial since 2018, had suffered several heart attacks in detention, his family said, but prison authorities [rejected their pleas](#) to have him admitted to a hospital.

Prominent activist Alaa Abdel Fattah has been in solitary confinement without trial in Tora’s maximum-security prison since September 2019. His family said a National Security Agency officer has been depriving prisoners of visits, exercise, sunlight, and books and newspapers. In October, authorities referred Abdel Fattah along with human rights lawyer Mohamed al-Baqr to trial in another case on charges of “spreading false news” before an Emergency State Security Court.

On September 15, President al-Sisi [said](#) that the government would soon inaugurate Egypt’s largest prison complex, which he described as built according to an “American model.” We Record, an independent group, [reported](#) in October that the new complex, northwest of Cairo, will have a capacity exceeding 30,000 prisoners.

Fair Trials, Due Process, Death Penalty

In 2021, Egypt continued to [escalate its](#) use of the death penalty and executions, in many cases following unfair proceedings and mass trials. The Egyptian Front for Human Rights [said that](#) in the first six months of 2021, the authorities executed 80 people, roughly half in cases of alleged political violence. Amnesty International [said](#) that Egypt ranked third-worst in numbers of executions worldwide. On June 14, the Court of Cassation, Egypt’s highest appellate court, [upheld death sentences](#) for 12 Muslim Brotherhood leaders, members, and sympathizers as well as long prison sentences for hundreds of others convicted in a mass unfair trial of over 700 dissidents, including 22 children, charged with involvement in the 2013 Rab’a sit-in that opposed the military ouster of President Mohamed Morsy.

Authorities increasingly employed the extraordinary Emergency [State Security Courts](#), the decisions of which are not subject to appeal, to prosecute dissidents. Former President Hosni Mubarak’s government had abolished them in 2007 but al-Sisi’s government [reinstated](#) them in 2017.

According to lawyers and detainees’ families, judges and prosecutors routinely [remanded thousands of detainees](#) in custody without presenting evidence, often in brief hearings that did not allow them to present a defense. Even when courts ordered detainees released, Supreme State Security prosecutors routinely [added them to](#) new cases with the same charges to detain them beyond the two-year limit on pretrial detention in Egyptian law.

Freedom of Association and Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

In January 2021, the government issued [implementing regulations](#) for the 2019 NGO Law, [confirming its restrictive nature](#) and extensive government interference. Existing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register under the new law by January 2022 or face being dissolved.

Under international and domestic pressure, authorities dropped investigations against several critical organizations and defenders in the decade-old Case 173 of 2011 in which dozens of NGOs were prosecuted for receiving foreign funds. However, punitive travel bans and asset freezes have not been lifted despite the judge’s orders in [August](#) and [September](#) to do so. Several other organizations and staff members remain accused in the case, including [Gamal Eid](#), director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, and Hossam Bahgat, director of the [Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights](#).

In September, authorities [referred to trial](#) before an Emergency State Security Court Patrick Zaki, a gender-rights researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, on charges of “spreading false news.” Authorities [had detained](#) him since February 2020 and officers allegedly tortured him in custody.

Also in September, a mass trial began before an Emergency State Security Court that included [lawyer Ezzat Ghoniem](#), director of the [Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms](#), and about two dozen activists that authorities linked to the group, including lawyer Hoda Abdel Moniem and activist Aisha al-Shater. Security forces have detained Ghoniem since March 2018. They face criminal charges of joining and financing an unlawful group as well as “spreading false news.”

The trials of Zaki, Ghoniem, and the others began the same week that President al-Sisi announced the government’s [“national strategy”](#) for human rights and [claimed](#) that 2022 would be the “year of civil society.”

Freedom of Expression

The authorities released several detained journalists such as [Khaled Dawood](#) and [Esraa Abdel Fattah](#), but detained others. On February 22, National Security officers at Cairo Airport arrested columnist and [journalist Gamal al-Gamal, known for his critical views](#), and held him incommunicado for five days upon his return from Turkey. Authorities [released him](#) without trial in July.

In May, [authorities arrested](#) veteran journalist Tawfiq Ghanim on terrorism charges. He remained in pretrial detention at time of writing. In July, authorities [arrested Abdel Nasser Salama](#), a former chief editor of the government-owned *al-Ahram* newspaper following [an article he posted on his Facebook page](#) criticizing President al-Sisi and calling on him to step down.

Freedom of Belief

Authorities detained independent activists working on societal and governmental discrimination against Egypt’s Christian minority, such as [Ramzy Kamal](#), the head of Maspero Youth for Human Rights. He has been held without trial since November 2019, accused of joining and financing a “terrorist group.”

The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights [said in October](#) that since 2016 the authorities have approved legalization of only 1,958 churches and service buildings among more than 5,540 Christian worship buildings that lack proper legal status. The [government](#) also issued no licenses to build new churches except in new desert cities that are subject to different rules.

Women’s Rights, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation

In 2021, courts sentenced at least four women social media influencers to two and five years in prison for morality-related offenses for their online videos and posts.

On May 11, Prosecutor General Hamada al-Sawy [said his office had terminated](#) investigations into the [high-profile 2014 “Fairmont” gang-rape](#) case for “insufficient evidence” and ordered the release of the four accused men. This came after the main witnesses, who came forward to support the rape survivor in 2020, had been unlawfully arrested and two of them spent months in arbitrary detention. At time of writing, all five key witnesses remain arbitrarily banned from travel abroad despite the closure of the case.

On September 25, a criminal court in al-Qaliubya governorate [sentenced](#) a father and a nurse to three and ten years respectively in prison for carrying out female genital mutilation (FGM) of a young girl that led to long-term disability. In March, the Egyptian parliament amended the penal code to impose tougher penalties for medical professionals and others who perform FGM. Earlier increases in sentences have done little to stem the practice of FGM, which remains rampant.

In March, women launched the social media #GuardianshipIsMyRight campaign to oppose amendments to the Personal Status Law, proposed by the government, which would have added to deeply entrenched discrimination against women.

Social, Economic, and Health Rights

Authorities used abusive terrorism laws to crack down on businesses and workers. In late September, National Security agents arrested [three workers from an](#) electrical appliances factory in western Cairo for participating in a sit-in. Supreme State Security prosecutors released them a week later after filing terrorism-related charges against them, the independent Center for Trade Union and Workers Services [reported](#). The authorities [arrested](#) well-known businessman Safwan Thabet in December 2020 and his son, Seif Thabet, in February 2021 and kept them in pretrial detention in conditions amounting to torture on terrorism-related charges. Their arrest came after they refused security officials’ requests to relinquish control of their company’s assets, the family [said](#).

The government’s plan for Covid-19 vaccine rollout that began in March has been inefficient and vague. By mid-October, [roughly 15 per cent of the population received](#) one dose of the vaccine despite the government claim that it had [millions](#) of additional doses. A [study cited by a World Bank report](#), published in August, found that Egyptian authorities underreported Covid-19 related deaths by tens of thousands.

Most children in Egypt experience [corporal punishment](#) at home or at school. Egypt promised to ban corporal punishment in all settings during its UN Universal Periodic Review in 2019 but did not revise the penal code or other laws that exempt the practice from penalty.

Key International Actors

In 2021, two major factors worried the Egyptian government: the change of administrations in the United States, and a long overdue [joint condemnation](#) of Egypt’s record by 32 states at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in March.

Annual report on the human rights situation in 2021

Despite US President Joe Biden promising that he would give President al-Sisi “no more blank checks,” in September his administration released \$170 million out of \$300 million in military financing that the US Congress had suspended pending human rights improvements. The remaining \$130 million will be released pending progress on nontransparent conditions set by the administration.

Egypt

European Union member states continued to cite Egypt in their Joint Item 4 statement at the UN Human Rights Council, but weapon sales, military assistance, and political support continued to be the rule at the bilateral level for many of these states. The negotiation of EU-Egypt partnership priorities has been stalled due to Egypt’s resistance to linking assistance to human rights conditions.

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<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/human-rights> Macron [said](#) in December 2020 that his government would not condition weapon sales to Egypt on human rights improvements. In May, the French government [announced](#) a €3.75 billion (US\$4.5 billion) sale of 30 Rafale fighter jets to Egypt, [financed through French loans](#) that add to Egypt’s external debt burden.

In October, an Italian court [suspended](#) the trial in absentia for four Egyptian police and National Security Agency officers charged by Italian prosecutors with the abduction and torture of Giulio Regeni, an Italian researcher who was murdered in Egypt in 2016, because of Egyptian authorities’ persistent lack of cooperation.

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