

THE UGLY FACE TOF HUMAN RIGHTS IN EGYPT TODAY

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 Analysis

We can name at least two significant issues in the streets of Egypt particularly in the past nine years; they are “social revolution” and “military coup”. The overthrow of the 30-year-old Mubarak regime did raise new hopes in the public eye. But the hopes fade in just a blink of the eye. The diversity of the opposition and the involvement of different actors on the regional and global levels quickly changed the destiny of the country. The military, which is strong and effective in the politics in Egypt, overthrew the legitimate government in consequence of a coup on July 3, 2013, and put the country into a new and painful process.

The constitutional amendment that Abdul Fatah El-Sisi brought into the Parliament on February 3, 2013 shows that the coup regime would continue to be repressive. By virtue of article 140 in the regulation, Sisi would remain in the presidency until 2034.^[1] The continuation of the

status quo in Egypt is a sign that the violation of rights on opposition groups would surely continue. In order to understand the magnitude of the ongoing violations, it is necessary to examine the revolution and coup processes and to acknowledge the types and numbers of violations.

The Processes of Revolution and Military Coup

On December 17, 2010, the Arab Spring begun when a street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself in Tunisia. The rise of the uprisings in Egypt following Bouazizi’s death, being a leading and important country, had been a critical development in terms of the circumstances of the region. On January 25, 2011, people took to the streets in Egypt, particularly in Tahrir Square. The uprising in Egypt and the overthrow of the Mubarak regime served as a source of

courage and inspiration for the uprising of other countries in the region, such as Yemen and Syria. Socio-economic imbalances and demands for political rights were the two main reasons of the uprisings.

During the demonstrations in Egypt, at least 846 people were killed and more than 6,400 were injured by state-affiliated security forces.² Eventually, Hosni Mubarak admitted defeat and resigned on February 11, 2011. However, in the course of 25 January-11 February 2011, there were many violations of the right to live, systematic torture, forced disappearances, and no punishment was given to the perpetrators. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) temporarily took over the government until the democratic transition of the system was achieved.

In June 2012, shortly after the presidential election, elected president Mursi was criticized for not being democratic and being prejudiced, and hence a new wave of demonstrations against Mursi began. During these protests, there were at least 46 cases of sexual assault against women in Tahrir Square. Sadly the Egyptian security forces did not respond to these crimes.

On July 3, 2013, Abdul Fatah El-Sisi, then Chief of staff, seized the control of the government through military coup. Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Tawadros II, the leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the well-known opponents Amr Moussa and Mohamed Al-Baradei and the Nur party supported the coup declaration.

After the coup, two presidential elections were held in 2014 and 2018. Sisi gained 96.7% of the votes in the election held on 26-27 May 2014, with merely 44.4% participation. In the 2018 election, he eliminated his opponents unlawfully and competed alone in the 41,4% participation election. As easily predicted, he got 97% of the vote.

Right Violations After the Military Coup

Since the time of the the military coup until present, hundreds of human rights violations against different opposition groups such as journalists, lawyers, and non-governmental organizations, especially members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, were done by the Egyptian Government.

After the military coup, thousands of Egyptians demonstrated in Rabia and Nahda squares demanding the reinstatement of Mursi. In a single day, which was August 14, 2013, more than 1,000 people (2,500 according to the Muslim Brotherhood) were killed in Rabia Square, now a symbol of resistance. This bloody day was recorded as the biggest massacre in modern history.

Many human rights organizations, including the Human Rights Watch (HRW), consider this attack as “crimes against humanity” by virtue of article 7 of the United Nations (UN) Rome Statute.³

In July 2018, a law approved by the Egyptian parliament prevented the trial of some names that killed the protesters in the demonstrations between July 3, 2013- June 10, 2016.⁴ In other words, the opponents were the only disadvantaged party during and after the uprisings. Hundreds of people were arrested in Rabia and many of them were severely punished.⁵

In the following years, the demonstrations held on the anniversary of the revolution and coup went bloody and suppressed by the military regime. With these massacres, the Sisi regime tried to strengthen its authority in the country and terrorize the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups. The politics of the Sisi regime have led to many bloody actions by extremist militarist groups in the country.

A large number of people were detained in the streets and universities as a result of belonging to different opposition groups; these people – in which some were anti-regime human rights activists and some from the media - were then used to blackmail the oppositions in July 2013. These people were detained for days, months, and most of them were tortured, without any justification, similar to the Mubarak era. Some of the detainees were taken to off-record detention centers and interrogated without any official records. Many people died due to torture during formal or informal interrogations.

According to unofficial figures, there are currently 60,000 prisoners in Egyptian prisons. Some of them are systematically tortured and subjected to sexual violence. Egypt has signed UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment that prohibits torture. Conversely, according to the statements of the victims of torture, there are different forms of torture, such as beating in prisons, electrocution, rape, harassment and psychological torture. The Egyptian government has repeatedly rejected requests of examination in the prisons and

detention centers by the UN Committee Against Torture and other international organizations. In the committee's report in June 2017, it was concluded that torture in Egypt is a systematic practice based on the statements of the victims.⁶

More than 250 people were sexually assaulted between November 2012 and January 2014 in Egypt.⁷ The actual figures on this issue cannot be estimated because government officials restrict in-prison observation. However, it is believed that the number is higher than predicted.

After the coup, the court produced many death sentences. According to the Egyptian Front for Human Rights (EFHR), at least 2,532 death penalties were made in criminal and political cases in military and civilian courts between 2013-2018. At least 165 people have been executed in this period.⁸ Egypt became the third country with the highest death penalty in 2017. It ranked sixth in the list of countries with most death penalties. Nine young people between ages of 20 and 30, who were accused for the assassination of the Chief Prosecutor Hisham Barakat in 2015, were executed in February 2019.⁹

SISI in NUMBERS

Sisi came to power in July 2013

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One of the most important methods used to subdue the opponents is “forced disappearances”. Accordingly, the officials working under the government can detain persons without an arrest warrant. The duration of forced disappearances varies from a few days to seven months. Egyptian Rights and Freedoms Coordination (ECRF), a non-governmental organization based in Cairo, announced that more than 10,000 cases of forced disappearances have taken place from 2013 to 2018. However, they could only document 1.520 of them, given access to resources is limited.¹⁰ Sisi’s repressive policies have also affected the media. Television broadcasts and social media began to be controlled by intelligence units. Restrictions on the Internet and social networks have been introduced. More than 500 websites have been blocked since the summer of 2017, and a large number of people have been detained because of their social media posts. According to the law adopted in 2018, a personal social media account, blog or website with more than 5,000 followers will be subject to the media laws.¹¹ Egypt ranks 163 in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index. Today, approximately 20 journalists are being held in Egyptian prisons.¹²

The “Sinai 2018” operation, launched on February 9, 2018, also increased the violations of the public’s basic rights. Civilians were killed in the attacks by state-affiliated forces and militarist groups. The operation also used cluster bombs, which is banned under international law.¹³

According to the official spokesman of the armed forces, 389 civilians were killed by illegal armed forces, while other internal forces have also murdered 109 other civilians in 2018 alone. According to Egypt’s Ministry of Interior, last year the Egyptian police have killed 271 civilians (144 in North Sinai and 127 in other regions).¹⁴ So just in 2018, a total of 828 people were killed in different ways in Egypt. During the operations, hundreds of hectares of agricultural land were also destroyed by the

Egyptian army and at least 3,000 homes and commercial buildings were destroyed.¹⁵

Still in 2018, there were at least 5.418 violations of human rights, including arbitrary arrest, killing, torture, death, executions and forced disappearances.¹⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

Western countries pride themselves as those who emphasize the importance of certain concepts such as democracy, freedom and justice on every platform. But the irony lies on the fact that they have not imposed any sanction in regards to the human rights violations of the coup regime in Egypt. Even more so, those countries have been in cooperation with the coup regime. Such that, just after the execution of the nine young people in Egypt, EU member states attended the Sharm el Sheikh meeting.

The United States has shown a partial reaction to violations of rights in the Obama era, but President Donald Trump clearly supported Sisi’s coup regime. In return of the political and economic support of the United States, the Sisi regime stayed silent for the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and the US’ recognition of the Golan Heights as the land of Israel. It also maintains its diplomatic relations with Israel at a high level.

The military coup regime has been receiving financial support from the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates since the beginning of the regime’s establishment.

Turkey has always been against the coup in Egypt. Although economic relations between the two countries continue, diplomatic relations has broken off. The Syrian crisis, the Eastern Mediterranean energy resources sharing and the violations of the rights of the opponents in the Sisi regime are the reasons for the continuation of tensions between the two countries.

In order to achieve a normal and humane state in Egypt, rights violations must be recognized in the international system before all else. International organizations and other countries should not ignore the rights violations of thousands of people simply for their political interests.

Violations in military operations in Sinai and all interventions that killed civilians must be stopped. Tortures and sexual assaults in prisons and detention centers must also be stopped, and the necessary medical treatment should be provided to ill prisoners.

During the trial, international and national laws should be respected. Military courts should never be used on civilians. Forced disappearances and arbitrary arrests must be stopped. The aftermath of persons who have been subjected to violations before should be shared with their families.

Those who are responsible for the violations of rights, such as killing, torture, injuries, sexual violence, especially in the Rabia massacre, should be held accountable and punished in courts. The Egyptian government should accept the proposals for international investigation of allegations of fundamental human rights violations in Egypt.

Endnotes

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- ³ “All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killing of Protestors in Egypt”, HRW, 12.08.2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt#page>
- ⁴ “Egypt passes law that could shield top military brass from prosecution”, *Reuters*, 16.07.2018, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1K62JP?fee>
- ⁵ Kahire Ceza Mahkemesi 14 Ağustos 2013'te Rabia Meydanı'nda oturma eylemine katıldıkları için 739 kişi hakkında adil olmayan bir şekilde toplu yargılama yaptı. Mahkeme, 75 kişinin idamına, 47 kişinin 25 yıl, 22'si çocuk olmak üzere 612 kişinin de 5 yıldan 15 yıla kadar hapsine karar verdi.
- ⁶ *The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)*, A/72/44, paragraf: 58, 2017, <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=dtYoAzPhJ4NMMy4Lu1TOebJtOzH-l9Ya%2bxza%2bE%2bvtPfEMjvoay0x2iV30x2zj4TL-GEMjRXVex9Q%2fNhnR3%2fZHIww27bw4ZF3htxF-LucJ9b7NxE%3d>
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- ¹² *Reporters without Borders: Egypt*, <https://rsf.org/en/egypt>
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- ¹⁶ “Inhumanity Human Rights...”, s. 5.