

Egypt: The prison in us

Saturday 21 February 2015, by [MOSSALLAM Alia](#) (Date first published: 17 September 2014).

About a month ago I went to visit a friend in prison.

It doesn't matter who he or she was, since there are now hundreds of young men and women in Egypt's prisons because of the new Protest Law. The prisons are full to the brim with teenagers, students, fathers, brothers, daughters and only sons. They are full to the brim with dreamers and idealists and brave souls who ventured into the streets to call for the release of their friends, comrades, brothers and sisters. Our prisons also hold in captivity people who have been arrested in police stations where they were looking for their loved ones, students who attended funerals in large numbers, individuals who had arguments in petrol stations affiliated with the military and even protestors who stood outside courts calling for accountability for the murder of Khaled Saeed.

Our prisons are full of youth in their late teens and early twenties. Do you remember what it was like to be in your late teens and early twenties? It's that time when we emerge into the world, when we start applying our virgin imaginations to reality, imaginations not yet contaminated by precedence and experience that constantly remind us that things are not possible. We believe we can make the law yield to us because, surely, laws are there to deliver justice. We believe that governments can be accountable to us. But more than anything, we strongly believe we can change the world.

Sanaa Seif is one of many activists who had made it their business to be in touch with young detainees who are little-known and not campaigned for. She was constantly in touch with their families, making day trips to prisons outside of Cairo.

The last time I saw her, about a week before her arrest, she told the story of a young man who had been arrested and detained in a prison cell in Fayoum. She had joined his family on their weekly visit to him: a day trip to the prison in Fayoum, a five-hour waiting period in the sun, for a 10-minute visit. He had asked his family to get in touch with her, so that she could help campaign for better conditions for him. This young man was kept in a prison cell that received no light, and was constantly subject to raids inside his solitary dark cell, where security personnel would ransack his belongings, looking for something he didn't necessarily have. These sudden, violent raids are forms of psychological torture. You never know when to expect them, you never know what they are looking for, and you never know what your fate may be if they decide to "find" something to hold against you.

During her visit, he tried to cram as much information into the 10 minutes as he could, constantly jerking his head to watch his back as he spoke to her. In the middle of the visit, an officer stood behind Sanaa's friend and shouted – for some reason or another – that he was wearing a t-shirt of the wrong color. Without hesitating, and as he continued to explain the conditions he was held in to Sanaa, he took off his t-shirt and threw it aside. He knew the attack was an attempt to disrupt the already short visit, and tried to thwart it any way he could.

She described, giggling, how he continued to talk about his conditions, insisting she focus on scribbling down his words, while he sat there without his t-shirt.

This story, like many others, makes me think heavily of how many similar cases we know nothing about. How many of the best of us, the youngest of us, lie in dark, solitary cells, some with long uncertain sentences, others having received no trial at all, subjected day in and day out to a spectrum of forms of torture, applied only because they have no media attention to stop them.

In the day leading up to the visit to my friend in prison, my stomach was rampant with butterflies. I was excited about seeing a friend I missed, I was nervous about not knowing what to expect, I was afraid I would be moved or dismayed to the point that I would let him down. I wanted to be full of good news, and laughable incidents. I wanted to tell him stories about our children and I made lists of updates about all that was colorful. I wanted, more than anything, to see and hear how he was doing.

When we arrived at the prison, we “registered” our visit at the gates, and waited until we were informed that our turn was coming. We stood in a line with other families, until we were admitted. We went through a variety of searches, and were finally admitted to a large, predominantly concrete indoor courtyard, a rectangular room lined with a built-in concrete bench that went all around it. We went in and out, trying to move in all the supplies we had bought with us for him and fellow detainees: food, drinks, books, letters and fresh, white laundry. The room was filled with families; mothers, daughters, husbands and brothers of other prisoners. All were moving supplies in, or straightening themselves out in preparation for the visit.

And then all our loved ones stepped in casually, in white, like a gust of fresh air. The room was flooded with love, a real, desperate, intense kind of love that came from missing someone, from loving someone, from worrying about someone, and the gasping sense of love of a long-anticipated meeting.

The family before us and closest to the door was that of the son of a prominent politician on a different end of the political spectrum, certainly not our own. His family (brothers, wife, sisters) came with large containers of pickles, and other kinds of food, and he was dressed in blue. After us, was a comrade whose wife and another relative had come to visit. Across from us, on the other side of the room, were two wives who had come to see their husbands. They were fully adorned in face veils and one of them had her four or five-year-old son. Both couples sat under a make-shift partition – an invention by the prisoners, consisting of a blanket pegged to the wall. They hid behind the blanket and, in one case, only the woman could hide, in an attempt to create a moment of seclusion, or perhaps just lose a few layers, in a small enclosure where they could be together as they would anywhere else.

The last of the six prisoners had the biggest number of visitors. An array of what seemed to be a mother, sisters, husbands and children had set up a picnic, complete with sweets and savory foods, cold and warm drinks, and the chatter and air of glee that accompanied such events. They abandoned the bench and sat on the large square blanket they had set up before he came in.

Everyone in that room had prepared for that visit. Everyone had made long lists of all the stories they could tell, of all the happiness they could bring in, of all the life they could cram into that one hour of grey, concrete existence.

I had hoped to bring freshness to what I imagined was a stale existence, but there was so much love intensified in that hour that I felt rejuvenated just being there. I felt humbled. I felt relieved. I felt, at a moment when I had lost so much hope in possibility, when I felt so much bitterness and disappointment toward so many people, that I was quenched somehow. All I wanted to do was take it in, to watch my friend, to hear his analysis, his plans for what we must and should be doing to change things, and watch the children run back and forth in and out of their father’s arms, play tag

with one another, and bring motion to the concrete.

When the guards warned us that the visits were ending, the air of desperate love got thicker. With an air of urgency, some made lists of their needs, others told stories quicker, and the couples across from us disappeared behind their blankets. Everyone crammed closer together.

Then the guards announced that the visits were over. The loved ones stood up and the goodbyes started. People took turns smuggling away their tears, while others gave their last hugs, held their faces close and whispered their last reassurances. The friend to our left hugged his wife one last time, and as he walked away, a single sob escaped her. He rushed back and kissed her with such force and passion, I struggled not to come undone.

As our friend prepared to leave in a rush, he asked "What's happening outside? You haven't told me what's happening outside!" I stared back at him in shock, and looked at my other friend, who was also new to the visits. "Outside? We started with news of Gaza," I told him. He laughed, saying "Not outside of Egypt - outside, outside!"

As the guards infiltrated to rush us away, we threw random pieces of news at him and he replied to each of them. In an air of flurry, excitement and absolute randomness, we tried to cram more and more of the world into those last few minutes - events he could think about, ideas he could chew on. Though God knows how much more he had loaded us with.

And then we left them. We all left them behind. It was time for them to go, but the end to the visit was that we were to leave the courtyard and they were to assemble and be escorted back to their cells. He stood there and watched us go. We walked away, out of that concrete room charged with life, into the barren, sun-scorched and helpless existence we led outside.

The best of us are in those prisons. The best of us are locked away, for speaking, writing and documenting against injustice. The best of us are locked away for fear that they may liberate us of our own stale, unjust existence. A fragile existence ours is. For these arrest raids spare only the silent; but can one stay silent forever?

P.S.

* <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/prison-us>