

Egypt

Egypt displayed a heavy hand against political dissent in 2006. In April 2006, the government renewed emergency rule for an additional two years, providing a continued basis for arbitrary detention and trials before military and state security courts. Torture at the hands of security forces remains a serious problem.

After a period of relative tolerance of political opposition and dissent in early 2005, the government reversed course starting in late 2005. In November 2005 the government responded to the Muslim Brotherhood's strong showing in the first round of national elections with extensive irregularities and violence by police and ruling party vigilantes in the subsequent two rounds. It renewed its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in March 2006, arresting at least 792 members of the banned organization over the following six months. The crackdown was emblematic of continuing limits on freedom of association and expression in Egypt.

Emergency Rule

The government renewed the Emergency Law (Law No. 162 of 1958) in April 2006 for an additional two years. The state of emergency has been in effect without interruption since October 1981. Although President Husni Mubarak, during the September 2005 presidential re-election campaign, said that he would allow it to expire, officials claimed the renewal was necessary because they had not yet drafted what Mubarak termed "a firm and decisive law that eliminates terrorism and uproots its threats." Egyptian human rights defenders fear that this legislation will perpetuate many objectionable features of the Emergency Law. Egyptian human rights organizations estimate that up to 10,000 people remain in prolonged detention without charge under the terms of the law.

Political Violence and Internal Security

Three explosions in the Sinai resort town of Dahab killed 23 people and wounded 80 more on April 24, 2006, the third such attack in Sinai resorts in two years. After the first attack, in which car bombers struck the resort town of Taba in October 2004, authorities carried out mass arbitrary arrests, detaining 3,000 people for questioning; more than 100 of them remained in detention without charge at this writing. A devastating series of bombings in Sharm al-Shaikh in July 2006 was followed by another spate of mass arrests. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights reported that as of August, 300 people had been detained in connection with the bombings.

On September 7, 2006, the Emergency Supreme State Security Court in Ismailiyya sentenced Osama al-Nakhlawi and Mohamad Hussein to death for their alleged role in the Taba bombings, based on what the defendants said were false confessions extracted under torture. A third man, who died in a gun battle with police, was sentenced in absentia. As of mid-November 2006, twelve others were on trial for their alleged roles in the bombings.

Torture

Human rights organizations continue to receive credible reports that security services and police routinely torture and mistreat detainees, particularly during interrogations. On May 25 State Security officers detained Karim al-Sha`ir and Mohamed al-Sharqawi, badly beat them both, and sexually assaulted al-Sharqawi. The authorities had detained the two for participating in protests supporting the Judges' Club (see below).

In its 2006 annual report, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) reported that it documented 34 torture cases in 2005. There are no indications that the government conducted any criminal investigations of, or imposed any disciplinary measures against, State Security Investigations (SSI) officials for torture or ill-treatment of detainees in 2006. The most recent investigation into allegations of torture by SSI officers was in 1986, despite numerous credible allegations of serious abuse in SSI custody in the past twenty years.

Freedom of Assembly

Before daylight on December 30, 2005, police used excessive force to disperse approximately 2,000 Sudanese, including many refugees and asylum seekers, who had staged a sit-in protest near the offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for more than three months. Twenty-seven Sudanese, more than half of them women and children, were killed, and a 14-year-old boy died a month later after he was hospitalized for injuries sustained in the melee. Most demonstrators carrying proof of their status as refugees or asylum-seekers were released within a few days, and the remainder over the following two months.

In the early hours of April 24, 2006, plainclothes police beat activists who had staged a sit-in to support senior judges facing disciplinary action after they publicly criticized election irregularities and campaigned for greater judicial independence. At subsequent demonstrations police beat dozens of protesters and detained hundreds more. At a May 11 demonstration, police also assaulted journalists, including `Amr `Abd-Allah, a staff photographer for the daily *Al-Misri al-Yom*, `Abir al-Askari, a writer for the weekly *Al-Dustur*, Yasir Suleiman, a cameraman for Al-Jazeera, and Nasri Yusef, a soundman for the network.

Freedom of Expression

On May 24 the state security prosecutor charged Wa'el al-Ibrashi and Hoda Abu Bakr, reporters for the independent weekly *Sawt al-Umma*, and `Abd al-Hakim `Abd al-Hamid, editor-in-chief of the weekly *Afaq `Arabia*, with defaming Mahmud Burham, the judge in charge of the electoral commission in the Dakhliya governorate. Their December 2005 articles included a "blacklist" of initials of judges that implied Burham was implicated in electoral fraud. The presiding judge twice postponed their trial, which was still pending at this writing.

On June 26 a local court sentenced Ibrahim `Issa, editor of the opposition weekly *Al-Dustur*, and Sahar Zaki, a journalist for the paper, to a year in prison on charges of "insulting the president" and "spreading false and tendentious rumors" after they reported on an anti-government lawsuit. At this writing the two were free, pending a ruling on their appeal.

On July 11, President Mubarak signed an amended version of Egypt's press law that left intact provisions allowing the authorities to detain journalists who criticize the president or foreign leaders, or who publish news "liable...to cause harm or damage to the national interest."

The Law on Political Rights (Law 73/1956), revised in 2005, includes criminal penalties for journalists and publishers convicted of reporting "false information" intended to affect election results.

Freedom of Association

Egypt's law governing associations, Law 84/2002, severely compromises the right to freedom of association, giving the government unwarranted control over the governance and operations of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The law provides criminal penalties for carrying out activities prior to an NGO's official authorization and for receiving donations without prior approval from the Ministry of Social Affairs. It also provides criminal rather than civil sanctions for certain other activities, including "engaging in political or union activities, reserved for political parties and syndicates." The broad terms in which the prohibitions are framed discourage legitimate NGO activity.

Egypt maintains strict controls over political associations as well. In July 2005, the parliament passed government-sponsored revisions to the Political Parties Law (Law 40/1956) providing that new parties be legally registered automatically unless the Political Parties Affairs Committee (PPC), headed by the chair of the ruling National Democratic Party, rejects the application. The revised law also empowers the PPC to suspend an existing party's activities if it judges this to be "in the national interest" and to refer alleged breaches of the law to the Prosecutor General.

Between March and July 2006 security services detained at least 792 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which, though officially banned, is the country's largest opposition group, with 88 out of 454 seats in parliament. The crackdown accelerated in April and May, as members of the Muslim Brotherhood joined secular activists in street protests in support of judicial independence and fair elections.

Ill-Treatment of Street Children

The government periodically conducts arrest campaigns of homeless or truant street children who have committed no crime. In custody many face beatings, sexual abuse, and extortion by police and adult suspects, and police at times deny them access to food, bedding, and medical care. The authorities do not routinely monitor conditions of detention for children, investigate cases of arbitrary arrest or abuse in custody, or discipline those responsible. In many cases, the police detain children illegally for days before taking them to the public prosecutor on charges of being “vulnerable to delinquency.”

Women’s Rights

Despite recent reforms of Egypt’s family and nationality laws, additional steps are needed to amend laws that discriminate against women and girls, to prosecute gender-based violence, and to grant women and girls equal citizenship rights. Discriminatory personal status laws governing marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance have institutionalized the second-class status of women in the private realm. The penal code does not effectively deter or punish domestic violence, and police are routinely unsympathetic to the concerns of battered women and girls.

Religious Intolerance and Discrimination against Religious Minorities

Although Egypt’s constitution provides for equal rights without regard to religion, discrimination against Egyptian Christians and official intolerance of Baha’is and unorthodox Muslim sects continue. Egyptians are able to convert to Islam generally without difficulty, but Muslims who convert to Christianity face difficulties in getting new identity papers and some have been arrested for allegedly forging such documents. Baha’i institutions and community activities are prohibited by law.

Key International Actors

The US remains Egypt’s largest provider of foreign military and economic assistance. In 2006 it provided approximately US\$1.3 billion in military aid and US\$490 million in economic assistance. In June 2006, the US Congress defeated a proposed amendment that would have cut \$100 million from the US aid package in response to Egypt’s poor human rights record.

In 2006 The Bush administration scaled back its public pressure on the Egyptian government with respect to human rights and democracy. In a 2005 visit to Cairo, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke forcefully about the importance of political reform in Egypt. In 2006, by contrast, official US pronouncements stressed that change must come from the Egyptian people and government. And while the US government continued to express concern over human rights abuses in Egypt, no visible consequences ensued.

In April 2006 the European Parliament voted to make respect for human rights a priority in its continuing negotiations with Egypt on an EU-Egypt Action Plan under the European Neighborhood Policy. As of October 2006 negotiations were still stalled over human rights language. The deadline for reaching an agreement is January 1, 2007.

Egypt failed to respond to a July 2006 request from the UN special rapporteur on torture for an invitation to visit the country, a request that has been outstanding since 1996. In October a Canadian federal court judge ruled that Canadian authorities could not deport a suspected terrorist, Mahmud Jaballah, to Egypt because of risk of torture. In late 2005 lawyers from the US Department of Justice said that `Ala `Abd al-Maqsud Muhamad Salim—an Egyptian detained in Pakistan in 2002, transferred to Guantanamo Bay, and subsequently declared “No Longer an Enemy Combatant”—would be released and returned to Egypt. In January they filed a motion claiming that, based on new information, there were no longer “immediate plans to transfer, repatriate, or release him.” Salim’s Washington-based attorneys had asked that Salim be held in Guantanamo because of fears that he would face torture in Egypt. According to briefs filed by his lawyer, when Egyptian officials visited him at the Guantanamo facility, they threatened to take him somewhere where people “will never see [him] again.”