Egypt

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s government maintained its zero-tolerance policy towards dissent, introducing repressive legislation, notably a nongovernmental organization (NGO) law that may end independent associations, reinstating a state of emergency and continuing near-absolute impunity for abuses by security forces under the pretext of fighting “terrorism.”

Security forces rounded up hundreds of dissidents, mainly targeting the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The Ministry of Interior's National Security Agency arbitrarily detained, disappeared, and tortured people. There were numerous incidents of what appeared to be extrajudicial killings, including of previously detained persons in staged “shoot-outs.”

Authorities placed hundreds of people on terrorism lists and seized their assets for alleged terrorism links without due process.

The government imposed a media blackout on its counterterrorism operations in Northern Sinai. Wilayat Sinai, an affiliate of the extremist group Islamic State (ISIS) operating there, targeted civilians as well as security forces.

Military prosecutors continued to send hundreds of civilians to military trials in cases related to political dissent, whether violent or peaceful. President al-Sisi has approved in August 2016 a five-year extension of a 2014 law that expanded, to an unprecedented extent, grounds for trying civilians before military courts. Between October 2014 and September 2017, authorities sent at least 15,500 civilians to military courts including over 150 children.
Security Forces Abuses

The Interior Ministry’s National Security Agency (NSA), operating with near-absolute impunity, was responsible for the most flagrant abuses, including widespread and systematic use of torture to coerce confessions. Torture techniques included beatings, prolonged painful stress positions, and electrocutions. Prosecutors rarely investigated torture claims and almost never dropped torture-tainted confessions.

President al-Sisi declared a nation-wide state of emergency in April following church bombings claimed by the Islamic State that killed 45. At time of writing, he had extended the state of emergency three times since then. The 1958 Emergency Law gives unchecked powers to security forces to arrest and detain and allows the government to impose media censorship and order forced evictions.

The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, an independent rights group, said that as of mid-August, 378 persons had been disappeared over the previous 12 months and the whereabouts of at least 87 remained unknown. These numbers do not include those who were found killed after having gone missing.

In May, security forces arrested Hanan Badr al-Din, a co-founder of the Association of Families of the Disappeared. Prosecutors charged her with “joining a banned group” and kept her in pretrial detention. National Security agents secretly detained lawyer Ibrahim Metwally, a co-founder of the same association, in September as he was leaving for a meeting of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in Geneva. Prosecutors subsequently charged Metwally with “propagating false news” about enforced disappearance and espionage on behalf of foreign entities.

In April two judges, Husham Rauf and Assam Abdi al-Gabber, faced disciplinary proceedings for their earlier efforts to advocate for a law prohibiting torture. An investigation continued against prominent human rights lawyer Negad al-Borai, with whom they worked on the project. The judges risk dismissal for being “involved in politics” and al-Borai risks a lengthy prison sentence on charges that included implementing human rights activities without a license and receiving foreign funds.
Human Rights Watch documented three incidents in 2017 in which individuals were killed in alleged shootouts after having been detained. The Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms, another independent group, said that police “liquidated” at least 37 people in the first half of 2017. The government undertook no known investigations into these killings and provided little or no information to the families. In some cases, the NSA delayed the delivery of the bodies and forced families to bury the dead relatives without funerals.

**Death Penalty**

Since July 2013, Egyptian criminal courts have sentenced over 800 people to death. The Cassation Court, Egypt’s highest appellate court, has overturned many of those sentences and ordered retrials. In 2017, the Cassation Court upheld death sentences of 22 persons at least, who remain on death row, while 103 more death sentences were awaiting final court decisions at time of writing. Military courts have issued over 60 death sentences of civilians since July 2013 and 19 of those sentences were confirmed by the Supreme Military Court of Appeals in 2017 raising the number of civilians executed in military courts to 25.

**Freedom of Association**

President al-Sisi ratified a new law on associations in May 2017 that, when implemented, could eliminate the little remaining space for civil society and end the work of decades-old human rights and other independent associations. The law criminalizes the work of NGOs, providing for up to five-year prison terms for failing to adhere to its provisions such as operating or receiving funds without government approval.

It also provides for day-to-day monitoring by officials, including security agencies, and prohibits activities that “harm national security, public order, public morality, or public health,” vague terms that authorities can use to outlaw legitimate work. The new law gives organizations until May 23, 2018 to comply with its provisions or be dissolved. As of November, the government had not yet published implementing regulations.

The protracted criminal investigation into NGO workers involved in Case 173 of 2011, known as the “foreign funding” case, continued. As of October, the investigating judge had summoned 61 staff members for interrogation and charged 15 leading rights activists from
Authorities banned 27 from traveling outside the country. A criminal court also ordered asset freezes of 10 activists and 7 NGOs. Those summoned in 2017 included Mohamed Zarea, deputy director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, released on 30,000 (US$1,700) bail, Mostafa al-Hassan, head of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, and Abd al-Hafiz al-Tayel, director of the Egyptian Center on the Right to Education, released on 20,000 ($1,130) bail each.

**Freedom of Expression and Assembly**

The government placed two independent newspapers, *Al-Borsa* and *Daily News Egypt*, and two independent news websites, *Misr al-Arabiya* and *Cairo Portal*, on the terrorist entities lists. The placement led to asset freezes and brought the four outlets under the administration of the government-owned *Akhbar al-Youm* newspaper, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

In March, an appeals court reduced a two-year prison sentence to one-year suspended sentence for the former head of the Journalists’ Syndicate, Yehya Qallash, and two former board members, Khaled al-Balshy and Gamal Abdel Rahim. A final appeal was ongoing before Egypt’s highest appellate court, the Cassation Court.

According to RSF, as of late October, 17 journalists remained in jail. On October 21, journalist Hisham Gaafar had spent more than two years in pretrial detention, the maximum allowed by Egyptian law, on charges of receiving foreign funds for his institution, Mada Media Foundation, and joining a banned group. Authorities denied him proper medical care for prostate disease. Ismail al-Iskandani, a journalist who reported on Sinai, will have entered his third year of pretrial detention in December 2017. He faces charges of spreading false news and joining a banned group.

In May, the government blocked 21 websites of political groups and news outlets. As of October, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, an independent Egyptian group, said that the number of websites blocked reached more than 425, including rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and RSF.
President al-Sisi signed parliamentary amendments to the 2013 protest law intended to meet a Supreme Constitutional Court ruling, but they did not affect the highly restrictive nature of the law, and peaceful gatherings remain effectively banned and penalized. Security forces rounded up activists preemptively, ahead of anticipated protests. For example, at the beginning of April, security arrested 190 political activists, mostly in home raids, ahead of the mid-June parliamentary approval of the controversial government decision to cede two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia.

Al-Sisi pardoned a total of 705 prisoners in March and June, most of whom had been convicted in cases related to peaceful protests.

Conflict in Sinai

The government continued to effectively isolate North Sinai from the outside world, imposing a near-absolute media blackout and shutting down communications for weeks at a time. Extensive military operations encompassed more areas, including al-Arish, the capital of the governorate.

Between January and August 2017, 209 government forces and 430 armed group members were killed in Sinai, according to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, based on military statements that are hard to verify.

The fighting in Sinai has been marred by widespread government abuses including secret detentions, extrajudicial executions, and military trials of civilians. In April, a video confirmed to be authentic showed army officers and pro-army militia members executing at close range blindfolded detainees, later claiming the detainees were “terrorists” killed in “clashes.”

The Islamic State-affiliate Wilayat Sinai targeted civilians perceived as collaborators and Christians, as well as security forces. In many cases, attacks against government forces also killed civilians. Seven Christians were murdered in Sinai between January 30 and February 23 in attacks that bore the hallmarks of Islamic State killings, though no group claimed responsibility. As a result, hundreds of Christian families fled to cities and towns outside Sinai, leaving almost no Christian families there.
On at least two occasions, in February, armed men who identified themselves as ISIS fighters stopped buses carrying women teachers on the way to work close to Rafah to warn them they faced punishment if they did not adhere to the “Islamic” dress code they described.

Freedom of Religion

On Palm Sunday, April 9, bombings later claimed by the ISIS targeted two churches in Tanta and Alexandria, killing at least 45. They were the deadliest ISIS attack since a suicide-bomber attacked Egypt’s main Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, killing 25, in December 2016. Since then, the government stepped up security around churches.

In Minya governorate in May 2017, ISIS claimed an attack on a bus carrying Coptic passengers travelling to a monastery that killed 29.

In September, representatives of Egypt’s Orthodox Church submitted a list of more than 2,000 churches that lack any license needed legalize their status according the 2016 discriminative law. Sectarian violence around construction or repair of churches still exists and when violent incidents do occur, as in Kom al-Lofy in Minya governorate in April, the government sponsored “customary reconciliation” sessions in place of criminal investigations and prosecutions.

Social and Labor Rights

Floatation of the Egyptian Pound in late 2016, apparently as part of a $12 billion loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund, nearly halved its exchange value from $0.112 to 0.057 and inflation reached almost 35 percent.

Egypt’s economic crisis also featured constricting space for workers’ mobilization. Workers’ Strikes remain criminalized in the Egyptian law. Authorities arrested or charged at least 180 workers for peaceful workplace strikes and protests in 2016 and 2017, mostly over bonuses and delayed wages. In September, for example, security forces arrested at least eight Tax Authority workers and independent union leaders prior to anticipated protests. Independent trade unions remained effectively banned. The parliament approved
in December a new trade unions law that will keep in place many restrictions and does not recognize independent unions.

In 2018, the government-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation, the only officially-recognized union, begins its 12th year without board elections, and the government continued to appoint its leaders in violation of International Labour Organization conventions that grant the right to organize and freedom of association.

Refugee Rights

Egypt remained a destination, transit, and source country for refugees and asylum seekers. As of September, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said that 211,104 persons from 63 nationalities were registered as refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt, mostly from Syria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan.

A law on combating irregular immigration came into force in late 2016. A misdemeanor court for minor offenses sentenced 56 defendants to terms ranging from 1 to 14 years in one mass trial. The defendants faced smuggling charges related to the 2016 capsizing of a boat off the coast of Rashid on the Mediterranean coast, killing over 200 migrants. The government has released little information, if any, about where apprehended migrants are routinely held and in what conditions.

In June, police arrested dozens of Uyghur students, a Chinese Muslim minority, some of whom were registered as refugees or asylum seekers with the UNHCR. The arrests seemed to have been at the request of the Chinese government, which ordered the Uyghur students abroad, including in Egypt, to return home. The government deported some of them to China, where they faced a high risk of torture. As of October, a lawyer confirmed that authorities released at least 60 of the students and allowed them to leave to a country of their choice while 16 remained in custody.

Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls

In May, according to Al-Masry al-Youm newspaper, the Justice Ministry’s Forensic Medical Authority said that they investigated three cases of female genital mutilation (FGM)
referred by prosecutors since the government amended the penal code to introduce harsher penalties in August 2016.

Also in May, the National Program for Combating FGM reported a decline in the percentage of girls aged 15 to 17 who underwent FGM from 74 percent in 2005 to 55 percent in 2015.

In September, the Supreme Constitutional Court took a step backwards when it ruled unconstitutional a 2008 law that prohibited the official registration of marriages for children under 18, although the prohibition against child marriages remained in place. President al-Sisi publicly spoke against child marriage after the 2017 national census in September revealed that there were 118,000 girls married under 18. “It hurts me and it should hurt anyone with true conscience,” al-Sisi said.

Sexual harassment and violence against women remained endemic. Women police officers, part of a special unit started in 2013 to combat violence against women, became more visible in public places especially during crowded holidays. But prosecution of perpetrators was still rare. Two years passed since the declaration of the National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women but local groups were skeptical of the results because of the lack of monitoring mechanisms.

The government remained unresponsive to local groups’ campaigns aiming at amending the highly restrictive abortion laws.

Women continued to face discrimination under Egypt’s personal status law on equal access to divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In September and October, security forces arrested as many as 75 gay and transgender people and activists after a few activists raised a rainbow flag, a sign of LGBT activism, at a concert in Cairo. Supreme State Security Prosecution charged two with “joining an illegal group” aiming at overthrowing the constitution. Courts sentenced over 40 of the arrested to prison terms of up to 6 years under vague “debauchery” laws.
Key International Actors

Egypt’s international allies continue to support Egypt’s government and rarely offer public criticism. United States President Donald Trump, in April during al-Sisi’s visit to Washington, said “he has done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation.”

In August the United States cut $100 million and held back another $195 million of its aid to Egypt, citing human rights violations, in particular the NGO law. An August 22 State Department memo to Congress, required by law for a national security waiver to allow US assistance, reportedly stated: “The overall human rights climate in Egypt continues to deteriorate,” noting lack of access to conflict areas in Sinai.

In September, the US resumed the Bright Star joint training exercises with the Egyptian Army, after eight years of suspension. The US Senate Appropriations Committee approved withholding 26 percent of the $1 billion in military assistance for fiscal year 2018 until the secretary of state can certify Egyptian has taken “effective steps for advance democracy and human rights,” specifying release of political prisoners and holding security officials accountable. While the bill approved by the committee was not law at time of writing, it would also withhold $75 million in economic aid until the convictions of NGO staff in the “foreign funding” case are quashed or set aside.

In July, the European Union-Egypt Association Council convened for the first time in seven years. The Council released the revised adopted partnership priorities, but downplayed human rights, only mentioning them under the heading of “enhancing stability,” despite shortcomings highlighted in the European Commission’s report on EU-Egypt relations, including the restrictions on independent groups.

The United Kingdom publicly supported the Egyptian government’s counterterrorism efforts in Sinai, despite the massive rights violations associated with this initiative. The UK was largely silent about the wider human rights crisis in Egypt.

In September, Italy and Egypt exchanged the return of ambassadors despite the unresolved case of the torture and murder of Italian PhD student Giulio Regeni in 2016.
German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Cairo in March, and in April the German parliament approved a security agreement with Egypt's Interior Ministry that had weak human rights provisions and risked making German authorities complicit in torture in Egypt. Later in October, the German government said it had canceled a training for Egyptian police on combating cybercrimes saying that the skills could be “used to pursue other groups.”

France’s then-defense minister, Sylvie Goulard, and foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, visited Cairo in early June to discuss “military and security cooperation.” Neither minister commented publicly on human rights issues. Following a meeting in Paris with President al-Sisi on October 24, French President Emmanuel Macron refused to criticize Egypt’s human rights record, citing respect for state sovereignty and the struggle to defeat terrorist groups.

In May, Egyptian warplanes launched airstrikes in eastern Libya against armed groups allegedly involved in attacks on churches and Egyptian Christians in Egypt. Egypt released almost no information about the size and nature of troops that joined the Gulf countries in the war in Yemen.