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Egypt: Arrests over calls for protests during COP27 expose reality of human rights crisis

The Egyptian authorities' arrest of hundreds of people in the past two weeks alone in connection to calls for protests during the UN Climate Change Conference (COP27), is a reminder of the grim reality of Egypt's policy of mass arbitrary detention to crush dissent, Amnesty International said. At least 151 detainees are currently being investigated by the Supreme State Security Prosecution, while hundreds more have faced shorter arrests and questioning.

"The arrest of hundreds of people merely because they were suspected of supporting the call for peaceful protests raises serious concerns over how the authorities will

respond to people wishing to protest during COP27 – an essential feature of any UN climate conference. The Egyptian authorities must allow peaceful demonstrators to gather freely and refrain from using unlawful force or arbitrary arrests to deter protests,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Research and Advocacy Director.

“World leaders arriving in Sharm El-Sheikh for COP27 must not be fooled by Egypt’s PR campaign. Away from the dazzling resort hotels thousands of individuals including human rights defenders, journalists, peaceful protesters and members of the political opposition continue to be detained unjustly. They must urge President Abdelfattah al-Sisi to release all those arbitrarily held for exercising their human rights. As a matter of urgency, this should include imprisoned activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, who today escalated his hunger strike to stop drinking water.”

In the lead-up to COP27, the Egyptian authorities released 766 prisoners following a decision by President al-Sisi to reactivate a Presidential Pardons Committee (PPC) in April. Yet over the same period, Amnesty International has documented the arrest of double that number; 1,540 people who were questioned over the exercising of free speech and association.

In the past six months, Amnesty International has gathered data from dozens of lawyers who regularly attend interrogations and detention renewal hearings, reviewed court decisions and other official documents, and interviewed former prisoners as well as relatives of detainees.

Arrested ahead of COP27

In recent weeks, security forces have arrested and detained hundreds of people in downtown Cairo and town squares across Egyptian cities over content on their phones — a tactic often employed by police ahead of expected protests. While most were released within hours or days, some were taken to prosecutors, while others remain subject to enforced disappearance according to 11 lawyers in Cairo, Alexandria, Sharqiya and Dakahliya.

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In September, Abdelsalam Abdelghani, 55, was arrested at his home on the outskirts of Cairo. Prosecutors questioned him about a Facebook group called “Our right”, including posts calling for protests on 11 November. The prosecutor questioned him on accusations of spreading “false news” and being “a member of a terrorist group” before ordering his detention pending an investigation.

Incarceration crisis

Egypt’s security agencies continue to use extrajudicial powers to determine which prisoners are released and have blocked the releases of thousands of prisoners arbitrarily detained solely for exercising their human rights.

Former presidential candidate and political party leader Abdelmoneim Aboulfotoh’s health is also at risk in detention. Lawyers Hoda Abdelmoniem and Mohamed Baker remain detained simply for their work defending victims of human rights violations. The authorities have largely excluded anyone believed to be a member of or affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The authorities have also continued to ignore decisions to release detainees in a practise known as rotation. Since April, Egypt’s security agencies have also refused to implement judicial orders for the release of at least 60 detainees. Instead, National Security Agency (NSA) officers have taken them from prison without notifying their relatives. Many were subjected to enforced disappearance for days in which their fate and whereabouts were unknown before bringing them before prosecutors to face bogus terrorism or other national security-related charges.

Most released following the reactivation of the PPC continue to face restrictions on their expression and liberty. Seven recently released detainees told Amnesty International that the NSA ordered they remove critical content they had posted on social media or threatened to arrest them when COP27 concluded. Some who did not adhere have already been re-arrested, such as Sherif al-Roubi, an activist released in June but re-arrested in September after giving a media interview on the hardships faced by former prisoners. Others recently released remain under police surveillance, while many are arbitrarily banned from travelling.

Restrictions and protests in Sharm El-Sheikh

According to the [website](#) of the Egyptian presidency for COP27, anyone wishing to organize protests in Sharm El-Sheikh must inform the authorities 36 hours in advance and show the organizers a COP27 badge. Protests will only be allowed between 10:00-17:00 in an area far from the conference and monitored by cameras. The authorities have also limited the content of protests to climate related issues.

Amnesty International finds these measures to be unnecessary and disproportionate, aimed at restricting the ability of individuals to protest safely in a way that allows them to be seen and heard. The authorities must ensure that the notification requirement is only used to facilitate protests and does not imply an authorization, and strictly refrain from dispersing or otherwise repressing any protests that fail to meet this requirement.

Arbitrary and disproportionate measures have also been taken against Egyptians, using passes and hotel reservations to limit access to Sharm El-Sheikh, workers in Sharm El-Sheikh are also heavily restricted in their movement.

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