

Human Rights Watch

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

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No one can claim that President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt hides his disparaging view of human rights. Take care when you are demanding your rights, take care, don't lead us astray with you, he [warned](#) potential protesters while speaking before an audience of police officers in January.

Am not saying protesting is rejected, he continued, but what about those 90 million who want to eat, drink, live and feel secure about their future. In the same remarks, referring to the many alleged human rights violations by security forces, al-Sisi added, We do not approve of them, but this is an exceptional stage in Egypt's history.

Arbitrary and politically motivated arrests have soared since al-Sisi, then defense minister, seized power in July 2013 from Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed al-Morsy. An Interior Ministry official in July 2014 acknowledged that authorities had arrested 22,000 people over the previous year. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, which independently monitors political arrests, said that the number was more like 41,000 arrested or facing criminal charges as of last May. There is little doubt that Muslim Brotherhood members and alleged supporters of Morsy constituted the greatest number. Brotherhood leaders said 29,000 of their number were in custody. But the arrest campaign includes numerous secularist and leftist activists as well.

And of course once in custody they are subject to the same abuse and intense overcrowding. According to an investigation published in Al Watan, an independent daily that generally supports the government, drawing on statistics from the Justice Ministry's Forensic Medical Authority, at least 90 detainees [died in police custody](#) in Cairo and Giza governorates in the first 11 months of 2014, from inhumane conditions, lack of adequate health care, and in some cases torture.

Those arrests have frequently been for violating a November 24, 2013 decree (Law 107) empowering the Interior Ministry to ban any gathering of a public nature on vague grounds such as influencing the course of justice and authorizing the use of force to disperse demonstrations. Alaa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent opposition activist who has been in and out of jail since the days when Hosni Mubarak was president, called for a demonstration two days later, on November 26, to protest continued military trials of civilians. Police used water cannons and batons to [disperse](#) between 200 and 300 protesters, and arrested scores, including well-known activists like Mona Seif, Nazly Hussein, and Salma Said, human rights lawyers like Ahmed Heshmat, Mohamed Abdelaziz, and Osama al-Mahdy, and the journalists Ahmad Ragab and Rasha Azab.

A criminal court housed in the infamous Tora Prison convicted Abdel-Fattah and 24 others of violating Law 107 and sentenced them to 15-year prison terms and hefty fines. On February 23, 2015 an appeals proceeding upheld the convictions but reduced the prison sentences of those in custody in Abdel-Fattah's case to five years.

Abdel-Fattah was not alone among the prominent secularist activists jailed on grounds of violating the November protest law. On December 21, 2013, a court sentenced Ahmed Maher and Mohamed Adel, founders of the April 6 movement that helped spark the 2011 uprising, and a fellow activist, Ahmed Douma, to three years in prison and fines of more than \$7,000 each. The charges included violating Law 107. As in most of these cases, authorities also lodged charges of thuggery and assaulting police officers, although in incidents Human Rights Watch was able to observe and document the only evidence for these allegations appeared to be the testimony of police officials.

Maher had not been reticent to criticize the stupidity of Morsy and the Muslim Brotherhood and his own mistake in supporting al-Sisi's coup. He [concluded](#) that everything we rose against in the January 25th [2011] revolution is back and worse than before.

Another prominent victim of Egypt's headlong return to repression is 28-year-old Yara Sallam, a human rights activist working with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. She, too, was a [victim](#) of the draconian anti-gathering decree. In her case, it's not even clear that she was participating in a demonstration when men in civilian clothes seized her while she was buying water at a kiosk. In her case, too, there appears to be no basis for police allegations that she and a score of others arrested in the same incident on June 21, 2014 had weapons or any intent of violence.

Working for human rights organizations is not as legal as everyone thinks it is in Egypt, [she said](#). Everyone in this field is working knowing that he or she can be arrested for any random reason. She is now serving a two-year sentence.

Journalists are among those detained on charges that are trumped-up at best. Many are familiar with the travails of the three Al Jazeera English journalists Peter Grete, Mohamed Fahmy, and Baher Mohamed who are finally out of prison (though Fahmy and Mohamed still face a new trial on the same outlandish charges of supporting the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood).

A freelance photojournalist, Mahmoud Abu Zeid, aka Mahmoud Shawkan, has not been as fortunate. Shawkan, a contributor to TIME, Die Zeit, and other outlets, has been detained without charge since August 14, 2013, when he was covering the violent dispersal of the pro-Morsy sit-in at Rabaa Square. I do not belong to anything but my profession, [he said](#). I am only a photojournalist.

Sending Egyptians to prison for simply exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly is likely to become more extensive under the new terrorist entities [decree](#) issued on November 26. It defines terrorist in extraordinarily broad terms: in addition to language about violence and threats of violence, the law covers any offense that in the view of authorities harms national unity or the environment or natural resources, or impedes work of public officials or application of the constitution or laws. A terrorist is anyone who supports such an entity support that can include providing information. Imagine the dragnet that can be cast if providing information that impedes the work of public officials or application of the Constitution constitutes a terrorist offense.

These new laws supplement existing Penal Code articles such as 98(f), which prescribes prison and a fine for exploiting religion in any manner that promotes extremist ideologies, stirs sedition, disparages any divine religion and prejudices national unity. Such ideas recently earned Karim Ashraf Mohamed al-Banna, a student, [three years in prison](#) for a Facebook post, as part of what appears to be a coordinated government [crackdown](#) on perceived atheists. Egyptian authorities have long relied on article 98(f) to prosecute religious minorities, dissident academics, and artists who, like the 22-year-old [blogger](#) Karim Amer back in Mubaraks day, spread information disruptive of public order and damaging to the countrys reputation.

President al-Sisi and his entourage have put in place a highly repressive order that, with the revival of arbitrary arrests, torture in custody, disregard for civil and political rights, and extremely limited tolerance for public criticism, is doing more than anyone to damage Egypts reputation.

Joe Stork is deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

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