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Egypt: Renewed Crackdown on Independent Groups Government Investigating Human Rights Workers

(London, June 15, 2015) -- Egyptian authorities are increasing their pressure on independent organizations in Egypt that receive foreign funding or have criticized government policies, ten international human rights organizations said today. Independent groups have already been subjected to continuing harassment and ordered to comply with an onerous law on associations that dates to the rule of former president Hosni Mubarak.

On June 9, government investigators working at the behest of a judge overseeing a four-year-old case against international and Egyptian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [visited the main office](#) of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) in Cairo and asked the staff to produce documents regarding the institute's registration, founding contract, and statute, as well as the budgets, financial accounts, and funding contracts for the past four years.

The investigators had previously visited the Egyptian Democratic Academy (EDA) and looked into their activities, funding sources, and whether they are in compliance with the current law on associations. Four EDA staff members have been banned from traveling outside Egypt.

"The reinvigoration of a four-year-old case against independent Egyptian civil society groups is an extremely worrisome sign that the government thinks it can get away with silencing one of the last bastions of criticism," said Joe Stork, Human Rights Watch Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa. "Egypt's allies such as the United States and European Union should make it clear that this is unacceptable."

The investigating judge has designated a group of Social Solidarity Ministry employees to a "committee of experts" to investigate whether Egyptian organizations are in compliance with the current repressive Law on Associations (Number 84 of 2002). During the June 9 visit, they refused requests from CIHRS employees to provide an official copy of their warrant, instead showing them an informal warrant without any government stamps. A CIHRS lawyer told the investigators that they could not search the office or access the files without providing an official warrant, and the investigators left.

The investigation into the foreign funding case has been split into two prosecutions, one involving foreign NGOs and one involving Egyptian NGOs. In the first case, a Cairo criminal court [sentenced](#) 43 foreign and Egyptian employees of foreign NGOs to between one and five years in prison in June 2013.

Though none of the defendants were made to serve their sentences, the verdict resulted in the closure of the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, Freedom House, the International Center for Journalists, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The government has now reinvigorated the investigation into the Egyptian NGOs, which could lead to criminal prosecution under provisions of the penal code.

Under amendments to the penal code decreed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in September 2014, prosecutors can seek a sentence of life in prison (effectively 25 years) under broad terms that include receiving money from abroad "with the aim of pursuing acts harmful to national interests or destabilizing the general peace or the country's independence and its unity."

Staff at the Cairo Institute who read the investigators' warrants said that the Hisham Mubarak Law Center and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights were also listed as targets. Both groups have provided essential work on human rights violations in Egypt.

Authorities raided the Hisham Mubarak Law Center in February 2011 and arrested staff members and staff of other international organizations who were in the office, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The authorities raided the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights in 2013 and again in 2014, seizing files and computers and detaining staff members for a few hours.

Since then, the authorities have also targeted local Egyptian NGO workers by arresting, threatening, and banning them from travel.

Mohamed Lotfy, the executive director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, was banned from travel to Germany on June 2, 2015, to attend a roundtable organized by the Green Party at the German Parliament. An Egyptian security agency officer in plain clothes confiscated his passport at the airport before releasing him back into Egypt.

On June 21, 2014, police arrested Yara Sallam, a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, amid a demonstration held to protest a restrictive 2013 law that effectively bans such demonstrations. According to Sallam's organization, she was arrested alongside her cousin while buying a bottle of water. The authorities released her cousin a few hours later but held Sallam and referred her to the prosecutor after the police discovered that she worked with a human rights organization. A judge eventually gave Sallam and others two-year prison sentences.

Other high-profile human rights workers have received indirect threats of prosecution or violence. Bahey Hassan, the CIHRS director, and another board member, have received death threats.

In August 2014, the Egyptian government gave NGOs a November 10, 2014, [deadline](#) to register under the Law on Associations, which empowers the government to reject registration applications without reasoning, shut down any group virtually at will, freeze its assets, confiscate its property, reject nominees to its governing board, block its funding, or deny requests to affiliate with international organizations. The 2002 law has never been replaced, despite government pledges to draft a new associations law abiding by international standards, but the government has not enforced it consistently.

The law provides for criminal penalties up to one year in prison for unauthorized activities by independent groups but it states that harsher penalties in other laws, including the penal code, will also apply to such activities. Under the governments of Hosni Mubarak, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), ousted president Mohamed Morsy and former president Adly Mansour, the authorities routinely harassed activists and in some cases arbitrarily shut down nongovernmental groups.

The government did not act upon the November 2014 deadline, but the current reinvigoration of the foreign funding case, first brought under the SCAF in 2011, suggests that the authorities are attempting to prevent organizations from working. If successful, independent civil society in Egypt risks being wiped out.

Few independent NGOs – most of which are registered as law firms or civil companies – complied with the November 2014 ultimatum. Others who chose not to comply shut down certain divisions, reduced their activities or relocated staff and activities abroad. The EDA, unlike most independent NGOs, successfully registered under the 2002 Law on Associations in September 2014. Nevertheless, it was the first to be investigated.

“Today, Egypt’s human rights organizations are making a desperate last stand for their independence. The international community must not let the authorities silence peaceful dissent,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa. “It’s time for members of the UN Human Rights Council to break their shameful silence on Egypt and stand up for independent civil society, including the human rights defenders whose work they so lauded after the 2011 uprising.”

The actions of the al-Sisi administration are at odds with Egypt’s pledges at its March 2015 Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council. There, Egypt’s delegation accepted recommendations to issue a new NGO law to “fully guarantee to the civil society a set of rights in conformity with international standards” and to “fully implement its international obligations to ensure the protection of human rights defenders and other civil society actors.”

The Egyptian authorities should halt enforcement of the 2002 Law on Associations immediately, including by withdrawing any prosecutions or travel bans leveled against any NGO worker simply for their work or membership in such an organization. The Egyptian authorities should adopt a new law on associations, ideally after a new parliament is elected, that complies with international human rights standards and ensure that independent civil society organizations are meaningfully consulted in the drafting process.

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