

Egypt: Is the National Dialogue A New Attempt to Whitewash Egypt's Human Rights Record or an Opportunity for Political Opening?

During the Egyptian Family Iftar on 26 April 2022, President Abdelfattah al-Sisi [announced](#) the launch of a national dialogue to discuss priorities for national efforts in the upcoming stage. Considering the unilateral decisions announced by authorities in preparation for the Dialogue, and the fact that previous similar initiatives did not produce palpable changes in policy or practices, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) believes that the National Dialogue is neither intended to facilitate a genuine political opening nor alleviate the current human rights crisis in Egypt. Nonetheless, the current international context, and the economic crisis in Egypt, present an opportunity for the Egyptian political opposition to influence the trajectory of the dialogue and guide it to meaningful reform.

While the authorities may be only interested in the National Dialogue as a face-saving measure, the opposition's main concern should be to steer Egypt away from crisis through developing a roadmap for genuine economic and political reforms, irrespective of getting equitable representation in the Dialogue.

Background on Similar Initiatives by the Egyptian Government

The call for national dialogue by President Abdelfattah al-Sisi comes as the latest initiative in a string of similar maneuvers by Egyptian authorities in recent years, ostensibly aiming to address the political and human rights crises in Egypt. In November 2018, the Cabinet created the Supreme Standing Committee for Human Rights. Egyptian officials lauded the establishment of the Committee and stated that it is indicative of the government's commitment to advancing human rights. The fact that the Committee is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is one of many indicators that its primary focus is addressing the international community to whitewash the abysmal human rights record in Egypt.

In 2021, the Committee released the National Human Rights Strategy, which was presented to the international community as another sign of a change in the Egyptian authorities' approach to human rights. Yet despite clear evidence of the absence of political will to address the human rights situation, and despite the Strategy's [problematic approach](#) to the nature of the human rights crisis in Egypt, some public figures in Egypt and several Western officials (and even [UN agencies](#)) celebrated the release of the Strategy as signaling genuine change in the Egyptian government's policy. Other initiatives, such as the creation of the International Dialogue Group and the reconstitution of the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights, attempted to signal a potential change in course.

Ultimately, the numerous initiatives and committees launched by Egyptian authorities over the past years did not reverse nor even alleviate the deteriorating human rights crisis in Egypt. Tens of thousands of political prisoners still languish in jail, through an array of legal and extralegal

measures. [Enforced disappearance](#) and [torture](#) are rampant and systemic, [extrajudicial killings](#) and impunity persist, and crackdown on peaceful opposition, independent [civil society](#), and [free media](#) does not subside. Although a limited number of political prisoners are released with the inauguration of each of these initiatives, other dissidents, [journalists](#), and human rights defenders are regularly [arrested](#) and take up their places.

The Call for National Dialogue

Although the call for the National Dialogue shares many similarities with previous initiatives, the international and national context through which it emerged render it fundamentally different in terms of the opportunities it presents.

Like the establishment of the Standing Committee in 2018 and the launching of the National Human Rights Strategy in 2021, the call for National Dialogue does not reflect genuine change in the authorities' approach to the current human rights crisis. Following the announcement of the National Dialogue, the Presidential Pardoning Committee was reactivated.¹ [In the weeks that followed](#), six political prisoners received presidential pardon while since the beginning of April terrorism courts ordered the release of 417 prisoners (though the cases against them have not been dropped. Yet over the course of the same weeks, at least 4,432 political prisoners had their detentions renewed by courts (in addition to those whom detentions were renewed by prosecutors). New arrests have been made, including at least [two journalists](#). A member of the Presidential Pardon Committee [stated](#) that some in security agencies are trying to obstruct attempts to pardon prisoners and that they would in fact rather arrest "all of us."

There are further examples of the state's practices belying its claims to be serious about improving human rights. A few weeks after the call for National Dialogue was announced, Abdel Moniem Aboul Fotouh and Mohamed al-Qasas, the top two leaders of a registered and peaceful political party who have been imprisoned for the past four years, have been [respectively sentenced](#) to 15 and 10 years in prison, while researcher Ahmed Samir Santawi was [sentenced](#) to 3 years in prison in a separate case. When Ayman Hadhoud, an economic researcher was [tortured to death while in police custody](#), authorities hastily closed the investigation, ensuring impunity for his murderers. Alaa Abdel Fattah, a prominent democracy activist who spent the majority of the past decade behind bars, has been on a hunger strike for more than 100 days to demand basic rights guaranteed under Egyptian prison regulations; yet state officials and the National Council for Human Rights refuse to acknowledge his demands or even acknowledge that he is on a strike and visit him.

The continuation of repression is enough of an indicator that the National Dialogue is not meant to signal an ease to the human rights crisis. Even more tellingly, the manner through which preparations for the Dialogue are being made conclusively point to the authorities' lack of political will to initiate meaningful political opening. A list of over 700 individuals, including dozens of human rights defenders and public figures, signed a [petition](#) with several human rights demands in relation to the call for dialogue. The demands included releasing prisoners of conscience, a moratorium on the death penalty, and ending arbitrary detention and the misuse of pretrial detention. The Egyptian authorities have neither responded to, nor acknowledged, those demands or any others.

¹ The Committee is tasked with submitting names of political prisoners to the President to pardon.

Similarly, when the call for dialogue was announced, some members of the Civil Democratic Movement presented a list of demands that were meant to guarantee the seriousness of the dialogue. Those [demands](#) included:

- The dialogue being organized under the auspices of the Presidency;
- Forming a 10-member secretariat to develop the dialogue's agenda and draft its outputs. Half of the members would be selected by the government and the other half by the opposition;
- For the dialogue to cover the themes of a) political reform and democratization; b) economic reform and social justice; c) legislative and institutional reform; d) human rights; e) national security and national reconciliation; e) citizenship and countering discrimination.

Yet the authorities failed to respond or even publicly acknowledge those demands, and proceeded to unilaterally dictate how the National Dialogue will be carried out. Rather than holding the Dialogue under the auspices of the Presidency, the National Training Academy announced that it has been tasked with organizing it — a step that was [rejected](#) by some members of the Civil Democratic Movement. It was also unilaterally announced that Diah Rashwan, the pro-government head of the journalist syndicate and chairman of the State Information Service)² was selected as General Coordinator of the Dialogue. Rashwan "[in consultation with political forces and syndicates](#)" selected a 19-member secretariat to manage the dialogue, with disregard to the opposition's demand of ensuring their fair representation.

Opposed to the themes proposed by the Civil Democratic Movement for the Dialogue (which included, human rights, citizenship, and reform), the Dialogue's organization committee [declared](#) that the agenda will center on three main themes: "a political axis; an economic axis, and a social axis". Not only did the vaguely-worded choice of themes dismiss the issues of reform, human rights, and citizenship proposed by the opposition, but it was announced unilaterally and with no transparency as to how those themes were selected and what subjects they would include. Media outlets were [reportedly](#) instructed by security services not to host specific figures from the opposition on their shows nor cover their news and statements, due to their criticism of how the Dialogue is being organized.³

All indicators point that the National Dialogue is yet another disingenuous initiative that nominally aims to signal that a political opening will take place. Yet there are also indicators that this initiative is unlike its predecessors and holds the potential to instigate a process of reform if properly engaged with.

Potential for Opportunities and the Responsibility of Political Opposition

Although previous initiatives were aimed at containing and mitigating both national and international pressure concerning the human rights record in Egypt, the international component took precedence. Yet unlike previous initiatives, relieving internal pressure seems to be the primary motive behind the launch of the National Dialogue.

² A body primarily tasked with relaying the government's responses to foreign journalists

³ The instructions came through United Media Services, a conglomerate owned by Egyptian Intelligence.

Between the impact of COVID-19 and the potentially devastating effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the global economy, the Egyptian economy is vulnerable to collapse. Mismanagement, corruption, opacity, and unilaterality in strategic decision-making have left the economy highly susceptible to external shocks, especially ones of the magnitude of Russia's war in Ukraine. Not only does Egypt [import 80% of its wheat](#) from Russia and Ukraine, but soaring inflation, especially in food and energy prices, represent a risk for the Egyptian authorities. More significantly, over the past eight years the Egyptian economy has relied heavily on borrowing, with [external debts](#) multiplying to \$145.5 billion in 2022, [up from \\$41.7 billion in 2014](#). After nearly a decade of a deteriorating living standards rendering 60% of the Egyptian population either [living in poverty or vulnerable](#), and considering inflation and the increasing cost of borrowing, socioeconomic conditions in Egypt will likely deteriorate further and may go into a free fall. Though the external shocks may have come as surprise, the [vulnerability of the Egyptian economy to such shocks did not](#). Far from being unavoidable, the current situation is directly linked to the economic policies unilaterally formulated by authorities.

At this stage, further deterioration in the living standards of Egyptians seems inevitable and may be a contributing factor in the motivation behind President Sisi's announced initiation of a national dialogue. This leaves political opposition, which has been entirely sidelined from decision making for the past decade, with one option: to strike a balance. On the one hand, acquiescing to nominal representation in the Dialogue with no guarantees of serious engagement or involvement in decision-making processes will likely render the Dialogue another empty publicity initiative. Not only would this be a lost opportunity, but it could also exacerbate the current political volatility and undermine the credibility of the opposition.

On the other hand, to meet the opportunity of the current moment, the opposition's political responsibility requires it to insist that national dialogue cannot be reduced to simply releasing a specific number of political prisoners - such a step is welcomed but is far from sufficient. Beyond the general themes of economic and political reform, and idealistic grand slogans of addressing the human rights situation, formulating realistic strategies and actionable concrete policies that would address the multitude of crises currently faced by Egypt may pave the way for reform in Egypt.

Guarantees of fair representation of the opposition in the Dialogue is a requisite first step towards addressing and remedying the factors that have led to Egypt's current crisis. Yet if the opposition does not get equitable representation, its responsibility dictates that it turns the current dialogue into a platform for a real national dialogue with the whole of society to address how to survive the looming catastrophe.