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HRW – Human Rights Watch (Author)

World Report 2024 - Egypt

The Egyptian government continued to systematically detain and punish peaceful critics and activists, effectively criminalizing peaceful dissent and often equating it with “terrorism.” The authorities detained and prosecuted dozens of protesters and activists participating in Palestine solidarity demonstrations in October, as well as in other protests, as the December presidential vote approached. Authorities also [detained](#) and prosecuted dozens of [family members](#) as well as perceived or actual supporters of former parliament member Ahmed Tantawy as soon as he said in March that he planned to run for president. In November, authorities referred Tantawy to trial over charges related to collecting public endorsements.

Meanwhile, thousands of detainees remained locked up in dire conditions in lengthy pretrial detention or on sentences stemming from unjust trials. Civic space remained severely curtailed as independent organizations operating under draconian laws faced continued judicial and security harassment. Key organizations and members faced criminal charges for their work as well as [asset freezes and travel bans](#). The deteriorating economic situation hampered people’s economic and social rights, such as the rights to food, health, and [electricity](#).

August marked [10 years since the Rab’a square massacre](#) on August 14, 2013, during which security forces killed hundreds with total impunity. In May, a national dialogue initiated by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi the year before began, but by October, it had not resulted in any recognizable policy reforms. Egyptian authorities continued to arrest activists, including [members](#) of groups participating in the dialogue, one of whom security forces detained for roughly 10 days in September.

Between April 2022 and September 2023, the authorities released [roughly 1,700](#) unjustly detained prisoners, including some high-profile political

detainees, such as Ahmed Douma. However, authorities arrested more than 4,500 during the same period, according to a rights campaign launched by local rights defenders, including some who had just been released.

Abuses by Police and Security Forces in Prisons

Interior Ministry police and National Security agents continued to forcibly disappear critics and dissidents in official and unofficial detention places where detainees are frequently subjected to [torture](#) and forced to confess.

Prison conditions remained generally dire with widespread and systematic abuses, including in the newly built prisons that the government used in public relations campaigns to [whitewash](#) its abuses. The banning of visits by family members and lawyers and denial of adequate medical care remained pervasive. In March, Salah Soltan, the arbitrarily detained father of a prominent Egyptian-American human rights defender, said in a leaked letter from Badr 1 prison that the prison authorities had deprived him of adequate healthcare even though he suffers from life-threatening heart and liver diseases, among other complex medical conditions. Families of some detainees in political cases [said](#) they had not seen their detained relatives for years because prison authorities denied regular visits, including by lawyers, as well as written or phone communication.

In April, prosecutors [refused](#) a request submitted by the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression to reopen the investigation into the forced disappearance, ill-treatment, and suspicious death in custody of Egyptian economist Aymad Hadhoud.

Military Operations in Sinai

In 2023, Human Rights Watch and the Egyptian rights group Sinai Foundation for Human Rights documented Egyptian security forces' arbitrary detention of women and girls [between 2017 and 2022, all of whom were](#) related to suspected members of Wilayat Sina' in North Sinai, the local affiliate of Islamic State (ISIS). Security forces held 12 of the 21 women and girls incommunicado for periods ranging from 2 weeks to 6 months. Relatives of three women said that National Security Agency (NSA) officers abused them at various agency sites, including with beatings and electric shocks. Two other women said that officers verbally abused the women, slapped one in the face, and blindfolded the other.

In September, the United States Department of State [added](#) Egypt to its list of countries implicated in using child soldiers based on independent reports that the Egyptian military conducted joint operations with allied militia groups in North Sinai that recruited children. In August, the Sinai

Foundation for Human Rights [reported](#) that army-aligned militias in North Sinai recruited boys, some as young as 16, for logistical and combat operations. Some of those children were injured or killed.

Freedoms of Expression and Assembly

The authorities continued their ruthless campaign to silence critics and crush freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The United Nations Human Rights Committee said in April, in its concluding observations, that it is “concerned that restrictive criminal laws are improperly used to unduly restrict and suppress legitimate freedom of expression, including by journalists.”

In October, following the escalation of hostilities in Israel and Palestine, authorities [detained and prosecuted dozens](#) of protesters and activists in pro-Palestine protests in Cairo and Alexandria. Authorities also detained dozens of protesters in several unrelated protests in Cairo, Marsa Matrouh, and North Sinai. Security forces routinely cordoned off peaceful protests to prevent more people from joining, and on several occasions, they used batons, sticks, and water cannons to violently disperse protesters.

In September, a court in Mansoura sentenced Mohamed Adel, a prominent activist and former leader of the April 6 Youth Movement, who had been held in [unlawful](#) pretrial detention since 2018, to four years in prison on charges of “spreading false news” because of Facebook posts that were critical of the government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). An appellate court [upheld](#) the verdict against him later that month.

On August 20, Egyptian authorities [detained](#) prominent politician and veteran news publisher Hisham Kassem after prosecutors charged him with libel and slander based on Facebook posts critical of a former minister. Prosecutors also added vague, broadly worded charges of intentionally “disturbing the authorities” and slander against policemen in Cairo’s el-Sayda Zainab Police Station, where Kassem was first interrogated. A Cairo court [sentenced](#) Kassem in September to six months in prison and a fine of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP) (about US\$647). An appeals court [confirmed](#) his sentence in October.

In February, the public prosecution [referred](#) three journalists working with *Mada Masr*, one of the few remaining independent media outlets in the country, to trial before the Mansoura Economic Court on charges of insulting members of parliament from the pro-Sisi Nation’s Future Party and of misusing social media. The charges are tied to *Mada Masr*’s September 1, 2022 published report about an unannounced corruption investigation that government oversight authorities were reportedly carrying out against senior party members. The trial has not started as of writing, according to a rights lawyer.

Freedom of Association and Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

April marked the deadline set by the government for nongovernmental organizations to register under the [draconian 2019 Associations Law](#), which allows the authorities to shut down and freeze the assets of any group that continues to operate without registration and bans work deemed to be “political” without defining what this means. Several leading human rights activists, such as Hossam Bahgat and Gamal Eid, remained under virtually indefinite travel bans and asset freezes, many stemming from Case 173 in which the major human rights organizations in the country have been prosecuted for over a decade for receiving foreign funds.

In March, a Cairo Emergency State Security court [sentenced](#) 29 rights activists belonging to the Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms, a human rights organization, to prison terms between five years and life following an unfair mass trial. Human Rights Watch and Egyptian organizations have documented that the defendants faced a number of serious [due process violations](#), including months-long enforced disappearances, denial of visits by family members, and lack of meaningful access to legal counsel.

Extraterritorial (Transnational) Repression of Egyptians Abroad

A Human Rights Watch report released in March [documented](#) that the Egyptian authorities in recent years have systematically [refused](#) to provide or renew the identity documents of dozens of dissidents, journalists, and human rights activists living abroad, apparently in order to pressure them to return to Egypt, where they would face near-certain persecution. The inability to obtain birth certificates or renew essential documents such as passports and ID cards has undermined livelihoods and hampered access to basic rights for the individuals targeted and their dependent family members, including children.

In addition, the authorities continued the systematic targeting of the families of actual or perceived dissidents living abroad. In August, Egyptian authorities detained the fathers of [Ahmed Gamal Ziada](#), an Egyptian journalist living in Brussels who was previously [detained and tortured](#) in Egypt, and Fagr al-Adly, a German-Egyptian doctor and activist. The Supreme State Security Prosecution kept both fathers in pretrial detention after charging them with “spreading false news.” Authorities released Ziada’s father on September 20, and al-Adly’s father on October 19, both without trial.

Fair Trials and Due Process

The Egyptian authorities in 2023 widely [deployed](#) a videoconference system to remotely conduct pretrial detention hearings and permanently avoid bringing detainees to court in person. The system is inherently abusive as it undermines detainees' right to be brought physically before a judge to assess the legality and conditions of detention, and it curtails their ability to speak to the judge directly and to their lawyers in private. In June, the Supreme State Security Prosecution, which usually investigates political cases, started holding the detention renewal sessions remotely via videoconference as well, with detainees attending the sessions from prisons under police custody.

Economic and Social Rights

In August, the annual inflation rate hit a record of 39.7 percent, exacerbating the economic hardships facing residents of Egypt. In September, a Bloomberg analysis showed that Egypt is the second most vulnerable country to a debt crisis, after Ukraine. In January, the IMF published the details of the new loan agreement with Egypt, worth \$3 billion, the fourth IMF-Egypt loan since 2016. The agreement included some improvements over previous loans, including clear conditions around transparency of military-owned businesses for the first time and by expanding coverage of the Takaful and Karama cash transfer conditional assistance programs. In September, the [government said](#) that the two programs were covering more than 5 million families (or 22 million people). However, this is only about one-third of families living in or near poverty. Currency devaluation eroded the value of the transfers, making it inadequate to protect people's economic rights from the combined impact of the IMF program's reforms, high inflation, and Egypt's low social spending baseline. Despite the agreement, the military continued to expand its enormous and opaque business ventures in civilian sectors. The first and second quarterly reviews of the agreement due around March and June were postponed to the end of 2023 as the government failed to meet transparency criteria.

Between July and November, the Egyptian government [limited](#) electricity use with daily or semi-daily power cutbacks nationwide. The cuts appeared to last longer in rural and impoverished areas and left many people without power amid soaring temperatures, hindering their ability to perform their jobs, including for some healthcare workers, and limiting access to water.

The Egyptian government and a private British company, Academic Assessment Ltd., [exposed](#) private data of over 72,000 children, including names, dates of birth, genders, home and email addresses, phone numbers, schools, grade levels, photos, and copies of their passports or national IDs online. It was left unprotected for at least eight months. The

children's information was stored as part of a university-application process that some secondary school students are required to complete.

Women's Rights

A Human Rights Watch report released in July [found](#) that male guardianship policies continued to hinder women's travel and mobility. For instance, Egypt's Personal Status Law provides that a woman can be deemed disobedient by a court and lose the right to spousal maintenance (*nafaqa*) from her husband if she leaves the marital home or works without her husband's consent, with some exceptions.

Authorities continued to prosecute women [social media influencers](#) on ill-defined morality charges. In April, an economic court [sentenced](#) the Egyptian model and influencer Salma al-Shimy to two years in prison and an EGP 100,000 (about US\$3,237) fine on vague charges of publishing sexually provocative videos and violating family values through her social media posts.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In a report published in February, Human Rights Watch [documented the far-reaching offline consequences](#) of online targeting against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Egypt, including entrapment; online extortion, including by organized gangs; online harassment; and reliance on illegitimately obtained digital information based on arbitrary phone searches in prosecutions.

The report included 29 cases in Egypt that involved arrests and prosecutions, including against foreigners, suggesting a coordinated policy—either directed or acquiesced to by senior government officials—to persecute LGBT people.

Human Rights Watch also documented serious abuses by security officials or co-inmates in detention against LGBT people, including being placed in solitary confinement; denied food and water, contact with family, and medical services; and sexually assaulted and subjected to other physical violence.

Egypt does not explicitly criminalize same-sex relations. However, several Egyptian laws restrict the rights to freedom of expression and privacy.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

In June, following the April outbreak of conflict in Sudan, the Egyptian government issued a decision requiring all Sudanese to obtain visas to enter Egypt. The decision—which [made it more difficult for](#) women, children, and older people, who had been previously exempted from visa

requirements, to flee the conflict—violated international standards by creating unreasonable and life-threatening delays in processing asylum seekers. As of September, Egypt had received [over 317,000](#) refugees fleeing Sudan’s conflict, including 310,000 Sudanese people and over 7,000 people of other nationalities, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Key International Actors

In September, the US government [announced](#) it would waive human rights conditions to provide \$235 million out of \$300 million in annual military assistance for Fiscal Year 2022, which Congress had previously conditioned on the Egyptian government taking actions to address human rights issues. The US government withheld only \$85 million due to lack of progress in “releasing political prisoners, providing detainees with due process, and preventing the intimidation and harassment of American citizens.” In the same month, Senator Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was [indicted](#) for allegedly accepting bribes to use his influence to benefit Egypt, including by allowing US military aid despite Egypt’s failure to meet human rights conditions. In early October, Senator Ben Cardin, who replaced Menendez as chairman of the committee, said he would put on hold the \$235 million previously waived due to inadequate improvements in Egypt’s human rights conditions.

In July, Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni invited Egypt, along with other Middle East and North Africa governments with [records of abusing migrants](#), to a conference in Rome to address irregular migration, in an apparent move toward expanding collaboration on migration control. Between January and October, more than 8,000 Egyptians had arrived by boats in Italy, mostly through Libya. In 2022, Egyptians had [constituted the highest number](#) of migrants arriving in Italy by boats as the economic crisis in Egypt continued to deteriorate.

In October, the European Parliament adopted an urgency [resolution](#) on Egypt, the fourth in this legislature, urging the Egyptian government to end its repression ahead of the presidential elections. Apart from occasional, faint criticism at the UN Human Rights Council, the European Commission and European Union member states continued to refrain from publicly criticizing the Egyptian government’s abuses and taking action to address them; instead, they continued to provide Egypt with security and military support. In October, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [proposed](#) additional support to Egypt.

The United Kingdom failed to gain consular access to or secure the release of the detained Egyptian-British pro-democracy activist and blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah.

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