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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015 - Human Rights Priority Country update report: January to June 2016 - Egypt

Updated 21 July 2016

In the first half of 2016, the human rights situation in Egypt continued to deteriorate.

We raised our concerns regarding human rights in Egypt in our national statements at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) sessions in [March](#) and [June](#). During the June session we took the decision to raise Egypt under Agenda Item 4 (human rights situations that require the HRC's attention). In previous HRCs, we had raised our concerns regarding Egypt in our national statement under the Agenda Item for the Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (Item 2). Our decision to raise Egypt under Item 4 represented a step-change in our approach, commensurate

with our growing concern. During the period funding was approved for projects under the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy to support human rights in Egypt; work will begin soon.

Reports of torture, police brutality and enforced disappearance in Egypt have continued. Local NGO, the Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, compiled media reports of 270 cases of torture and 51 deaths in detention from 1 January to 7 June 2016. The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms documented 168 cases of enforced disappearance from January to March 2016, based on reports from victims' relatives and friends. Data for the full period is unavailable, and there are no official figures, although Egypt's National Council for Human Rights has [submitted a list of 331 cases](#) to the Ministry of the Interior. In response to a number of police abuse cases, including some which resulted in the killing of civilians, President Sisi has stated that the government will pass new legislation regulating the conduct of police officers. Implementation of this commitment would be a welcome development. Senior UK officials have raised concerns about torture with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Interior.

On 25 January, Italian Cambridge University student Giulio Regeni disappeared in Cairo. His research focussed on trade unions in Egypt. His body was discovered nine days later exhibiting signs of torture. A joint Italian and Egyptian investigation is ongoing. On 24 March, Egyptian police killed 4 men alleged to be members of a criminal gang targeting foreigners, and published photographs of Mr Regeni's identification documents which are alleged to have been found at their property. Italian investigators later said that there was no definitive evidence that the 4 men were responsible for Mr Regeni's murder. The Italian government has led efforts to work with Egypt to discover what happened to Mr Regeni and bring his killers to justice. We have offered the Italian government our full support and have remained in close contact. Ministers and senior officials, including the Ambassador, have raised the case with the Egyptian Ambassador in London and senior officials at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Interior. In April the UK government published a [response](#) to a petition on the case, urging the Egyptian authorities to cooperate fully with Italian investigators and consider every possible scenario as they investigate.

Restrictions on civil society organisations continued, including legal measures against several human rights NGOs. On 17 February, Ministry of Health officials served a closure order on the Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence. On 5 April, officials returned to attempt to shut down the centre's office. In March, a large number of Egyptian human rights defenders (HRDs) and NGO workers were summoned for questioning in Case 173/2011 (also known as the "Foreign Funding Case"). Those summoned included the prominent human rights lawyer Negad el Borai. He was later charged with several offences related to his drafting of an anti-torture law. Several high-profile HRDs were banned from travelling in relation to the case, including investigative journalist Hossam Bahgat, Arab Network for Human Rights Information Director Gamal Eid, and Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies Egypt Director Mohamed Zaree. Ongoing pressure on human rights NGOs has had a severe impact on their work: high-profile HRDs have left Egypt, several NGOs have stopped or restricted public advocacy activities, and others have temporarily closed their offices. On 22 March, the Minister for Middle East and North Africa, Tobias Ellwood made a [statement](#) expressing concern at the reopening of the "Foreign Funding Case". He and senior officials have raised the case and the closure of the Nadeem Centre with the Egyptian Ambassador in London, the Egyptian Minister of Health, and senior Egyptian officials.

On 15 and 25 April, protests took place in Cairo and around the country in relation to the demarcation of the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir as Saudi Arabian territory. According to local organisations, 1,312 individuals were arrested in relation to the protests, although there are no official figures to confirm this. 152 individuals were sentenced to between 2 and 5 years in prison (72 in absentia) in relation to their participation in the protests, but 52 of these were acquitted, and the remainder in detention had their prison sentences reduced to a fine on appeal. Other detainees have been sentenced in separate cases in relation to calls for or participation in protests. These include activist Sanaa Seif who is serving a 6-month sentence for “insulting the judiciary” during her questioning on charges of handing out leaflets calling for protests. A number of HRDs were detained around the time of the protests, including Board Chair of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF) Ahmad Abdallah, ECRF Minority Rights Programme Director Mina Thabet, and human rights lawyer Malek Adly. Mina Thabet was released on bail on 20 June, but Ahmad Abdallah and Malek Adly remain in detention. Minister for North Africa, Tobias Ellwood, and senior officials have raised protest-related detentions, including the case of Ahmad Abdallah, with the Egyptian Ambassador in London and senior officials at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The media environment continued to be restricted. On 25 April, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least [33 journalists were detained](#) while covering the protests, although all have since been released. On 1 May, police arrested journalists Amr Badr and Mahmoud al Sakka at the Journalists’ Syndicate on charges of forming an illegal group with the aim of overthrowing the government, inciting protests on 25 April, publishing false news and belonging to the banned April 6 Youth Movement. On 29 May, syndicate Head Yahia Qallash and Head of the Syndicate’s Freedoms Committee Khaled el Balsy were arrested and later charged with harbouring suspects against whom an arrest warrant has been issued and publishing false news which threatens public peace in relation to their statements on the arrests of Badr and Saqqa. Both were released on bail on 30 May. Senior officials have raised the case with the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Egyptian authorities used gagging orders to restrict reporting on high-profile issues, including the demarcation of Tiran and Sanafir as Saudi Arabian territory, the Journalists’ Syndicate issue and the “Foreign Funding Case”. On 7 May, a judge sentenced 6 people to death, including three journalists sentenced in absentia, on charges of helping to smuggle secret documents to Qatari intelligence officers and broadcaster Al Jazeera. All have the right to appeal if sentenced in court or a retrial if sentenced in absentia. On 3 February, Gamaliyya Misdemeanour Court upheld the one-year prison sentence on TV presenter Islam al-Beheiry on charges of contempt of religion. On 16 May, the Cabinet approved a new Press and Media Law, which would remove the penalty of imprisonment for all crimes related to publication, thereby bringing the law in line with the Egyptian constitution. If passed by Parliament and implemented, this would be a positive step.

On 24 April, a court sentenced 11 men to 12 years in prison for “inciting debauchery”. These charges are understood to refer to the men being involved in same-sex relationships. Their sentences were reduced to one year on appeal.

On 30 May, a 17-year-old girl died during a female genital mutilation (FGM) procedure taking place in hospital, in violation of Egyptian law. The girl’s mother has been arrested and the hospital has since been shut down. Security forces say they are attempting to apprehend the doctor. This comes in the context of a 13% decline in the prevalence of FGM since 2008, according to Ministry of Health statistics.

On 29 May, a military court sentenced eight civilians to death on charges including belonging to a banned group, possession of firearms and explosives, and obtaining classified military information without authorisation. Lawyers and families of the defendants [told Amnesty International](#) that they had been subjected to enforced disappearance and torture. Irish citizen, Ibrahim Halawa, remains detained in prison in Egypt. He and 493 other people are on trial for their alleged role in violence during protests in Ramses Square in Egypt in 2013. The case has been subject to lengthy proceedings and delays. On 29 June, the case was postponed again until 2 October.

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