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COP27 & the Human Rights Crisis in Egypt



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In November 2022, the Egyptian city of Sharm El Sheikh is scheduled to host the United Nations' 27th Climate Change Conference (COP27). The choice of Egypt as a host country, despite the scale and severity of its ongoing human rights crisis, is counterproductive to both the credibility of COP27, and the prospects of addressing the human rights situation. The international community and states participating at COP27 have a responsibility to publicly and privately address urgent human rights concerns that affect climate security, and the broader human rights crisis in Egypt. Short of upholding this responsibility, participating states may undermine the credibility of COP27 and risk having their participation perceived as a sign of approval of the Egyptian authorities' notorious human rights record.

- **Background on the Human Rights Crisis in Egypt**

For almost a decade, and since President Abdelfattah al-Sisi assumed power in 2013, Egypt has been witnessing the most severe human rights crisis in its modern history.

Protests have been effectively banned through a series of draconian laws and through the use of lethal force against peaceful protestors (in 2013, Egyptian protestors were the victims of the worst massacre in Egypt's modern history, where [at least 817 people](#) were killed within a few hours). Over the past nine years, political protests and demonstrations driven by economic or social grievances, including [labor sit-ins and strikes](#), have been crushed by Egyptian authorities through mass detention and imprisonment, enforced disappearances, coercion, intimidation, and the use of lethal force. The systematic practice of enforced disappearances and policy of indefinite cycles of pretrial detention have left tens of thousands languishing in inhumane prison conditions where denial of access to adequate medical care, [deaths in detention](#), and torture are prevalent. The scale of torture in places of detention in Egypt is perhaps best explained by the [United Nations Committee Against Torture's conclusion](#) that:

“Torture is perpetrated by police officers, military officers, National Security officers and prison guards. However, prosecutors, judges and prison officials also facilitate torture by failing to curb practices of torture, arbitrary detention and ill-treatment or to act on complaints.... all the above lead to the inescapable conclusion that torture is a systematic practice in Egypt.”

The severity of the human rights crisis in Egypt is a result of a broad strategy that aims to silence all forms of peaceful dissent. Security agencies [control the media](#) through their conglomerates while [over 600 websites](#), including those of news agencies and human rights NGOs, are blocked by the authorities. Members of legitimate political parties, journalists, lawyers, civil society activists, academics, and tens of thousands of other Egyptians from an array of different backgrounds are imprisoned and forcibly disappeared for merely expressing disagreement with government policies. Egypt is described as [“one of the world's biggest jails for journalists,”](#) as its draconian counter-terrorism legislation and anti-cybercrime legislation are being used to silence dissenting voices and curb public debate.

Under the pretext of “disseminating fake news,” or “using social media to assist a terrorist organization” Egyptian authorities have imprisoned renowned activists like British-Egyptian citizen Alaa Abdelfattah, or peaceful politicians such as Abdelmoniem Aboul Fotouh and Zyad al-Eleimy. Meanwhile, Egyptian courts have issued [356 death sentences](#) in 2021 (the largest number recorded by Amnesty International excluding China). The scope of repression has in fact broadened to target apolitical citizens and social media users; for instance, [female content creators have been imprisoned](#) under trumped-up charges of human trafficking and “violating family values,” for posting social media content.

- **Besieged Civil Society**

Independent civil society has been one of the primary targets of the past decade’s far-reaching repression. [According to UN experts](#), Egypt’s law regulating the work of non-governmental organizations gives the executive authorities “broad discretion to regulate and dissolve civil society organizations” and therefore undermines its independence. [Beyond](#) legislative restrictions, Egyptian authorities have forcibly disappeared, tortured, and imprisoned civil society actors, including for [cooperating with the UN](#). Case no. 173, commonly known as the “NGO Foreign Funding Case”, which involves dozens of human rights defenders and organizations and which has been ongoing for over a decade, is being used by authorities to punish and intimidate human rights defenders, including through freezing their assets, [banning them from traveling](#), and leveraging [trumped-up charges](#) that carry a potential sentence of life imprisonment.

Upon the sentencing of a prominent human rights defender in absentia to 15 years in jail by a terrorism court, Michele Bachelet, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [stated](#) that the verdict and others like it “raise serious concerns about human rights and civic space in Egypt.” Concerns about civic space in Egypt have been echoed by many other UN officials; for example, the reprisals against civil

society actors who cooperated with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing during her official visit to Egypt have been so severe that she stated "Unless Egypt ensures that human rights defenders and victims of human rights violations can interact with UN human rights envoys without fear of reprisal, it is in our view not ready to host further visits."

Egyptian authorities' antagonism towards civil society is not solely limited to Egyptian organizations and actors. In 2019, when Egypt was hosting the African Union's 64th African Commission on Human and People's Rights, Egyptian officials refused to issue badges to human rights defenders, and went so far as to physically assault a human rights defender from South Sudan during the registration process. Participants from civil society have stated that Egyptian security officials subjected them to unprecedented degrees of intimidation, surveillance, and restrictions.

- **The Credibility of COP27 Undermined**

Upon the announcement that Egypt will host the climate conference, activists and experts warned that the Egyptian authorities' record on human rights will likely undermine COP27. Those warnings have been vindicated. Egyptian authorities have privately screened Egyptian NGOs, selecting those they allow to register for COP27 and filtering out organizations that are critical of the government, through a secret registration process using selection criteria that were not made public. However, directly curtailing civil society engagement during COP27 is but one of many dimensions of how Egyptian authorities undermine the conference. Warnings about Egyptian authorities' intolerance to protests have led the Egyptian Foreign Minister to state that the authorities will "develop" a specific "facility" for protests "adjacent to the conference center". This is not equivalent to normal use of the public space outside of the "blue zone" for peaceful assembly, a right that Egypt's Constitution and international human rights commitments are supposed to guarantee, and which its draconian legislation and practice violates. Some Egyptian environmental activists and

NGOs fear that their engagement on COP27 will put them at risk of being targeted by Egyptian authorities after the conference is over. Civil society engagement and the public's freedom to peacefully assemble and protest, traditionally regarded as complementary features of COP, are under serious threat.

The Egyptian authorities' approach to environmental issues offers another important insight on how COP27 could be undermined. After an Egyptian court ruled that the government is obligated to take necessary measures to prevent the discharge of sewage and industrial waste into the River Nile around the city of Aswan, the government appealed the court's decision in August 2022. The appeal was filed despite the court highlighting that it was appalled by government officials' failure to enforce the law and allowing environmental and health violations to take place for more than 20 years. Yet Egyptian authorities' attitudes towards environmental issues go beyond technical and legal environmental offenses.

The instrumental role of local communities in addressing climate change has been recognized by COP through the establishment of The Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP). The Platform aims to “enhance the engagement of local communities and indigenous peoples in the UNFCCC process,” and highlight that “the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities should be respected, promoted and considered.” Yet the environmental transgressions of Egyptian authorities systematically take place with absolute disregard to local communities and the population at large. As noted by Greenpeace, environmental and human rights aspects have been overlooked in the management of natural resources in Egypt as a result of “corruption, lack of transparency, and the exclusion of citizens from the decision-making process, as well as pricing policies that prioritized supporting industries at the expense of the environment and the people.” Over the span of four months, and in pursuit of its “development plan,” Egyptian authorities uprooted 390 thousand square meters of green spaces in urban districts, without any prior societal

consultations and despite the vehement objections of affected local communities. The island of Warraq, along with several other islands in the Nile, has had its status as a nature conservation area unilaterally revoked by the government, in order to “develop” it. Local residents of Warraq have been forcibly evicted from their homes, arrested for organizing to contest the government’s plans, and in some cases killed in clashes with security forces.

The example set by Egyptian authorities’ handling of environmental issues is consistent with their existing exclusionary and repressive approach to governance, and it constitutes a model of governance and decision-making that should be eschewed by COP and the international community. The choice of Egypt as a host country, despite the persistently severe human rights crisis and its approach to environmental issues (which is at odds with international standards), substantially undermine the credibility of COP27.

- **The Responsibility of the International Community and Participating States**

The Egyptian authorities have much to gain from hosting COP27. On the one hand, it presents an opportunity to double down on the demand that developed states provide financial support for developing nations’ efforts to address climate change. While developed nations have the responsibility to provide such financial support, for a wide array of reasons, they also have a responsibility to ensure that such support is efficiently and effectively spent on climate issues, and that it is not being directly or indirectly used to perpetuate injustices.

Over the past decade, Egypt has received over USD 100 billion in financial support (financial aid from the Gulf states accounts alone for USD 114 billion), not to mention support from Western states and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Yet Egypt still remains on the verge of a severe

economic crisis. While the trigger for the looming economic crisis might be related to international events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Egypt's high susceptibility to external shocks and its high dependence on financial assistance is a product of structural causes that are rooted in the absence of accountability, the quashing of civic space (including repression of independent civil society, media, and political dissent), and authoritarian governance at large. Short of real guarantees that civil society and media can operate freely, there is no reason to believe that financial assistance aimed at addressing climate change will fulfill its purpose in Egypt.

Hosting COP27 in Egypt also gives the authorities an excellent opportunity to whitewash their human rights record. Though largely halfhearted, international criticism of the human rights record in Egypt over the past decade has led authorities to pay more attention to improving their international image. Initiatives including the establishment of Egypt's Supreme Standing Committee for Human Rights, the formation of the International Dialogue Group, and launch of the [National Human Rights Strategy](#) have all primarily aimed to deflect international criticism and are not related to any genuine effort by the authorities to tangibly address the human rights crisis in Egypt. The Call for National Dialogue, announced in April 2022 by President Sisi, is believed to be partly aimed at containing potential internal disaffection caused by the dire economic situation, yet it also serves as a whitewashing tactic addressed to the international community and donor states. The lack of any significant outcomes from the National Dialogue, especially concerning demands to release all prisoners of conscience, is an indicator of the absence of political will to address the human rights crisis.

Hosting high-profile international events such as COP27 similarly serves to send the false message that all is well in Egypt. In dealing with one of the most serious abusers of human rights as an infallible member of the international community and with

disregard to the sheer scope and severity of human rights abuses being committed, participating states actively normalize the human rights crisis in Egypt and provide tacit support for its perpetuation. However, now that the decision has been made to have Egypt host COP27, the conference can also offer an opportunity for participating states and the international community to shed more light on the crimes being committed in Egypt and urge the Egyptian authorities to change course.

To ensure that the credibility of COP is not undermined and that it is not used as a whitewashing event by a serious abuser of human rights, participating states, parliamentarians as well as other figures of the international community, should privately and publicly press the Egyptian authorities to:

1. Unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including prominent figures such as Alaa Abdelfattah, Zyad al-Eleimy, and Abdelmoniem Aboul Fotouh.
2. End the punitive use of pretrial detention to punish political dissidents, including through the use of indefinite cycles of pretrial detention for years on end.
3. Cease the systematic practice of enforced disappearance, and reveal the location of all forcibly disappeared persons under their control; for those who are dead, reveal their fate to their relatives.
4. Put an end to the systematic torture occurring in places of detention, and implement prison regulations on visitation, access to medical care, exercise, and communication with the outside world.
5. Issue a moratorium on death sentences.
6. Remove legal and extralegal restrictions on independent civil society, the freedom of expression and free media.

7. Ensure a fair, equal and transparent process is available for Egyptian civil society organizations to access the COP27, including independent human rights NGOs, and not limited to organizations selected by the Egyptian authorities.
8. Amend legislation on freedom of peaceful assembly to comply with Egypt's international human rights obligations, and allow the full exercise of freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression during the COP27 and afterward.

Short of highlighting the severity of the human rights crisis in Egypt and raising civil society demands, participating states and the international community would be effectively colluding with Egyptian authorities and encouraging more human rights abuses.