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The rights to freedom of expression and association were severely repressed. Authorities targeted human rights defenders, opposition politicians and other activists through unlawful summons, coercive questioning, extrajudicial probation measures, criminal investigations, unfair prosecutions and inclusion on a “list of terrorists”. Thousands of people, including human rights defenders, journalists, students, opposition politicians, business owners and peaceful protesters, remained arbitrarily detained. Dozens were convicted after grossly unfair trials or were tried by emergency courts on charges stemming from the peaceful exercise of their human rights. Enforced disappearances and torture continued unabated. Conditions of detention remained cruel and inhuman, and prisoners were denied adequate healthcare, which led or contributed to at least 56 deaths in custody. Death sentences were handed down after grossly unfair trials and executions were carried out, including for drug offences. Authorities failed to adequately investigate or punish sexual and gender-based violence, and introduced legislation further undermining women’s rights and autonomy. LGBTI individuals were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to long prison terms on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Authorities clamped down on labour strikes, independent unions and workers expressing grievances or criticism. The Covid-19 vaccine roll-out was marred by delays in vaccinating those most at risk, among other things. Residents of informal settlements were forcibly evicted and detained for protesting. Authorities discriminated against Christians in law and practice, and prosecuted members of religious minorities and those espousing religious opinions not sanctioned by the state. Refugees and migrants were arbitrarily detained indefinitely for crossing borders irregularly, and forcibly expelled without due process or access to asylum procedures.

Background

In October, the president lifted the nationwide state of emergency in place since April 2017. Within days, parliament approved legislative changes expanding the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians, eroding fair trial guarantees and criminalizing reporting on the military.

Sporadic attacks by armed groups in North Sinai continued. The military, which announced fatalities in its ranks and the killing of 122 militants in clashes, released a video in August depicting the unlawful killing of two unarmed men by the military. In October, the president granted the defence minister exceptional powers to impose curfews, close schools and evacuate North Sinai residents.

A national budget adopted in June failed to meet the constitutionally mandated allocation of 3% and 6% of GDP to health and education, respectively, and reduced spending on health insurance and medicine.

In March, 32 states condemned human rights violations in Egypt at the UN Human Rights Council.

In September, authorities launched a five-year national human rights strategy praising the legal framework and overlooking concerns over past and ongoing human rights violations.

Freedom of expression

Authorities continued to severely repress the right to freedom of expression and clamp down on critical voices offline and online.

Security forces arbitrarily arrested at least six journalists for their work or critical views. On 19 July, they arrested journalist Abdelnasser Salama after he called for the president’s resignation. He and 24 other journalists remained in prison following convictions or pending investigations into accusations of “misusing social media”, “spreading false news” and “terrorism”.

In May Hossam Shaaban, a doctor involved in relief work, was arrested after he criticized the authorities’ ban on solidarity protests during the Israeli offensive on Gaza. He remained detained pending investigations into “terrorism” accusations.

Authorities continued to block at least 600 news, human rights and other websites, according to rights groups.

Freedom of association

Officers at the National Security Agency (NSA), a special police force, intimidated human rights defenders and political activists by unlawfully summoning and subjecting them to coercive questioning and extrajudicial police probation measures.¹

Authorities arbitrarily detained and unfairly prosecuted tens of human rights defenders and opposition politicians on unfounded charges of “terrorism” and “spreading false news”. In July, Hossam Bahgat, director of a prominent NGO, was convicted and fined for peacefully expressing his views on Egypt’s 2020 elections. Investigative judges interrogated at least five NGO directors in July and revived investigations into tax evasion by NGOs as part of the politically motivated decade-long criminal investigation into the activities and funding of human rights organizations known as Case 173. Authorities dropped investigations against 12 NGOs but continued to subject their directors and staff to travel bans and asset freezes. At least 15 others remained under investigation and subject to similar restrictions.

Authorities arbitrarily added 408 people, including activists and opposition politicians, to the “list of terrorists”, effectively banning them from engaging in civic or political work and travelling abroad for five years. In November, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a decision to disbar six lawyers on the “list of terrorists”.

Arbitrary detention and unfair trials

Authorities released 13 human rights defenders, journalists and politicians who had been held in pretrial detention for years, but thousands remained detained arbitrarily solely for exercising their human rights or after grossly unfair trials or without legal basis. Security forces arbitrarily arrested hundreds of actual or perceived government critics.

In February, authorities arbitrarily detained leading businessman Seif Thabet, two months after his father, Safwan Thabet, was arrested, because of their refusal to hand over assets of their successful company Juhayna. Both remained detained in prolonged solitary confinement without trial or formal charge.

Prosecutors and judges renewed the pretrial detention of thousands of individuals held pending investigations into unfounded terrorism-related charges without allowing them to challenge its lawfulness. In October, the Ministry of Justice issued a decree allowing for the renewal of pretrial detention remotely without guaranteeing respect of due process.

The Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP), a special branch of the Public Prosecution responsible for investigating security threats, continued to bypass release orders by judges or prosecutors for individuals in prolonged pretrial detention, including those detained beyond the two-year legal limit, by issuing new detention orders over similar charges based on secret NSA investigations – a practice known as “rotation”. Similar tactics were employed to keep convicted prisoners in detention after they had served their sentences. On 15 June, the SSSP ordered the detention of human rights lawyer Mohamed Ramadan pending investigations into a new case, days after a court ordered his release from his three-year pretrial detention.

The SSSP referred at least 28 arbitrarily detained human rights defenders, opposition politicians and activists to trial by emergency courts.² Proceedings in these courts are inherently unfair and defendants are denied the right to have their convictions and sentences reviewed by higher courts. Security forces prevented lawyers from meeting their clients in private.

In August, the SSSP referred to emergency courts human rights NGO founder Ezzat Ghoneim and lawyer Hoda Abdelmoneim on charges of “spreading false news” or “terrorism” solely for their peaceful human rights or political work.

Between June and December, emergency courts convicted student Ahmed Samir Santawy; opposition politicians Zyad el-Elaimy, Hossam Moanis and Hisham Fouad; activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, lawyer and NGO founder Mohamed Baker and blogger Mohamed Ibrahim, known as “Oxygen”, of “spreading false news” and sentenced them to between three and five years’ imprisonment for criticizing Egypt’s human rights record, economic policy and living standards.

Enforced disappearances

Authorities subjected hundreds of detainees to enforced disappearance in NSA premises, police stations and other unknown locations. The NSA removed prisoners of conscience and others held for political reasons from their habitual places of detention following court release orders and concealed their fate and whereabouts for up to three months.

No investigations were ordered into the 23-month enforced disappearance of Manar Adel Abu el-Naga with her toddler son preceding her February questioning on terrorism-related charges by the SSSP. Her husband, Omar Abdelhamid, remained forcibly disappeared since March 2019.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Security forces tortured and otherwise ill-treated detainees, including through beatings, electric shocks, suspension in contorted positions and indefinite solitary confinement in dire conditions. At least 56 detainees died in custody following medical complications and four others died following reports of torture. Authorities failed to investigate the causes and circumstances of these deaths.

In March, prosecutors failed to investigate claims that a police officer beat Mohamed Abdelaziz to death in his workplace in Shebin el-Qanater in Qalyubia governorate.

Conditions in prisons and other detention facilities remained cruel and inhuman,³ with prisoners reporting overcrowding, poor ventilation, and lack of hygiene and access to sanitation facilities and adequate food, drinking water, fresh air and exercise.

Authorities continued to restrict or ban family visits and correspondence and deny prisoners access to adequate healthcare, in some cases deliberately with the apparent purpose of punishing dissent.

Death penalty

Courts, including terrorism circuits of criminal courts and emergency courts, handed down death sentences after grossly unfair trials.

On 29 July, an emergency court, whose convictions and sentences are not subject to appeal, sentenced 16 men to death following a grossly unfair trial in a case relating to deadly attacks.⁴

Executions were carried out, often in secret and without final family visits. On 26 April, the authorities executed 82-year-old Abd alRahim Jibril and eight others convicted of killing police officers in August 2013. Their mass trial was marred by torture-tainted “confessions”. In other cases, several men were executed for offences not meeting the threshold of most serious crimes, including drug trafficking.

Sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence

Women continued to face discrimination in law and practice.

In February, the cabinet referred a new draft personal status law to parliament, which retained discriminatory provisions against women in relation to marriage, divorce, child custody and education, and granted powers to male guardians to judicially annul women’s marriage without their consent. In April, parliament toughened penalties for female genital mutilation.

In October, 98 women became State Council judges, but women remained under-represented or excluded from most judicial and prosecutorial bodies.

Authorities continued to prosecute women social media influencers for how they acted, dressed and earned money on social media apps. In June, Hanin Hossam and Mawada el-Adham were sentenced to 10 and six years in prison respectively, for inciting “indecent” content and “human trafficking”. At least seven women social media influencers remained imprisoned on morality-related or other bogus charges.

Authorities failed to prevent and investigate widespread violence against women and girls. In May, authorities released all suspects due to “lack of evidence” in a case concerning a gang rape at a Cairo hotel in 2014. At least two witnesses reported being pressured by security agents to change their testimonies.

Authorities continued to arrest and prosecute individuals on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. In August, a court convicted four men of engaging in same-sex sexual relations and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from six to nine years.

Workers’ rights

Authorities repressed workers’ right to strike and form independent trade unions, and penalized workers for expressing their opinions or demands. They failed to protect dozens of workers unfairly dismissed, punished and harassed by private companies for their involvement in peaceful strikes.⁵

In September, a court in Alexandria sanctioned the dismissal without compensation of a public sector company worker for “publicly expressing his political opinions”. The same month, authorities arbitrarily detained three Universal Company workers for two days for exercising their right to strike.

In August, the president ratified a new law, allowing for the unfair, automatic dismissal of public sector employees included on the “list of terrorists”. This followed official statements calling for the dismissal of railway workers affiliated to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood group, blamed for frequent fatal train crashes.

Right to health

The health system continued to struggle with Covid-19 outbreaks, and the government failed to address concerns raised by health workers over their unsafe working conditions, including inadequate healthcare facilities, training and protection equipment. In November, the president ratified a law criminalizing the publication of information on pandemics, using vaguely worded grounds.

A national Covid-19 vaccine programme was announced in January, but less than 22% of the population had been fully vaccinated by the end of the year. The roll-out was marred by lack of transparency, delays in vaccinating health workers and other at-risk groups, and failure to prioritize marginalized people and carry out awareness raising in remote rural and poor urban areas to tackle vaccine hesitancy.⁵

Some prisoners held for political reasons were excluded from the prison vaccine roll-out. Authorities refused requests by detained 69-year-old ailing opposition politician Abdelmonim Aboufotouh to be vaccinated. At least eight detainees died in custody after displaying Covid-19 symptoms.

Forced evictions

Authorities carried out forced evictions in informal settlements and arbitrarily detained dozens of people for protesting against home demolitions.

On 4 June, security forces used tear gas to disperse a protest in Ezbet Nady al-Seid, a neighbourhood in Alexandria, against plans to relocate its residents without consultation or adequate compensation. At least 40 protesters were arrested and detained at a riot police camp. They were released nine days later, but 13 were tried on charges of “participating in unauthorized protests”, “thuggery” and “sabotaging a public facility” by an emergency court, which acquitted them in December.

Freedom of religion and belief

Christians continued to face discrimination in law and practice. Their right to worship remained restricted by a discriminatory 2016 law on building and repairing churches requiring approval from security agencies and other state bodies, through lengthy, complicated and opaque procedures. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, since the enactment of the law, fewer than 20% of applicants were granted full registration and at least 25 churches remained closed on the grounds of their illegal status or on the pretext of avoiding sectarian tensions.

Authorities failed to protect Christians in North Sinai from violence by armed groups. In April, the organization Sinai Province, an affiliate of the armed group Islamic State, released a video showing the execution-style shooting of Nabil Habashy, a Christian, in reprisal for his involvement in establishing a local church. Authorities failed to secure the safe return of his family and hundreds of other Christians forcibly displaced from North Sinai following violent attacks in 2017 or to provide them with any compensation for lost property and livelihoods.

Members of religious minorities and Muslims not espousing state-sanctioned religious beliefs were prosecuted and imprisoned on “defamation of religion” and other bogus charges. In November, an emergency court sentenced lawyer Ahmed Maher to five years in prison for “defamation of religion” for his book on Islamic jurisprudence.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

Authorities continued to arbitrarily arrest dozens of refugees and migrants and detain them indefinitely in cruel and inhuman conditions for irregularly entering or attempting to leave Egypt. Some had been held for years without access to asylum procedures or due process.

From October to the end of the year, authorities forcibly returned 40 Eritrean nationals, detained since October 2019, to Eritrea without allowing them to challenge the decision to remove them or access asylum procedures.

1. [Egypt: “This Will Only End When You Die”: National Security Agency Harassment of Activists in Egypt \(Index: MDE 12/4665/2021\), 16 September](#)
2. [“Egypt: Stop trials by emergency courts”, 31 October](#)
3. [Egypt: “What Do I Care if You Die?”: Negligence and Denial of Health Care in Egyptian Prisons \(Index: MDE 12/3538/2021\), 25 January](#)
4. [“Egypt: Retry 36 men facing execution following unfair trials by emergency courts”, 8 November](#)
5. [“Egypt: Authorities fail to protect striking workers from reprisals”, 25 November](#)
6. [“Egypt: Haphazard and flawed Covid-19 vaccine roll-out fails to prioritize most at-risk”, 29 June](#)

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