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Three years after Egyptians took to the streets demanding bread, freedom and social justice, human rights violations are widespread and frequent, and their perpetrators enjoy an unprecedented sense of impunity. Security forces have repeatedly used excessive force against largely peaceful demonstrators and continue to arbitrarily detain and subject to torture large numbers of Egyptians. Restrictions against freedoms of assembly, association, and expression have intensified since August 2013, including in the run-up to the referendum that approved a new constitution, in which authorities allowed no space for dissent.

Excessive Use of Force

Since January 2011, Egyptian security forces repeatedly used excessive lethal force to disperse protests, killing well over 2000 protesters. Between January 25 and February 11, 2011, police killed at least 846 demonstrators in squares and near police stations in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, and other cities who called for the end of the Mubarak regime.

Under the rule of Supreme Council of the Armed Forces over the subsequent year and a half, new incidents of violent dispersals of protest took place, including with the killings of 27 unarmed Coptic Christian protesters outside the government television building known as Maspero in October 2011 and 51 protesters on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November 2011. Under Mohamed Morsy, police killed 46 outside the Port Said prison over three days in January 2013.

The use of excessive force escalated after the overthrow of Morsy in July 2013 in a campaign of intense and extensive repression against the Muslim Brotherhood as well as non-Islamist critics of the new government. Most significantly, security forces killed up to 1,000 people when they dispersed pro-Morsy sit-ins in Raba'a and Nahda Squares on August 14, 2013, making it the most serious incident of mass unlawful killings in modern Egyptian history. While a small number of protesters used firearms that day—seven police also died—the widespread use of live ammunition from the outset constituted a serious violation of international standards on the use of firearms by police and military acting in a law enforcement capacity.

Security forces also used excessive and unlawful lethal force outside the Republican Guard Club Headquarters in Nasr City on July 8, when 61 protesters and two members of the security forces died, and on Nasr Street near the Rabaa al Adawiya protest camp on July 27, when 95 protesters and one police officer died. Subsequently, security forces used excessive force leading to the death of 120 people around Ramsis Square on August 16, and yet again used excessive lethal force to disperse pro-Morsy marches on October 6, leading to at least 57 deaths. On the third anniversary of January 25, 2014, security forces killed at least 64 protesters across Egypt.

To date, Egyptian authorities have failed to acknowledge responsibility for these mass killings, investigate these incidents, or hold any security or senior government officials accountable.

Arrests and Detention

Under President Morsy, police arrested more than 800 protesters demonstrating outside the presidential palace and in other incidents. In one incident outside the presidential palace in December 2012, credible accounts of victims and witnesses provided to Human Rights Watch indicate that dozens of persons were

subjected to abuse by supporters of the president. Security forces failed to intervene to protect the peaceful sit-in by anti-Morsy protesters and stop the violence by both Morsy supporters and anti-Morsy protesters.

Following the military's ouster of Morsy in early July, an intense campaign of arrest and detention largely focused on members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights has credibly estimated that the military-backed government has rounded up an estimated 20,000 persons. Military officials held the former president along with nine senior aides in secret military detention for weeks. Police also arrested the majority of the high-level and much of the mid-level leadership of the Brotherhood and Freedom and Justice Party across the country, including figures exclusively involved in politics and communications. The government designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization on December 25, 2013, thereby criminalizing virtually all of its activities and association with it.

Since July, police have also arrested thousands of demonstrators, including 1,400 detained in the immediate aftermath of the August sit-in dispersals—150 of whom were children—and over 1000 who demonstrated on the third anniversary of the outbreak of the 2011 revolution on January 25, 2014. Also detained are Egyptians distributing pamphlets critical of the interim government and displaying signs commemorating mass killings during the Raba'a dispersal. As many universities became focal points for political activity when classes resumed in the fall, police have repeatedly entered campuses and arrested hundreds.

Prosecutors have ordered the pretrial detention of most of those detained pending investigation on a range of charges, including incitement or participation in violence, "thuggery," vandalism, membership in a banned or terrorist organization, and illegal public assembly. Prosecutors routinely renew detention orders on the basis of little evidence while severely limiting detainees' access to lawyers. At least some of the cases that have gone to trial have been riddled with serious due process violations, including the inability to call defense witnesses, yet nevertheless resulted in lengthy sentences. Human Rights Watch has received credible information indicating that police abuse and torture in custody continues unabated.

Restrictions on Freedom of Expression and Association

Following the ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak, privately-owned media allowed for government critics to express their views publicly although President Morsy's year in office saw a sharp increase in prosecutions of journalists and political activists on charges of "insulting" the president or other officials and institutions and "spreading false information", using Mubarak-era penal code provisions. After July 2013, the military-backed government closed down all TV stations affiliated with or sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other Islamist stations. Egypt has particularly targeted Doha-based Al Jazeera, closing its Egypt offices, arresting many of its reporters, and referring three of them, along with 16 other persons, including Egyptian and international journalists, to trial on charges that include operating illegally and being in contact with the Muslim Brotherhood and carry prison sentences ranging from 5 to 15 years.

In November, the government issued a new law that severely restricts peaceful demonstrations and used penal code provisions that criminalize speech offenses to imprison journalists and activists. Prominent activists like Alaa Abdelfattah, Ahmed Maher, Ahmed Douma, and Mohamed Adel have been imprisoned under the new protest law, along with scores of other activists and government critics. Maher, Douma, and Adel received three-year prison sentences in December 2013, while Abdelfattah remains detained while awaiting referral to trial. Some of the few activists who openly challenged the draft constitution or called for a "no" vote in the referendum were arrested.

In January, the government put a travel ban on academic and former member of parliament Amr Hamzawy. Prosecutors charged Hamzawy with "insulting the judiciary" based on a tweet that deemed a particular court case to be politicized. The same month authorities charged another prominent academic, Emad Shahin, with conspiring with foreign organizations to harm national security. Both Hamzawy and Shahin had been critical of some of President Morsy's policies but also criticized the heavy repression that followed his ouster.

Discrimination against Women

Systematic harassment of women and girls in public places continued unabated, with a number of mob assaults of women protesters and bystanders in Tahrir Square in the early weeks of July, and authorities undertook no investigations or serious measures to stop this from occurring again. Instead, the government downplayed the seriousness of the trend.

Egyptian personal status laws discriminate against women on issues of divorce, custody, and inheritance, and there is no law criminalizing domestic violence specifically. The newly adopted constitution committed to achieving equality between women and men and protecting women from all forms of violence against them. However, laws are yet to be brought in line with such provisions.

Freedom of Religion and Sectarian Violence

In the first half of 2013, under President Morsy, prosecutors interrogated at least 14 people on charges of blasphemy, referring 11 of them to trials that resulted in prison sentences for opinions protected by freedom of expression. In April, sectarian violence in the town of Khosus left five Christians and one Muslim dead. Two days later, the police failed to intervene to halt clashes that broke out after a funeral at the main Coptic cathedral in Cairo, and at times themselves shot at Christian protesters inside church grounds.

In June, a mob of hundreds of Islamists lynched four Shia Egyptians in the village of Abu Musallim just outside of Cairo after weeks of anti-Shia hate speech by Islamist extremists. The Morsy administration condemned the lynching but failed to condemn the sectarianism that incited it or to uphold the right of Shia to religious freedom.

In the aftermath of Morsy's overthrow, there was a significant increase in attacks on churches and property of Christians. Immediately following the August 14 dispersals of Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in Cairo, mobs chanting Islamist slogans attacked at least 42 churches, burning or damaging 37, and leaving 4 people dead. Security forces failed to intervene to halt the attacks but subsequently arrested dozens of suspects.

Refugee, Asylum-Seeker, and Migrant Rights

The population of refugees from Syria in Egypt grew to 300,000 by the end of 2013, according to the Egyptian government. Over 125,000 Syrians have registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Egypt, however, has prevented UNHCR from registering Palestinians from Syria. Airport officials sent three Syrian men—two in January and one in October—back to Syria against their will in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.

After Morsy's overthrow, security officials implemented a visa requirement and security clearance for Syrians. As a result airport officials denied entry to at least 276 Syrians and returned them to Syria in violation of the international prohibition against refoulement. In July, police and military police arrested at least 72 Syrian men and 9 boys at checkpoints on main Cairo roads in an arrest sweep following a media campaign accusing Syrians of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Since August, Egypt has detained without legal basis over 1,500 refugees from Syria, including 250 children, many of whom had sought to migrate irregularly to Europe, and coerced over 1,200 to leave Egypt under threat of indefinite detention.

Eritrean nationals continued to report torture and rape at the hands of traffickers operating in Sinai with the apparent acquiescence of state officials. The abuses started in late 2010 and the government acknowledged them publicly for the first time in mid-February 2014. To date, only one person has been charged with Sinai trafficking-related crimes. The authorities have made no evident effort to investigate alleged collusion between security forces and traffickers, including along routes to the Suez Canal from Egypt's border with Sudan, at the heavily-policed canal, and in Sinai.

Recommendations

- The Egyptian government should ensure security forces act in accordance with international human rights laws and standards on the use of force, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.
- The Public Prosecutor should initiate criminal investigations into the apparently unlawful use of lethal force by security forces that has resulted in the killing of more than 2000 protesters and bystanders, as well as investigations into attacks on police, since 2011, and prosecute suspected perpetrators in criminal proceedings before courts that meet international fair trial standards.
- The government should cease harassment and persecution of opposition activists exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including defamation campaigns and threats.
- The government should release and drop charges against all those detained solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including national and international media personnel arrested in the context of performing their duties as journalists.
- The government should release and drop charges against all those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of association, including those detained solely for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood. The government should amend Law 107 of 2013 restricting freedom of assembly to bring it in line with international standards on freedom of assembly and association, and halt the arrest and prosecution of persons on charges of peacefully protesting without notifying the authorities.
- The government should take steps to ensure the full and effective protection of the lives and property of religious minorities by holding accountable those responsible for attacks against religious minorities and investigating instances where security forces failed to respond to such attacks.
- The government should hold accountable men suspected of participating in mob attacks on women during public demonstrations and publicly announce a zero-tolerance policy regarding such attacks.
- The government should enact measures criminalizing domestic violence and amend personal status laws that discriminate against women on issues of divorce, custody and inheritance.
- The government should ensure that military and law enforcement operations in the Sinai include rescuing trafficking victims and arresting suspected traffickers, and halt the detention and prosecution of trafficking victims on immigration charges.
- The government should grant UNHCR access to all places where migrants are detained pending deportation to ensure asylum-seekers among them can lodge asylum claims.
- The government should respond positively to all UN special procedures mandate holders who have requested to visit the country and set dates for their visits.