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Public criticism of the government remained effectively banned in Egypt in 2016. Police arrested scores of people in connection with protests, many preemptively. Authorities ordered travel bans and asset freezes against prominent human rights organizations and their directors and brought criminal charges against the head of the Press Syndicate and the country's top anti-corruption official. Parliament proposed a new law regulating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that would effectively end independent human rights work in the country.

Members of the security forces, particularly the Interior Ministry's National Security Agency, continued to routinely torture detainees and forcibly disappeared hundreds of people with little or no accountability for violations of the law. The disappearance, torture, and death of Italian doctoral researcher Giulio Regeni, probably at the hands of security services, highlighted these abuses and caused a diplomatic rift between Egypt and Italy.

Investigations by National Security officers, often without any hard evidence, formed the basis of many of the 7,400 or more military trials of civilians brought since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi issued a decree widening the scope of military jurisdiction in 2014.

Conditions in detention remained harsh. The quasi-official National Council for Human Rights continued to report that prisons and other detention facilities were severely overcrowded. Conditions were particularly harsh in Cairo's Scorpion Prison, where inmates, most of them political prisoners, suffered abuses at the hands of Interior Ministry officers, including beatings, force feedings, deprivation of contact with relatives and lawyers, and interference in medical care that may have contributed to at least six deaths in 2015.

Security Force Abuses

Officers of the National Security Agency routinely tortured and forcibly disappeared suspects with few consequences. Many of the detainees who suffered these abuses were accused of sympathy with or membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government named a terrorist group in 2013 but has remained the country's largest opposition movement.

Between August 2015 and August 2016, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, an independent group, documented 912 victims of enforced disappearance, 52 of whom had not reappeared by the time the group issued its report.

National Security officers routinely tortured suspects during these enforced disappearances. Between January and October 2016, 433 detainees claimed that police or prison officers mistreated or tortured them while they were in custody, according to a count by the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture based on media reports, lawyers' statements, criminal complaints, and other sources. In one case documented by Human Rights Watch, National Security officers in Alexandria forcibly disappeared and tortured 20 people, including eight children, in connection with a protest and an alleged arson attack on a garage and a traffic police vehicle.

Incidents of abuse by police officers, including fatal incidents of torture and illegal killings at protests, rarely resulted in accountability. Of the hundreds of such cases recorded in media reports and by activist groups since July 2013, when the military ousted Former President Mohamed Morsy, only 10 had gone through trial as of October 2016, resulting in six guilty verdicts against police officers.

Many convicted officers have appealed initial verdicts and won acquittals or shorter sentences. In February, Egypt's highest appeals court ordered a retrial for an officer originally sentenced to 15 years for shooting and killing political activist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh at a peaceful protest in January 2015, an incident that was photographed and videotaped. In October, the same court ordered a retrial for two officers who received five-year sentences for torturing lawyer Karim Hamdy to death in a police station in 2015.

Freedom of Assembly

A 2013 decree that effectively banned all anti-government protests remained in place, though it was subject to an ongoing legal challenge before the Supreme Constitutional Court.

Police made large, pre-emptive raids and arrests on two occasions when they anticipated protests.

Beginning in December 2015, police arrested dozens of people in a number of governorates whom they accused of planning protests timed for the January anniversary of the 2011 uprising. In the days ahead of the anniversary, police raided numerous downtown Cairo apartments, searched them without warrants, and arrested some activists, including Taher Mokhtar, a doctor who had advocated for better detention conditions. A court in August ordered Mokhtar released on bail pending investigation.

One official at the National Security Agency told Reuters on January 21: "We have taken several measures to ensure activists don't have breathing space and are unable to gather, and several cafés and other meeting places have been closed, while some have been arrested in order to scare the rest."

After a rare mass demonstration on April 15 against President al-Sisi's decision to cede two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia, activists planned a follow-up protest for April 25. Police arrested at least 382 people in the days leading up to and during the dispersal of the second protest, many from their homes or downtown Cairo cafés. Police stopped people riding public transportation or walking in the street, inspected mobile phones without warrants, and arrested phone owners if they found anti-government images.

Prominent human rights lawyer Malek Adly, arrested in May after filing a legal challenge against al-Sisi's decision to cede the islands, was released without bail in late August but still faced charges of spreading false rumors, inciting protests, and attempting to overthrow the government.

Freedom of Association

Parliament and authorities took unprecedented steps to restrict independent human rights work by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), threatening their very existence.

In September, a Cairo criminal court approved a request from a panel of investigative judges to freeze the assets of three organizations and the personal assets of five people who founded or led prominent human rights groups. The investigative judges had previously banned at least 12 NGO directors, founders, and staff members from travelling outside Egypt. Activists said the travel bans were probably a prelude to the filing of criminal charges against them for illegally receiving foreign funding.

Under penal code article 78, amended by decree by President al-Sisi in 2014, NGO workers can receive a 25-year sentence under such charges if a judge determines that they received foreign funding for "pursuing acts harmful to national interests" or other broad reasons.

In November, parliament swiftly approved a new law regulating NGOs after no public debate or input from civil society. The law would effectively eliminate independent human rights work, placing all NGOs under the effective veto power of a council dominated by representatives of the General Intelligence Service and Interior and Defense Ministries and allowing the council to dissolve NGOs based on broadly worded infractions. It would punish anyone violating the law with a prison term of one to five years and a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$3,160-\$6,300). In late November, the law still awaited legal advice of the State Council and approval from President al-Sisi.

In February, local government authorities and security officers ordered the closure of the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture for allegedly violating the terms of its license, but the center remained open pending negotiations with the Health Ministry. In June, an investigative judge interrogated human rights lawyer Negad al-Borai, who had been involved in drafting an anti-torture law, on charges that he received illegal funding, established an unlicensed entity, and spread false information. Al-Borai has been interrogated on these charges six times.

Freedom of Expression

On May 29, prosecutors summoned the head of the Press Syndicate and two senior board members for questioning. The following day, they charged the men with "harboring suspects against whom an arrest warrant has been issued" and "publishing false news, which threatens public peace." The charges were related to an unprecedented police raid on the Press Syndicate headquarters on May 1, during which police arrested two journalists whom they accused of belonging to the April 6 Youth Movement.

On July 28, a Cairo court for minor offenses convicted Hisham Geneina, the country's former top corruption watchdog, for disseminating false information and gave him a suspended one-year sentence. Geneina appealed the verdict but had to pay a fine of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$2,252) and 10,000 (\$1,126) for bail. President al-Sisi removed Geneina in March after Geneina claimed to have uncovered tens of billions of dollars-worth of government corruption.

In May, police arrested four members of the Street Children satire troupe who had posted videos on YouTube mocking al-Sisi and government policies. Though a court ordered the four released in

September, they still faced charges of using social media sites to undermine the country's stability by inciting citizens to protest.

In February, writer and novelist Ahmed Nagi received a two-year sentence for what the prosecution described as "sexually explicit" content in his novel, *Using Life*, parts of which appeared in a newspaper.

Freedom of Religion

In August, parliament passed a long-awaited law on church building that maintained restrictions over the construction and renovation of churches and discriminated against the country's Christian minority.

The new law allows governors to deny church-building permits with no stated way to appeal, requires that churches be built "commensurate with" the number of Christians in the area, despite the lack of official census statistics, and contains provisions that allow authorities to deny construction permits if granting them would undermine public safety, potentially subjecting decisions on church construction to the whims of violent mobs that have attacked churches in the past.

Between May and July, anti-Christian violence, prompted or preceded by suspicion among some local Muslims about actual or alleged church construction, left one person dead, several injured, and numerous Christian properties destroyed. Authorities continued to fail to protect Christian minorities from sometimes fatal attacks and imposed "reconciliation sessions" that allow Muslim perpetrators to escape prosecution and foster impunity.

In February, a juvenile minor offenses court sentenced four Christian children to five years in prison for posting a video online mocking the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). The boys fled Egypt in April. In March, an appeals court upheld a three-year sentence for contempt of religion against the writer Fatma Naout for criticizing the Muslim tradition of slaughtering livestock as a sacrifice on Eid al-Adha.

Egyptian human rights groups documented unlawful harassment of other religious minorities, including Shia Muslims and atheists, such as arbitrary travel bans and summonses for interrogations.

Violence and Discrimination against Women

In August, parliament passed an amendment to a law prohibiting female genital mutilation (FGM), increasing the penalties. The new law provided for prison terms of five to seven years for those who carry out FGM and up to 15 years if the procedure results in permanent disability or death. Anyone who escorts girls to undergo female genital mutilation will also face one to three years in prison. FGM is still widely practiced, and prosecutors have only obtained one conviction since the law was passed in 2008.

In September, a group of eight women's rights organizations released a statement commending the government for initiating its "National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women" in 2015 but recommended creating a follow-up committee to ensure that government ministries were actually carrying out the strategy.

Sexual harassment and violence against women remained endemic. The Interior Ministry appointed Brig. Gen. Nahed Salah, a woman, to a new position in charge of combating violence against women. Salah publicly urged women to avoid talking or laughing loudly in public and to be cautious about how they dress to avoid street harassment.

Women continued to face discrimination under Egypt's personal status law on equal access to divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Sexual relations outside marriage are criminalized. Since 2013, authorities have pursued a campaign to intimidate, track, and arrest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, including entrapment using social media applications. Police regularly used forced anal examinations in prosecutions of those suspected of homosexual sex.

Solidarity With Egypt LGBTQ+, an advocacy group, said it had recorded 114 criminal investigations involving 274 LGBT individuals launched between the end of 2013 and November 2016, 66 of which involved the authorities' use of social media.

Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 212,500 registered refugees and 38,171 asylum seekers in Egypt in 2016. Since January 2015, Egyptian authorities arrested more than 2,300 people for attempting to enter or leave the country in an irregular manner, according to the UNHCR. A report by the independent website Mada Masr stated that the UNHCR recorded 3,742 migration-related detentions on the north coast of Egypt by August.

In November, President al-Sisi signed a new law on irregular migration, stiffening penalties for smugglers and shielding asylum seekers and smuggled migrants from criminal responsibility but failing to enshrine key rights. The law provides for harsher prison terms for those who smuggle women and children and life sentences for those involved in organized crime or who smuggle a migrant who dies. But it does not guarantee non-refoulement – the principle that countries will not send migrants back to places where they risk persecution, torture, or a threat to life.

Key International Actors

In April 2016, during a visit to Cairo by President François Hollande, France signed deals to build a military telecommunications satellite, extend the Cairo metro, and finance a wind farm and solar power plant. In June, France delivered the first of two Mistral class helicopter carriers to Egypt, part of a spree of Egyptian arms purchases from France that have also included a FREMM-class frigate, four Gowind-class corvettes, and 24 Rafale fighter jets. Hollande said in a press conference that he raised issues of human rights, specifically the case of Eric Lang, a French teacher murdered in a Cairo jail cell in 2013.

In March, United States Secretary of State John Kerry criticized the reopening of the investigation into the funding of local Egyptian NGOs, saying he was "deeply concerned by the deterioration in the human rights situation in Egypt in recent weeks and months."

During two visits to Egypt in April and May, Kerry's public remarks stressed cooperation against the Islamic State extremist group and made no comment on human rights concerns. In April, a US Government Accountability Office report documented the US government's failure to fully implement required end-use monitoring and human rights vetting for US military equipment purchased by Egypt under the US' annual \$1.3-billion Foreign Military Financing program. The White House issued a statement in September calling on Egypt to release US-Egyptian citizen Aya Hegazy, who ran a center for homeless children before her arrest in May 2014.

During a meeting with President al-Sisi during the United Nations General Assembly in September, two months before being elected president, Donald Trump expressed "strong support

for Egypt's war on terrorism" and pledged that his administration "will be a loyal friend, not simply an ally."

The disappearance, torture and murder of Italian doctoral researcher Giulio Regeni, who was in Egypt to research labor unions, caused a diplomatic rift with Italy after media reports quoted unnamed members of the security services who said that they had arrested Regeni before his death. Italy recalled its ambassador and expressed anger at apparent Egyptian efforts to stall the investigation, which remained ongoing as of October 2016.

In April, the United Arab Emirates pledged \$4 billion of aid to Egypt, adding to the \$20 billion already granted or loaned by other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council since former President Morsy's 2013 ouster. In October, Ali Mamlouk, head of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's intelligence services, visited Cairo for the second time in a year, reportedly to discuss security cooperation. Mamlouk's visit, together with Egypt's support for Russia on Syria at the United Nations Security Council, raised diplomatic tensions with Saudi Arabia, which supports armed groups fighting al-Assad's forces.

In September, the International Monetary Fund reached a staff-level agreement with Egypt on a \$12 billion loan program aimed at raising revenue and cutting spending. The agreement would require Egypt to cut subsidies, impose a new value-added tax, and float the Egyptian pound.

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