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Egypt: Trends in Politics, Economics, and Human Rights

Written Testimony

Thank you for inviting me here to give my personal testimony on the human rights situation in Egypt.

Please allow me to consider this hearing as a form of dialogue over human rights with the Egyptian government.

Unfortunately the only channels of dialogue President Abdelfattah al-Sisi allows with human rights defenders is kidnapping and beating their sons or daughters, such as the case with Ms. Aida Saif al-Dawla, or through arresting their spouses, as was the case with Mr. Mohamed Lutfi, or through physical assault in public, as was the case with Mr. Gamal Eid, or forcibly disappearing and torturing them, as was the case with Mr. Ibrahim Ezzedin. In other cases, human rights defenders were kidnapped from the airport while traveling to meet with UN experts in Geneva, as was the case with Mr. Ibrahim Metwally. Mr. Mohamed al Baqir, a human rights lawyer was arrested while attending the interrogation with his client Mr. Alaa Abdelfattah. Another case is Ms. Mahinour al-Masry who was kidnapped in broad daylight and right in front of the prosecutor's office.

Perhaps those examples explain why the Egyptian parliament selected a former police officer accused of torture as the head of its human rights committee, where his time is spent at accusing human rights defenders of being foreign agents.

What happened to me was just another form of President Sisi's government dialogue with human rights defenders. I was forced to leave Egypt after receiving a death threat. I now live in France. I don't know if I will ever be able to go back home.

But still, I consider myself lucky compared to tens of thousands of Egyptians who peacefully expressed their opinions and were killed, jailed or forcibly disappeared in return. Many died in jail under torture or due to intentional medical negligence, as was the case with former president Mohamed Morsi, the first elected president since the military coup of 1952. Many of those in jail are there after being sentenced in politicized sham trials. Others are spending years and months under fabricated charges without a trial. Tens of millions continue to live in the republic of fear.

When I first received the death threat, three weeks after President Sisi formally assumed power in June 2014, I was calm. What was surprising was the degree of confidence, reflected by those I consulted, that the threat to my life is real and timely. Some of those I consulted were Egypt-based diplomats and senior UN officials in New York and Geneva.

After I left Egypt, public figures affiliated with the government incited to kill me on live Egyptian television. One of them a member of the parliament and is closely affiliated with Sisi. Another called for attacking me with the same nerve agent used against Serjei Skripal in the UK. He accused me of espionage because I speak out on human rights violations with officials from the UN and its member states.

When I filed a complaint with the Egyptian Public Prosecutor concerning the televised threat to kill me, it was shelved, and the person who made the threat was later appointed by President Sisi at a government post tasked with monitoring the "professionalism" of international media in Egypt.

In the years after my death threat, an Egyptian court ordered the freezing of my assets and those of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies along with other human rights organizations and defenders.

The same public prosecutor who shelved my complaint against incitement to murder, opened two parallel investigations into my public statements on the human rights situation. Within the past 11 months I have been sentenced to 18 years in prison for "insulting the judiciary" and spreading "fake news."

The moment I found out about my sentence I remembered Dr. Mostafa al Nagar. Al Nagar was one of the icons of the liberal youth movement of the January 2011 revolution. He won his parliamentary seat in 2011 through a landslide victory against his Muslim Brotherhood-backed opponent.

Despite that he legally enjoyed immunity for his statements as a parliamentarian, in 2017 he was sentenced to three years in jail for the same reason I was. But Al Nagar, like thousands of Egyptians over the past few years, was disappeared by Egyptian security forces. Till today, his fate remains unknown.

Throughout the past seven years, many prodemocracy activists were prosecuted and/or sentenced in sham trials for allegedly joining an unnamed terrorist organization. Despite the numerous attempts of those accused to know which terrorist organization they are accused of joining, the prosecution refuses to inform them and renews their detention anyway. Those accused include renowned Christian and secular figures, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and even medical staff that criticized the handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

The collapse of judicial norms does not only reflect on political cases, but also on the blatant discrimination against women in social cases. Recently a highly publicized cases of rape saw the imprisonment of the victims and witnesses.

It is my criticism of this pattern of fabrication of charges and politicized trials that earned me the charge of “insulting the judiciary”. As a matter of fact, for many years, independent human rights defenders, including myself, struggled along with judges for the independence of the judiciary. I never meant to insult the judiciary, but I criticized those who transformed the oldest modern judiciary in the Arab world into a weapon against peaceful dissidents.

When the judiciary decides that a human rights defender is jeopardizing national security, economic interests, and public order for a mere tweet, then we need to reevaluate how stable is Egypt.

Mr. Chairman, given this context it’s time for a serious and transparent talk between the American and Egyptian governments, under the oversight of the Egyptian people and American taxpayers to reevaluate the partnership between the US and Egypt, and the massive gap between its declared goals and actual effect.

I always saw human rights as a calling rather than a job. The death threats, the incitement to kill me, the amount of years I’m sentenced to serve in prison, and the fact that my testimony here today could lead to more sentences, are all prices that I have been paying for the past 35 years and that I will continue to pay for what I believe in.

However, if there is no sustained pushback from the international community against this unjust sentence, then many other Egyptian human rights defenders and pro-democracy critics of the government will be subjected to similar treatment.