

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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As it prepares to celebrate its [30th anniversary](#) on April 15, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is [boasting](#) about its commitments to sustainable development, democracy, and equality.

When we look at how and where EBRD invests, though, its shameless hypocrisy becomes apparent. And its political mission - to assist only countries that are committed to and that apply the principles of [multi-party democracy and pluralism](#) - looks to be nothing more than a farce.

In recent years, the Bank has been heavily investing in countries ruled by authoritarian governments, and it has done little in some cases, nothing to use its leverage to promote democracy and protect civic space. In 2020, the two biggest countries of operations for EBRD were Turkey and Egypt.

In Egypt, EBRD is investing over 7 billion, with [127 projects to date](#), mainly in finance, agribusiness, tourism and infrastructure. But under the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, thousands of [human rights defenders](#), journalists, and political activists in Egypt have been arrested, forced to go into hiding or exile, disappeared, tortured, and even killed. The government has frozen the accounts of civil society organizations, which face crippling restrictions. The military [controls](#) directly or indirectly many private businesses and economic sectors.

Workplace sit-ins bring criminal charges and independent trade unions cannot operate freely. Corruption is rampant. Democracy, rule of law, and separation of powers are now meaningless words when applied to Egypt.

This year the Bank will review its country strategy for Egypt. [Pro-government Egyptian media](#) have also announced that Odile Renaud-Basso, the former head of the French treasury who was elected EBRD president in November, will visit the country this spring. The strategy review and the upcoming visit are an opportunity for EBRD to uphold its commitments and to put human rights and civic space issues on its agenda, which it has so far failed to do.

In November, in an [interview with the Financial Times](#), Renaud-Basso defended EBRD's investments in countries ruled by repressive governments, saying that the Bank wanted to help countries move in the right direction and that the focus on private-sector lending was helping to strengthen civil society. It is unclear, however, how continuing business as usual without even trying to push these countries to change course will do anything to loosen the governments' grip on civil society or curtail the military's expanding role in the economy, which enables it to intervene in political life in ways that fuel abuses.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, the situation has even worsened. Using the pretext of fighting disinformation, the Egyptian government has been further suppressing free speech and peaceful dissent. At least 10 medical workers have spent months in detention without trial for challenging government narratives about the Covid-19 situation or criticizing their lack of equipment. Dozens have been arrested for criticizing the government's Covid-19 response on social media.

In one recent case, on March 17, the Criminal Court of Cairo sentenced [Sanaa Seif](#), a well-known human rights defender, to 18 months in prison. She was charged with spreading false rumors about the spread of Covid-19 in the Egyptian prisons and misusing social media. International funders like the EBRD should question this abusive treatment rather than remaining silent.

EBRD, which is currently funding the pandemic response in Egypt with over [\\$500 million](#), should make clear to the Egyptian government that it views inclusiveness and free speech that enables people to speak out about problematic policies and corruption as key

to an effective Covid-19 response.

When rights defenders are imprisoned, when journalists are threatened, when every dissenting voice is at risk, and when human rights are relentlessly crushed, prospects for economic growth and social justice are most likely diminished and not sustained, let alone hopes for anything resembling democracy. Those that invest in Egypt such as the EBRD should use the opportunities those investments provide to press the government to end its wholesale repression, if they really believe in their mission.

For this reason, in a letter published on April 15, [more than 20 civil society organizations called on EBRD President Odile Renaud-Basso](#) to convey to the Egyptian authorities that the country's worsening non-compliance with the political aspects of the EBRD's mandate constitutes a major problem and should be addressed urgently and seriously.

EBRD has little to celebrate on its anniversary if after 30 years of operations it has not yet found a way to live up to its core commitments in one of its largest countries of operations. Despite their dire situation, courageous Egyptian activists are peacefully struggling every day to make their voices heard and to promote basic human rights. If EBRD is at all serious about its values, it should listen to these voices and respond to civil society's calls.

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