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## AI – Amnesty International

### Egypt 2020

The authorities continued to punish any public or perceived dissent, and severely repressed the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression and association. Tens of journalists were detained arbitrarily solely in relation to their work or critical views. The authorities clamped down on reporting that deviated from the official narrative on COVID-19 and detained health care workers who expressed safety concerns. The authorities continued to severely restrict human rights organizations’ and political parties’ freedom of association. Security forces used unlawful force to disperse rare protests, and arbitrarily detained hundreds of protesters and bystanders pending investigations into “terrorism” and protest-related charges. Thousands of people remained in prolonged pre-trial detention, including human rights defenders, journalists, politicians, lawyers and social media influencers. Conditions of detention remained cruel and inhuman and prisoners were denied adequate health care, which led or contributed to at least 35 deaths in prisons or shortly after release. Fair trial guarantees were routinely flouted. Death sentences were handed down and executions were carried out. Women were prosecuted on “morality” charges for the way they dressed, acted or earned money online. Dozens of workers were arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted for exercising their right to strike. Residents of informal settlements were forcibly evicted. The authorities arrested and prosecuted Christians, Shi’a Muslims and others for blasphemy. Security forces dispersed protests by refugees over the killing of a Sudanese child with force and subjected them to racial slurs and beatings.

#### Background

Between August and December, elections were held for both chambers of parliament amid low voter turnout.

Every three months, the authorities extended the state of emergency, in force since April 2017, thereby circumventing the constitutional six-month limit. In May, the emergency law was amended giving the President additional sweeping powers to restrict public and private gatherings and further expanding the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians.

In June, the International Monetary Fund approved a US\$5.2 billion package to help Egypt respond to the economic impact of COVID-19. In August, the government reduced the size of subsidized bread. In September, small and scattered protests took place in several poor urban and rural communities, triggered mainly by the deteriorating economic situation and government threats to demolish unregistered buildings unless residents paid a fine based on the law on reconciliation.

Attacks by armed groups in North Sinai continued sporadically. The military announced fatalities in its ranks in May, July and October, and the killing of dozens of militants. According to media reports, armed groups overran several villages in the Bir al-Abd area in July, forcing residents to flee. Some were killed by improvised explosive devices in October upon their return home.

Egypt remained a member of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in the conflict in Yemen, and in the coalition imposing sanctions on Qatar arising from the ongoing diplomatic crisis in the Gulf. Egypt supported the self-declared Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), a party to the armed conflict in Libya, including by allowing transshipments of arms from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE launched drone strikes in Libya on LAAF’s behalf from the Sidi Barrani airbase in Egypt.

#### Freedom of assembly

The authorities responded to small and rare protests in September and October with unlawful use of force, mass arrests, censorship and random security checks. Security forces used tear gas, batons, birdshot and on at least one occasion live ammunition to disperse protests. They also raided homes in a violent manner to arrest suspected protesters, killing at least two men and injuring others.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of protesters and bystanders were arrested and detained pending investigations into “terrorism” and protest-related charges.

## Freedom of expression

The authorities clamped down on free speech offline and online.

Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained tens of media workers pending investigations into charges related to “misuse of social media”, “spreading false news” or “terrorism”.

On 24 June, security forces raided the office in the capital, Cairo, of the al-Manassa independent news site and briefly detained its editor-in-chief Noura Younes.

Hundreds of news, human rights and other websites remained blocked, according to rights groups. In April, the authorities blocked the Darb news site after it reported on human rights concerns.

The authorities clamped down on independent reporting on COVID-19 and warned against “spreading false news” on the pandemic. The authorities arbitrarily arrested at least nine health care workers who expressed safety concerns or criticized the government’s handling of the pandemic on their social media platforms and detained them pending investigations into “terrorism”-related charges and “spreading false news”. Others were subjected to threats, harassment and punitive administrative measures.

On 25 August, a terrorism circuit court sentenced the director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Bahey el-Din Hassan, in his absence, to 15 years’ imprisonment on charges of “insulting the judiciary” and “disseminating false news” for tweeting about human rights violations in Egypt.

## Freedom of association

The politically motivated criminal investigation into the activities and funding of human rights organizations, known as Case 173, remained active. At least 31 staff members of civil society organizations continued to be banned from travelling abroad. In July, a Cairo court rejected an appeal by 14 of them against their travel bans.

In February, security forces arbitrarily arrested Patrick Zaki George, a human rights researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), a human rights NGO, upon his arrival in Cairo from abroad. His lawyers said that the police subjected him to electric shocks and beatings. He remained in pre-trial detention pending investigations into unfounded “terrorism”-related charges. In November, security forces arrested EIPR directors Gasser Abdel Razek, Karim Ennarah and Mohamed Besheer and detained them pending investigations on terrorism-related charges following a meeting with several western diplomats that took place at EIPR offices. They were released after a global campaign, but the authorities froze their assets in December.

Opposition politicians faced arbitrary detention and other harassment. In March, a court sentenced Zyad el-Elaimy, a former parliamentarian and leader of an opposition party, to one year in prison for conducting a media interview on the human rights situation. In June, a higher court upheld the verdict. He remained imprisoned. Following amendments to counter-terrorism legislation in February allowing the judicial authorities to designate entities and individuals as “terrorists” on the sole basis of police investigations and without the occurrence of “terrorist acts”, terrorism circuit judges added politicians Zyad el-Elaimy and Abdelmoniem Abouelfotoh, as well as activists Ramy Shaath and Alaa Abdelfattah and human rights defender Mohamed el-Baqer, to Egypt’s “terrorists list” for five years without any hearing or due process.

## Arbitrary detentions and unfair trials

Thousands of people were detained arbitrarily solely for exercising their human rights or on the basis of grossly unfair trials, including mass and military trials. The authorities also threatened, questioned and arbitrarily detained family members of exiled dissidents.

In August, activist Sanaa Seif, unjustly detained since June, was referred to trial for “spreading false news,” “insulting an official” and other charges relating to her speaking out against a police officer’s complicity in an assault she suffered with her mother and sister outside the Tora Prison Complex in full view of security forces.

Prosecutors and judges routinely renewed the pre-trial detention of thousands of suspects held pending investigations into unfounded “terrorism”-related charges, in some cases in the defendants’ absence and without allowing lawyers to challenge the legality of their detention. Many were held in pre-trial detention for periods exceeding the maximum limit under Egyptian law of two years.

The Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP), a special branch of the Public Prosecution responsible for investigating security threats, bypassed court or prosecution release decisions after prolonged pre-trial detention by issuing new detention orders covering similar charges. The SSSP employed similar tactics to arbitrarily detain convicted prisoners after they had served their sentences.

## Enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment

Authorities subjected hundreds of detainees, including prisoners of conscience, to enforced disappearance in undisclosed locations.

Among them was trade unionist Ahmad Amasha, who was forcibly disappeared for 25 days following his arrest on 17 June. On 12 July, the SSSP questioned him and ordered his detention pending investigations into “terrorism”-related charges.

Torture remained rife in formal and informal places of detention. Defendants arrested in connection with the September protests told prosecutors that they were beaten and given electric shocks by security forces.

Prosecutors routinely failed to order investigations into claims of torture and enforced disappearance against National Security Agency (NSA) officers. Only in rare cases of deaths in custody did the authorities open criminal investigations. On 7 September Islam al-Australi, a poultry shop owner, died at Monib police station in Giza governorate two days after his arrest. The Ministry of Interior denied claims that he had died as a result of torture. Security forces arrested his relatives, neighbours and local residents protesting against his death, releasing them after his family dropped their complaint. The Public Prosecution ordered the detention of four low-ranking policemen pending investigations and released a police officer on bail.

In December, Italian prosecutors named four NSA officers as suspects in the abduction, torture and killing of Italian student Giulio Regeni in 2016.

## Right to health – prison conditions

Conditions in prisons and other detention facilities remained cruel and inhuman, with prisoners complaining of overcrowding, poor ventilation, lack of hygiene and access to sanitation facilities, and inadequate food and drinking water. Authorities tortured some detainees by holding them in dire conditions in prolonged and indefinite solitary confinement.

Authorities denied prisoners access to adequate health care, in some cases deliberately to punish dissidents which may have amounted to torture. At least 35 detainees died in prison or shortly after their release, following medical complications and in some cases denial of adequate health care; the authorities failed to conduct independent or effective investigations into the causes and circumstances of their deaths.

On 13 August, senior Muslim Brotherhood figure Essam El-Erian, who had been detained since 2013, died in prison. He had previously complained in court about ill-treatment in solitary confinement and denial of health care.

The authorities failed to take measures to reduce the impact of the outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons and other detention facilities, including by failing to provide prisoners with sanitizing products or systematically testing and quarantining those suspected of infection or attempting to address overcrowding. The authorities failed to release thousands held in prolonged pre-trial detention, proceeding only with regular annual pardons to release thousands of prisoners in non-political cases. Authorities also arbitrarily arrested and harassed relatives and supporters of prisoners for expressing concerns over their health.

The authorities banned prison visits between March and August citing COVID-19 fears, and for the whole year for scores of detainees in political cases. Prison officials failed to provide regular alternative means of communication between prisoners and their families and lawyers.

## Death penalty

Egyptian courts, including military courts and terrorism circuits of criminal courts, handed down death sentences after unfair mass trials. Higher courts upheld the verdicts on appeal. Executions were carried out.

In March, a criminal court handed down death sentences against 37 men after an unfair mass trial.<sup>2</sup> Many of them had been forcibly disappeared for months, beaten, subjected to electric shocks or suspended for prolonged periods before their trials. In July, the Court of Cassation upheld the death sentence against Wael Tawadros, known as Father Isaiah, after a trial marred by torture and enforced disappearance.

Executions were carried out, including of individuals convicted in grossly unfair trials, marred by allegations of enforced disappearance and the acceptance of “confessions” extracted under torture as evidence. In October and November alone, Egypt executed almost double the number of those executed in all of 2019.

## Sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence

Women and girls continued to face discrimination in law and practice.

In response to public campaigning against impunity for sexual violence, the authorities arrested several men suspected of rape. However, they failed to guarantee the protection of survivors and witnesses, and neither prevented nor adequately investigated widespread violence against women and girls. Authorities also carried out reprisals against a rape survivor and others who reported sexual violence.

In August, authorities arbitrarily detained and opened criminal investigations against four people who came forward as witnesses in a case concerning a gang rape at a Cairo hotel in 2014, over charges related to “morality” and “misuse of social media”, among others. Two men also arrested in connection with the case, other than the rape

suspects, faced “debauchery” charges, frequently used in Egypt to prosecute same-sex sexual relations. Authorities subjected the two to forced anal examinations, an act amounting to torture. The case against the six people was primarily based on private videos and photographs of an intimate nature.

On 5 September, the Code of Criminal Procedures was amended to prohibit prosecutors and law enforcement officials from revealing the identities of survivors of sexual violence; it did not stipulate penalties for breaches of confidentiality or contain provisions to protect witnesses and others reporting sexual violence.

From April, the authorities intensified their crackdown on women social media influencers for the way they dressed, acted and earned money on apps such as TikTok, prosecuting at least nine women on charges of “indecentcy” and “violating family principles and values”. At least six women were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to six years.<sup>1</sup>

## Workers’ rights

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, tens of thousands of private sector workers were dismissed, forced to accept reduced wages, work without protective equipment or take open-ended unpaid leave. The authorities failed to provide workers who lost their livelihoods as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19 with sufficient social protection measures, including unemployment benefits.

The authorities arbitrarily detained tens of workers and trade unionists solely for exercising their right to strike and protest peacefully.

In September, security forces arrested at least 41 workers at a state-owned textile company in Shebin al-Kom city who were protesting for their outstanding dues. All were released 10 days later.

A June verdict by the Court of Cassation sanctioned the dismissal of workers at state-owned companies who had been convicted of protest-related charges, even if acquitted by higher courts.

## Right to housing and forced evictions

The authorities carried out forced evictions in informal settlements and arbitrarily arrested dozens of people for protesting against threatened house demolitions.

On 18 July, security forces used force to disperse a protest by residents of Ma’awa el-Sayadeen in Alexandria against the demolitions of their homes, and arrested about 65 protesters. At least 42 men were detained pending investigations into charges of “participating in unauthorized protests” and “attacking public employees” for up to five months. All were released later.

## Freedom of religion and belief

The authorities continued to discriminate against Christians in law and practice. Their right to build or repair churches remained restricted by a 2016 law requiring approval from security agencies and other state bodies. According to the EIPR, such bodies had granted full legal registration to fewer than 200 churches out of a total of 5,540 applications since 2016, while only 1,412 churches received preliminary, conditional approvals.

Members of Muslim minorities, atheists, Christians and others were prosecuted and imprisoned for blasphemy or for “terrorism”-related charges. In June, two Shi’a men were sentenced to one year’s imprisonment for practising their faith. In August, security forces arrested Quranist writer and blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman and forcibly disappeared him for 22 days, apparently in retaliation for the religious and political writings of his exiled relative. He remained in pre-trial detention.

## Rights of refugees and migrants

The authorities continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain refugees and migrants. Between January and September, security forces arrested and detained at least 14 Syrians, 29 Sudanese people and one Guinean person in police stations in southern Egypt for irregularly entering or staying in Egypt.

In November, security forces violently dispersed two peaceful protests by Sudanese refugees and migrants over the murder of a Sudanese child. Security forces arrested dozens of protesters and subjected them to beatings, racial slurs and other ill-treatment.

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1. [Egypt: Rare protests met with unlawful force and mass arrests \(Press release, 2 October\)](#)
  2. [Egypt: Death sentences against 37 convicted of terrorism after unfair trial \(Press release, 2 March\)](#)
  3. [Egypt: Survivors of sexual violence and online abuse among prosecuted women TikTok influencers \(Press release, 13 August\)](#)

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