

Unprecedented police crackdown: Solidarity with the LGBTIQ community in Egypt

Tuesday 17 October 2017, by [DAHHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 12 October 2017).

An unprecedented police crackdown has been launched against the LGBTIQ community in Egypt since Sept. 22, 2017, after the concert of the Lebanese group Mashrou' Leila in Cairo, during which rainbow flags, a symbol of the LGBT community, were displayed by some people in the public.

Following the publication of images on internet social networks of the concert, political figures, political parties' representatives, members of Parliament and Al-Azhar religious scholars condemned the people waving the rainbow flags and pressured the state to put an end to — what they called — attempts to corrupt the youth. One church organized an anti-gay conference. Police and security forces began arresting dozens of individuals — either LGBTIQ or perceived as being — most of whom had no connection with the concert. At least 57 individuals have been incarcerated in Egypt since then.

The majority of those arrested were accused of “debauchery” or “promotion of debauchery,” according to articles 9 and 10 of the anti-prostitution and debauchery law of 1961. Others face accusations of facilitating debauchery, and being a member of a banned group to disrupt provisions of the Constitution and the law by inciting “deviance.” These laws are used by the courts to circumvent the absence of explicit penalization of homosexuality in Egypt.

Eight individuals arrested have already been sentenced to between one and six years' of imprisonment.

The arrests, interrogations, and indictments are similarly in gross violations of the right to a fair trial and its guarantees, in accordance with the Constitution and international conventions that have been ratified by the successive Egyptian regimes. Those imprisoned were not able to exercise their constitutional rights to contact their families and choose their lawyers. The arrested individuals were also subjected to threats and torture, including violent beatings, persistent insults in police stations, threats of sexual violence and “anal examinations ” to “prove” their homosexuality.

Egyptian media also have a criminal role in calling and encouraging the police and security forces to repress LGBTIQ individuals, or suspected of being LGBTIQ. They promoted a hate and discriminatory speech against these individuals by claiming that waving a rainbow flag, as well as any LGBTIQ person, poses a threat to Egyptian values and morals. In addition to this, they slandered those incarcerated by publishing their personal details in the news before interrogations are concluded or formal charges are made. As a reminder, in December 2014, TV journalist Mona al-Iraqi led a security raid on a bathhouse in Cairo, filming men who were arrested and publishing their identities.

The Supreme Council for Media joined this campaign by publishing a statement saying: “Homosexuals should not appear in visual, broadcast media or the Press.” They argued as well that

homosexuality is considered to be “a disease and a shame that is best kept hidden, not promoted.”

The pop rock group Mashrou ‘Leila, committed to the cause LGBTQI denounced in a statement on Facebook a “witch hunt.” They declared “We cannot begin to explain how saddened we are to see yet another era of backwards tyranny creep over one of our most beloved countries and audiences.”

Already persona non grata in Jordan, the very conservative Egyptian Musicians’ union said the Lebanese group should not be able to perform in Egypt in the future.

The campaign of repression widened in the days following the concert and included members of the National Council for Human Rights and members of parliament, some of whom submitted requests for investigations. A member of the Legislative and Constitutional Affairs committee in Parliament stated that the committee would look into reinforcing the penalty for homosexuality, despite this not being a crime in Egypt.

This campaign against LGBTQI is not an isolated incident or a new one. 232 persons, either LGBTQI or perceived as being, were arrested between the last quarter of 2013 and the month of March 2017. The overwhelming majority of people had been convicted in relation to the anti-prostitution and debaucheries mentioned.

At a time when we are writing “this witch-hunt,” the worst in two decades, was continuing, while some people were hiding to avoid imprisonment. Activists who have denounced the recent crackdown, such as Sarah Hegazy, have also been arrested. Sarah Hegazy has been jailed, beaten by inmates, and could face a life sentence in an Egyptian prison if found guilty of “promoting sexual deviancy” and other charges tied to her alleged crime: waving a rainbow flag at a concert.

Until today, no Western government has publicly condemned or commented on this crackdown.

This is the worst crackdown against people based on their perceived sexual orientation since the mass arrests of 52 people following a raid on the Queen Boat, a floating nightclub on the Nile, in 2001. Sexual relations between two consenting same-sex adults, of course, should not be considered a punishable offense.

As argued very rightly by the Mashrou ‘Leila group “This crackdown is by no means separable from the suffocating atmosphere of fear and abuse experienced by all Egyptians on a daily basis, regardless of their sexual orientations.”

The Egyptian regime have used widespread arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture against political opposition members and perceived dissidents, many of them alleged members or sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood, but also leftist, democrats, human rights defenders, journalists and others. This is without forgetting, the massacre of more than 800 protestors of the Muslim Brotherhoods and its supporters in Cairo’s Raba’a Square in August 2013. The Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), an independent human rights group, has identified 30 people who died from torture while being held in police stations and other Interior Ministry detention sites between August 2013 and December 2015. In 2016, the ECRF reported that its lawyers received 830 torture complaints and that another 14 people had died from torture in custody.

Egyptian authorities have also arrested a number of leaders of independent trade unions in recent weeks. Nine leaders have been arrested and of those, seven remain in jail. Other independent trade unionists are threatened to suffer a similar fate. The authorities have not recognized independent trade unions operating outside of the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation, while workers have been arrested for engaging in labor strikes.

Human rights groups in Egypt estimate that more than 60,000 political prisoners languish in the country's jails. Twenty prisons have been built since Sisi took power.

The regime continued as well to prosecute people for defamation of religion, notably atheists, while religious minorities, including Coptic Christians, Shi'a Muslims and Baha'is, continue to face discriminatory restrictions in law and practice and inadequate protection from violence.

The Sisi's regime is without any doubt the most counter-revolutionary actor in Egypt.

Down with al-Sisi's authoritarian regime and all oppressors.

Solidarity with the LGBTQI and against all forms of oppression.

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P.S.

* Peace News. October 12, 2017:

<http://peacenews.org/2017/10/12/solidarity-lgbtqi-community-egypt-joseph-daher/>

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