

Egypt's Civil Society Is on Life Support

Under the guise of fighting a "war on terrorism," Cairo is cracking down on organizations that shed light on its abuses.

BY KRISTEN CHICK | DECEMBER 13, 2017, 1:24 PM

CAIRO — For more than two decades, the Al Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture was the only organization in Egypt devoted to helping torture survivors. The center's doctors worked under the autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak, under the military junta that replaced him, and under Egypt's first democratically elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, providing psychological treatment for clients who suffer abuse in Egypt's jails and prisons. It wasn't until this year, under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, that officials shut down their clinic.

The police didn't storm in and haul everyone off to jail. Instead, in February, police arrived on the clinic's day off and **sealed the doors** with wax. Two of the center's founders, Aida Seif al-Dawla and Suzanne Fayyad, have been banned from traveling abroad.

The closure order came from the Ministry of Health on the grounds the clinic overstepped its mandate by issuing reports. The center frequently publishes information on torture, including tabulating all instances of torture reported in the media. The real reason for the closure, said Seif al-Dawla, is that the center could expose the Sisi government's lies.

"We talk about torture. And they know that we have firsthand information about torture because we see the victims," she said. "Contrary to the former regime — the Mubarak regime — which used to say 'OK, torture exists, but it's only a few individual cases,' this regime — Sisi — says 'there is no torture.' ... We know they're lying. And we're not a small population."

Repression of human rights and civil society organizations in Egypt is not new. But under Sisi, it has reached unprecedented levels. His government is not simply rolling back the space won when mass protests brought down Mubarak, activists say, but seeking to eliminate it altogether.

Egyptian officials often use the country's struggle with terrorism as justification for the ongoing crackdown. After last month's **terrorist attack** on a mosque in northern Sinai that killed more than 300 people, Diaa Rashwan, head of the State Information Service, **said**: "This heinous crime is an alarm to all organizations that trade in raising high the banners of 'human rights and freedoms.' It is time for them to become aware that their fabricated reports that are teeming with exaggerations and false information would render these organizations 'partners' in giving an excuse, albeit inadvertently, to these crimes and their perpetrators."

Presidential and Foreign Ministry spokesmen did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Rights activists say the assault on civil society appears calibrated to progressively tighten the screws without sounding alarm bells for Egypt's Western allies. Rather than face the bad press that would result from courtroom cages full of Egypt's most prominent rights defenders, authorities have taken a subtler approach, using an array of tactics to cripple the ability of organizations and individuals to work.

That public relations strategy stumbled in May, when Sisi signed a **new law** regulating civil society organizations. The law criminalizes much of the work of nongovernmental organizations

, strictly controls their funding, and establishes a new agency to oversee civil society organizations that includes representatives of Egypt's national security agencies, which have long been hostile to rights organizations. The United States took notice, and in August delivered an unusual rebuke by **delaying and canceling** a portion of its **annual aid** to Egypt of more than \$1.3 billion. The government has yet to issue the bylaws of the legislation, which provide guidance on compliance, so organizations cannot yet apply for the necessary registration and are in the dark about what will happen under the new rules.

Nonetheless, the retreat among rights organizations in recent years has been dramatic. International groups like Human Rights Watch no longer have offices in Egypt and local organizations have shuttered their offices outside Cairo. Policy work is nonexistent because "there is no one to engage with," said Hossam Bahgat, founder and former executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) and now an investigative journalist in Egypt. "It's like we're back to the Mubarak era in terms of the types of activities. Most people are now engaged with legal aid and documentation and that's it."

Even documentation of rights violations is more difficult because of restricted access.

“We have to pick and choose our battles” now, said Mohamed Lotfy, executive director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF). “Strategically, it’s wrong to just go with the full-fledged attack, on all files, at the same time.”

One of the most dangerous activities for Egyptians right now, he said, is traveling abroad to raise awareness of Egypt’s human rights violations. In September, Ibrahim Metwally, a lawyer documenting the cases of those who are forcibly disappeared by the state, **vanished** from Cairo International Airport before boarding a flight to Geneva to testify at a U.N. working group on enforced or involuntary disappearances. Authorities later confirmed his detention on charges of spreading false news and running an illegal organization. At least 28 rights activists have been banned from travel, according to the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS).

Activists’ work wasn’t without opposition even before Sisi took power. In 2013, 43 employees of international organizations, including 15 Americans, were convicted of fomenting unrest with foreign funds, and their offices closed, in what became known as the **foreign funding case**. After the 2014 coup, however, authorities reopened the case — this time **coming after** Egyptian organizations. At least 18 people have been summoned for questioning on charges like “receiving foreign funding to disrupt the public interest and national security,” and authorities froze the assets of 10 individuals and seven organizations, according to a CIHRS tally. The travel bans are also connected to the case.

Bahgat is one of the activists caught up in the crackdown. His personal assets have been frozen for more than a year, and he is banned from travel, but he has still not been called in for questioning. The authorities’ sluggish pace leaves those involved stuck in a sort of twilight zone, unable to get on with their lives and unsure if tomorrow could bring a referral to trial and the possibility of years in prison.

“At the worst you’re looking at a life sentence,” said Bahgat. “And at best you’re looking at two, three, four years of a criminal trial and appeals and retrials and, you know, that hellish process that they have so mastered recently with the tacit approval of the judiciary.”

The Egyptian government has also used travel bans to curtail international advocacy on the human rights situation in Egypt. Activists have found themselves unable to attend conferences or accept awards: Mohamed Zaree, the Egypt program manager at CIHRS, which has closed its Cairo office, was unable to travel to Geneva in October to accept the Martin Ennals Award, a prestigious prize for human rights defenders; and Mozn Hassan,

director of Nazra for Feminist Studies, missed the Stockholm ceremony for her Right to Livelihood Award, sometimes referred to as the “alternative Nobel Prize.”

The travel bans also serve as a way to squeeze activists financially. Azza Soliman, head of the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance (CEWLA), can no longer travel to conduct the consulting she depended on for income. She, like all those targeted in the case, is being investigated for tax evasion, with authorities attempting to portray the money that flowed to CEWLA to fund projects as Soliman’s personal income. She laughs at the accusations, splashed across the newspapers for weeks at the time of her interrogation, that she is a millionaire getting rich off plots to harm Egypt’s reputation. “OK, if I have this money, give it to me!” she laughed. “I need it!”

Soliman’s levity masks exhaustion. Authorities also froze CEWLA’s assets, and the organization had to shut its shelter for female victims of violence, cut its staff by about a third, and drastically reduce the number of women to whom it provides legal aid. “All the time, I’m fighting to still have hope,” she said.

Even those activists who don’t have a case open against them fear the authorities could sweep in without any warning, or justification. Mina Thabet, an ECRF researcher who is now attending graduate school in Britain, was detained for more than a month last year, most of it in solitary confinement. His arrest was ostensibly for participating in a protest but he discovered later, he said, that it was the result of his work documenting rights violations against minorities. The case against him was closed, but he still lives under a cloud: “All the time you feel that every road in Egypt leads to jail. And that’s the biggest challenge.”

The coup de grace in the Egyptian government’s efforts to stifle human rights work — the new NGO law — is also the one action that provoked a sharp U.S. response. In June, Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid **defended the law**, saying it was designed “to uphold transparency and the rule of law, and with no intention on placing any restrictions on the activities of the NGOs.”

The law applies to all NGOs, meaning it will affect not just rights groups but also charities and development organizations, which provide vital services to Egypt’s population.

Nancy Okail, director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, said Egypt’s allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, are particularly troubled by the way it will restrict their ability to fund development work in Egypt through nongovernmental organizations.

“It’s a very odd thing for the Egyptian government to do because it’s a time when we have the economic crunch and high inflation,” she said. “And now you’re basically closing down all the channels for these organizations to operate in a legal manner.”

U.S. officials urged Sisi not to sign the law when the Egyptian president visited Washington in April, Okail said. “I know that this was something on the top of the agenda, and it was stressed in several meetings,” she said. “And they were surprised when he went on and did it.”

“If applied seriously, none of us will be able to exist in the form we exist now, and most likely will not be able to exist as registered NGOs under the new law,” said Gasser Abdel Razek, executive director of EIPR.

Still, many rights organizations are forging ahead. At Nazra for Feminist Studies, one of the organizations targeted with an asset freeze, the staff is working on a volunteer basis. The Nadeem Center is still functioning, too. Though the clinic is closed, the center successfully fought to reopen two other offices shut by authorities, and doctors continue to see their patients outside the clinic: in their personal offices, in the doctor’s syndicate, or even in cafes.

ECRF continues to **lead a campaign** against enforced disappearances — including documenting the disappearances, raising awareness, and providing legal aid to victims’ families — that has forced the government to acknowledge the issue. EIPR recently **released a report** on the government’s crackdown on gay and transgender people.

“We made the choice a while ago that our best option is to keep the office open, to come every day,” said EIPR’s Abdel Razek. “If we’re going to be arrested, I’d rather be arrested from here than from a room next to my two sleeping children.”

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