



## **Egypt: Immediately Release Prodemocracy Advocate Hesham Kassem and Cease the Targeting of Peaceful Dissidents**

Egyptian authorities should immediately and unconditionally release Egyptian prodemocracy dissident and press publisher Hesham Kassem, as his detention stems from the exercise of his freedom of speech, said 12 organizations today. While his trial is scheduled for 2 September, his lawyers have been denied access to his case file to date, thus undermining his due process rights. The circumstances of his detention and prosecution strongly suggest that this is a politically motivated persecution in retaliation for his opposition to the government.

Kassem, one of the sharpest critics of President Abdelfattah al-Sisi and a veteran advocate of freedom of media and the press, is detained on trumped up defamation charges for sharing on social media newspapers article on potential corruption and will stand trial on September 2. Kassem's detention comes less than two months after he cofounded the Free Current, a coalition of liberal political parties and figures opposing the Sisi government and seeking to [present alternative economic policies](#).

Kassem is being targeted by Egyptian authorities for his peaceful opposition and prodemocracy work. We fear that he may join tens of thousands of political prisoners who were [harshly sentenced in sham trials](#), or kept for years on end [in pretrial detention](#).

Despite its atrocious human rights record over the past decade, Egypt is the recipient of substantial financial and economic [support](#) from Western governments and international financial institutions. Although Egyptian authorities have been claiming recently to address the human rights situation, the detention of Kassem and the [recent surge of repressive practices](#) are yet another indication that Egyptian authorities have no intention of changing course. We call on the international community to demand the release of Kassem, and act in support of Egypt's swelling population of political prisoners.

On 19 August, although Kassem was summoned by the South Cairo Public Prosecution Office as a witness, he found out when he went to the prosecutor's office the following day that he is being

questioned as a suspect in relation to a libel complaint filed by former minister Kamal Abu Eita. Kassem had earlier shared on his social media account newspaper articles concerning allegations of corruption against Abu Eita. The Prosecutor charged Kassem with defamation, and set a bail of EGP 5,000, an unusual procedure in defamation cases, [according](#) to Kassem's lawyers, and as such, he petitioned having to pay bail.

The following day, while Kassem and his lawyers were awaiting the Prosecutor's decision regarding the request to abolish the bail, they learned that another complaint has been filed by three police personnel alleging that Kassem had verbally assaulted them while carrying out their duty. The case was referred to court with an urgent session set on Saturday 2 September. Kassem's lawyers have not been granted access to the case files, which compromises his right to a fair trial. Under international standards, defendants have the right to an adequate time to prepare for their defense, which requires courts and prosecutors to grant them access to case files.

### **Background on Hesham Kassem**

Hesham Kassem (64 years) is a renowned Egyptian press publisher, human rights defender, and liberal politician. In the mid-1990s, he published the English-speaking magazine Cairo Times, which was forced to shut down due to [restrictions](#) imposed by the government. In 2004, he cofounded Al-Masry Al-Youm, Egypt's first independent daily newspaper in decades, which quickly became one of the country's leading newspapers and challenged the dominance of state-owned media. Kassem is the former chairman of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. Hesham Kassem is also a former member of the [World Movement for Democracy's](#) Steering Committee and a recipient of the National Endowment for Democracy's 2007 Democracy Award.

In 2018, Kassem was one of the founding members of the Hope Coalition, an alliance of opposition figures and parties aiming to run as a joint list in the 2019 parliamentary elections. The coalition was ended after Egyptian authorities arrested and imprisoned several of its leaders, in what was later named the "Hope Cell" case. In June 2023, ahead of the forthcoming presidential elections, Kassem cofounded the Free Current, a liberal coalition of opposition parties and figures, seeking to present alternatives to the Sisi government's political and economic policies.

### **Background on Political Prisoners in Egypt**

Since the military coup of July 2013, the number of political prisoners in Egypt has exponentially grown. Tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience are either serving sentences handed down in grossly [unfair trials](#) or are being detained in pretrial detention, sometimes for periods extending the two-year limit stipulated by Egyptian law.

Prison conditions in Egypt have significantly deteriorated over the past decade. Access to [medical care and visitation rights](#) are granted arbitrarily, while some prisoners spend years in solitary confinement. In 2019, UN experts have [warned](#) that thousands of detainees in Egypt "may be suffering gross violations of their human rights, many of whom might be at high risk of death. This

appears to be a consistent, intentional practice by the current government of President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi to silence dissenters.” Egyptian authorities still refuse to grant independent rights groups access to prisons.

In April 2022, President Abdelfattah al-Sisi called for a National Dialogue and subsequently a presidential pardoning committee was reactivated. However, according to the Till the Last Prisoner campaign, an initiative led by Egyptian human rights defenders, while authorities released 1,662 prisoners between April 2022 and mid-July 2023, 4,968 others were newly detained on politically-motivated charges.

**Signatories:**

1. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
2. Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti Violence Studies
3. Committee for Justice
4. Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms
5. Egyptian Front for Human Rights
6. EgyptWide for Human Rights
7. Egyptian Human Rights Forum (EHRF)
8. EuroMed Rights
9. Freedom House
10. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
11. PEN America
12. World Movement for Democracy