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AI – Amnesty International

Egypt: World leaders must act to stop President al-Sisi’s repressive crackdown

Ahead of further protests expected on Friday, world leaders must confront President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and utterly condemn the crackdown he has waged to counter the outbreak of protests in recent days, said Amnesty International as heads of state meet at the UN General Assembly in New York this week.

Amnesty International has documented how the Egyptian security forces have carried out sweeping arrests of protesters, rounded up journalists, human rights lawyers, activists, protesters and political figures in a bid to silence critics and deter further protests from taking place. The government has also added the BBC and Alhurra news to the list of 513 other websites already blocked in Egypt and disrupted online messaging applications to thwart further protests.

“The government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is clearly shaken to its core by the outbreak of protests and has launched a full-throttle clampdown to crush demonstrations and intimidate activists, journalists and others into silence,” said Najia Bounaim, North Africa Campaigns Director at Amnesty International.

“The world must not stand silently by as President al-Sisi tramples all over Egyptians’ rights to peaceful protest and freedom of expression. Instead of escalating this repressive backlash, the Egyptian authorities must immediately release all those detained for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and allow further protests on Friday to go ahead.”

Amnesty International has documented the arrests of at least 59 people from five cities across Egypt during protests that took place on the nights of 20 and 21 September. Local human rights organizations have reported hundreds of arrests all over Egypt. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights reported that 964 (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1MtnmLXnma3Dalo8fdWddbTuuCdv-RscnrV6oUjle2Tk/edit?fbclid=IwAR1nc7ajQcnF8Bp4knKlxjG1oVJ0vYi0pNKdAAvr2u_dPfvSYMP8yBdxvbk#gid=1088629803) individuals have been arrested in relation to the protests between 19 and 24 September.

President al-Sisi responded to questions from media in New York yesterday claiming that the protests were instigated by “political Islam” (<https://twitter.com/evanchill/status/1176256932899971080/photo/1>) , however

Amnesty International found that in fact the protesters came from an extremely diverse range of age, socioeconomic, gender and religious backgrounds, including non-political backgrounds. All those detained faced the same “terrorism”- related charges.

Police violence

In scenes that have not been witnessed in Egypt for years, crowds of protesters gathered in Cairo’s iconic Tahrir square, as well as in Alexandria, Dumyat, Mahala, and in Suez chanting slogans against President al-Sisi’s rule and decrying corruption and detention. The response from the authorities was swift.

Amnesty International has verified three videos showing police officers beating protesters taken into custody and firing birdshot and tear gas to disperse crowds of peaceful protesters.

One of the videos (<https://www.facebook.com/206388199744219/posts/1033198887063142?sfns=mo>) shows police officers beating an unarmed protester before dragging him into an armoured vehicle, while another policeman opened fire with birdshot on people running away from vehicles.

Using verified video footage (<https://twitter.com/aNabbil/status/1175180355600564225>) showing Egyptian security forces, Amnesty International has identified the vehicles as French-made MIDS and Italian-made IVECO armoured vehicles. Amnesty International has previously documented the use of French MIDS in repressing protests in Egypt (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/10/egypt-france-flouts-international-law-by-continuing-to-export-arms-used-in-deadly-crackdowns/>) .

“These protests came as a shock because the authorities thought they had permanently intimidated protesters through the heavy-handed tactics of the past six years including arbitrary arrests and the use of excessive force, including lethal force. The fact that protesters risked their lives and liberty to protest against President al-Sisi’s rule suggests his ruthless tactics have garnered frustration and anger,” said Najia Bounaim.

Sweeping arrests

Hundreds of detainees have been held in Central Security Forces camps without access to their lawyers or families. Some were later released, but at least 274 were brought before the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP), and at least 146 in front of local prosecution offices in Cairo, which was seconded by the SSSP to keep up with the numbers arrested, according to the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (https://www.facebook.com/ecesr/posts/2507913959252150?_tn_=K-R) and lawyers (<https://www.facebook.com/khaled.ali.72/posts/1782556778556339>) .

According to lawyers, prosecutors questioned suspects about their participation in the protests and told them they were being investigated on charges that include “aiding a terrorist group in achieving its goals”, “spreading false news”, “participating in unauthorized protests” and “misusing social media” to disseminate information of a “terrorist group,” a term used to describe the Muslim Brotherhood, before ordering their detention for 15 days.

Politicians, journalists, activists rounded up

In the aftermath of the protests, Egypt’s security forces have continued with a campaign of repression rounding up lawyers, journalists, activists and politicians.

Amnesty International has also documented the arrest of five journalists. Sayed Abdellah, who had been sharing news about the protest in Suez on his Facebook account, was arrested at home on 22 September; and Mohammed Ibrahim, founder of the well-known blog "Oxygen Egypt", was arrested for posting videos about the protests when he attended a police station in Cairo on 21 September as part of his probation conditions.

Prominent human rights lawyer and activist, Mahienour el-Masry was seized by men in plainclothes at around 7pm on 22 September and bundled into a minivan after she left the SSSP building where she had been representing a detained human rights lawyer. She was later questioned by an SSSP prosecutor on the unfounded charges including “aiding a terrorist group in achieving its goals” and “spreading false news” in a case that dates back to protests that took place in March 2019, (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/egypt-forcibly-disappeared-transgender-woman-at-risk-of-sexual-violence-and-torture/>) before ordering her detention pending investigations.

At least three people have been also arrested from their homes in Suez, including Rashad Mohammed Kamal, a labour leader who also took part in the protests. The authorities have also continued with arrests across in Egypt, with at least seven party leaders and lawyers arrested in the early hours of 24 September.

Other politicians arrested include Abed Aziz Hussein, the vice president of the Karama party, following a statement issued by the party announcing it was suspending its activities in response to unprecedented repression and AbdelNasser Ismail, vice president of the Popular Socialist Coalition Party.

“President al-Sisi will face a crucial test over the coming days. The world will be watching his response to the protests and if his repressive crackdown continues to intensify, Egypt’s international allies must send a clear message that the ruthless crushing of peaceful dissent will not be tolerated,” said Najia Bounaim.

Media censorship and internet disruption

Amnesty International has observed and verified ongoing network disruption activities targeting web content and media platforms, such as BBC News, and web services including communication apps, such as Wire. These have either been blocked or restricted making it harder to communicate or access information. Amnesty also received alerts of temporary service disruptions on WhatsApp and Signal.

“It seems the authorities are trying out new network interference tactics to restrict people’s ability to access information, communicate securely and organize. They are keeping an eye on how people are adapting and learning to develop counter measures,” said Ramy Raoof, Tactical Technologist at Amnesty Tech.

The Supreme Council for Media Regulation (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/351368.aspx>) confirmed that BBC News’ website had been blocked due to “inaccurate” coverage of the demonstrations. Egypt’s State Information Service also warned foreign correspondents that they should “abide by internationally recognised professional standards in their coverage of Egyptian affairs and news”.

Background:

Scattered protests first broke out in cities across Egypt on 20 and 21 September, calling on President al-Sisi to resign. The protests are believed to have been sparked by corruption allegations shared by former army contractor Mohamad Ali accusing army leaders and the president of wasting public money on building luxury properties.

The day before the protests began, police arrested the brother of US-based Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim, Hazem, because of videos Wael had posted in which he criticizes the Egyptian authorities and President al-Sisi. Both were later accused of “aiding terrorist groups” by the SSSP.

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ecoi.net summary:

Several arrests during protests that took place in 5 cities on 20 and 21 September 2019; several journalists and activists arrested; increased censorship and internet disruptions



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