



**CAIRO INSTITUTE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES**
Institut du Caire pour les études des droits de l'homme
مركز القاهرة لدراسات حقوق الإنسان

Speech by Mohamed Zaree, director of the CIHRS Egypt office

Dear friends,

Today we celebrate the passing of 21 years since the founding of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the idea for which grew from the mind and spirit of the late Dr. Mohamed Sayyed Said and Bahey eldin Hassan.

Rooting human rights in Arab culture — this was the goal of CIHRS, to groom new generations that respect and believe in human rights. This has been the Institute's overriding concern for the past 21 years. To achieve this, CIHRS has issued more than 500 publications, including books, reports, and research and academic periodicals. It has trained more than 2,000 young men and women who are now leaders in Egyptian, Arab, and international rights organizations and the press. Some even occupy important positions in various state ministries.

And the role of the CIHRS does not end there. Throughout its history, it has defended Arab and Egyptian human rights groups and has and continues to coordinate and consult with its friends and partners in the human rights movement to bring all views together and build consensus in order to forge the most effective, influential shared positions. It is no secret that the CIHRS has played a leading role in shaping the independent human rights movement in Egypt in its current form.

For this reason, for more than two decades all Egyptian governments—those under former President Hosni Mubarak, the Supreme Council of the Armed Force, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the post-July 3 transitional government—have dealt with the Institute as a fact that cannot be ignored. All of these governments solicited its opinion on human rights-related topics and invited it to participate in most, if not all, official meetings and consultations on public issues, including the NGO law, regardless of the disappointing outcomes of most of these debates. In some meetings, the CIHRS was the only rights group present. On other occasions, the CIHRS has hosted meetings between rights groups and high-level government officials, among them ministers, on the same issues, again including the NGO law. The CIHRS also took part in the six-month marathon of negotiations initiated by Dr. Ahmed al-Borai, the minister of social solidarity in the July 3 government, which produced—for the first and possibly last time—a government-drafted law that reasonably

complied with the constitution and international standards for freedom of association. That law was written with the participation of the government, the General Federation of Civic Associations and Foundations in Egypt and the regional federations, and advocacy organizations, among them CIHRS.

The CIHRS has pursued and continues to pursue all paths toward the improvement of the state of human rights in Egypt. It sought for and called for numerous dialogues with senior officials in the July 3 government, including face-to-face meetings with former Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Bahaa Eldin, [former Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmi](#), former Minister of Social Solidarity Ahmed al-Borai, former Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, and finally [Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehleb](#) on July 24, 2014. Most of these meetings were held at the behest of the CIHRS, including the last meeting with the prime minister, in which Bahey eldin Hassan submitted [a memorandum signed by 23 rights organizations](#) demanding a return to the NGO law drafted by the aforementioned committee formed by former minister Ahmed al-Borai and the revocation of the warning issued by the Ministry of Social Solidarity to numerous civil society organizations a week earlier. On August 26, the CIHRS [sent a detailed memorandum to President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi](#), the last call issued by Egyptian human rights groups for dialogue with the Ministry of Social Solidarity on the issue of freedom of association in Egypt. In addition, the CIHRS has always taken part in discussions with the National Council for Human Rights.

In the Arab world and internationally, the CIHRS enjoys strong ties with prominent independent Arab, African, Latin American, and international rights organizations, research centers, and think tanks, as well as UN bodies such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the office of the UN secretary-general, as well as the African Union and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

In his capacity as CIHRS director, Bahey eldin Hassan has met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his office in New York; in [New York](#) and [Cairo](#) with Jeffrey Feltman, the UN under-secretary-general for political affairs; and in Geneva with [former High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay](#) and current High Commissioner [Zeid Raad](#).

On this occasion, however, we are saddened to note that CIHRS is now a major target among rights groups and is facing fundamental challenges to its very existence as a defender of human rights in Egypt, and this because it is one of the parties struggling to open up the public and political sphere in Egypt. This challenge comes in the context of unprecedented harassment and violent pressure directed at all critical and independent voices in the media, political parties, trade unions, and youth and social movements, which are fighting tooth and nail simply to be allowed the right of peaceful expression.

The blow directed at the human rights movement and the persecution of independent, critical voices in Egypt is not only a crucial challenge facing the affected persons and groups. It is a decisive moment as well for the cohesion and stability of the state itself and strikes at the core of the well being and safety of every citizen.

The targets are currently all those critical and independent voices standing against social violence, violent extremism and terrorism, and extremist religious rhetoric issued from both state and non-state institutions. Security campaigns are not an alternative to a government response to reports and criticisms made by independent and international rights organizations.

The time has come to renounce the style of warnings, character assassination, and threats, and return to the negotiating table—a move consistently supported by CIHRS and other independent rights groups. We must also revive the broader dialogue with all political and civic actors, to open up the public sphere to all peaceful social and political forces and shut the door on the extremist tendencies that are currently growing and being fed in the prevailing political, security, and judicial climate.

The closure of all public platforms; the violent persecution of every peaceful, independent voice—Islamist or secular—in political, media, artistic, university, youth, and rights circles; the systematic crackdown on civic activity; and the collapse in the performance of the institutions of justice—all of this will only further block channels for peaceful expression and hope for a better future. It will simply nourish the sense of desperation, frustration, insecurity, and despair at the possibility of justice and fairness, feeding instead the desire for vengeance and retaliation and spontaneous political violence, which is spreading every day all over the country. This fosters a climate ripe for the recruitment of more Egyptians into organized terrorist groups in Sinai and the Western Desert, and outside the country as well, which every day claims the lives of growing numbers of civilians and military personnel.

Contrary to rosy predictions, Egypt is facing formidable challenges and no less formidable setbacks that are affecting the stability and cohesion of the country. It is therefore time to reconsider the agenda and the policies that are heightening these risks, eroding society's capacities and energies, and weakening its resistance.

Shortsighted security policies have failed to prevent a dangerous escalation in acts of political violence and terrorism, and meanwhile the human rights situation and stability have deteriorated to dangerous levels. There is no alternative to comprehensive social and political dialogue. We hope this, our oft-repeated message, reaches the current administration before it is too late. We have not and will not fail to offer proposals, policies, and the necessary support for the respect of human rights in Egypt and the Arab world.

In conclusion, we can only offer our heartfelt thanks for your attendance and support, certain that with your support and the backing of all those who believe in the universal values of human rights, we can make it through this crisis.