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EGYPT'S RESILIENT AND EVOLVING SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Amr Hamzawy

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About the Author

Amr Hamzawy studied political science and developmental studies in Cairo, The Hague, and Berlin. He was previously a senior associate in the Middle East program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace between 2005 and 2009. Between 2009 and 2010, he served as the research director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon. He has also served on the faculty at the American University in Cairo, Cairo University, and Stanford University.

His research and teaching interests, as well as his academic publications, focus on democratization processes in Egypt, tensions between freedom and repression in the Egyptian public space, political movements and civil society in Egypt, contemporary debates in Arab political thought, and human rights and governance in the Arab world.

Hamzawy is a former member of the People's Assembly after being elected in the first parliamentary elections in Egypt after the January 25, 2011, revolution. He is also a former member of the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights. Hamzawy contributes a weekly op-ed to the Egyptian independent newspaper *Shorouk* and to the All Arab daily *al-Quds al-Arabi*.

Summary

With the decline of party politics in Egypt, social activism is becoming increasingly relevant in the fight against the government's new authoritarian policies and tactics. While Egypt's ruling generals have developed a tight grip on power in virtually every sector of society, various activist groups have had at least some success in holding the government accountable for human rights abuses. It will take many more victories to counteract the entrenched repression, but these groups offer the best hope for changing Egypt's current reality.

The Struggle

- Since 2013, four anti-authoritarian platforms—led by young activists, professional associations, student groups, and workers and civil servants—have shaped social activism in Egypt.
- Spontaneous eruptions of popular anger have also become politically significant.
- In contrast, opposition parties have become less significant. Unable to carve out a stable, independent role in Egyptian politics, they are gradually turning to activist initiatives to exert some influence.
- Young activists remain committed to single human rights causes, primarily focused on extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, or torture in places of custody.
- Certain professional associations—particularly the Syndicate of Doctors and Syndicate of Journalists—have ramped up their demands for autonomy and freedoms of expression and association.
- Students are challenging the security services' interference in their affairs and the presence of government and private security forces on campuses.
- Workers and civil servants remain highly engaged, continuing to voice the economic and social demands of organized labor.
- Citizens have frequently taken to the streets to protest specific government policies and practices, as well as accumulating human rights abuses.

The Impact

- The government is using repression, undemocratic legal frameworks, and aggressive judicial tools to try to extinguish social activism. A large number of activists have been detained and arrested.

- Yet, the activism has restored pluralist politics to professional associations and increased popular awareness of the daily instances of repression.
- Labor activism has not been quashed, despite the banning of independent unions and the frequent referral of protesters to military courts; nor has the government's renewed co-optation of the General Union of Egyptian Workers silenced the protesting of deteriorating economic and social conditions.
- The government's tactics have also failed to vanquish student activism. Students continue to hold protests and have successfully mobilized against pro-government candidates in student union elections.
- The frequency of popular protests has resulted in a relatively effective push back against the impunity of police personnel implicated in human rights abuses.

Introduction

Egypt's ruling generals are cracking down on civil society and secular opposition parties and severely inhibiting Islamist movements. The regime has empowered the security services to exercise outright repression and since 2013 has enacted numerous undemocratic laws with little resistance from a submissive legislature. Meanwhile, the media has propagated populist rhetoric that legitimates the unchecked power of the generals and ridicules demands for democratic alternatives.

In the face of this holistic repressive campaign, various pro-democracy politicians and opposition parties have grown demoralized and lost hope. For them, the current Egyptian reality offers few opportunities to effect democratic change and protect human rights. Thus, at first glance, it seems that the new authoritarian government has succeeded in equating the post-2011 brief democratic opening with chaos and the worsening of social and economic conditions. Egypt's civil society appears to be dominated by the military establishment and overshadowed by the double-sided image of an authoritarian government and a powerless opposition—reflecting just how effective the crackdown on liberal, leftist, and Islamist parties has been.

However, this picture ignores another crucial narrative: the emergence of resilient and adaptable social activism. Since 2013, popular protests spearheaded by young activists, professional associations, student groups, and the labor movement have been shaping Egypt's reality as much as individual initiatives taking on human rights abuses and police brutality. These actors are linked by the absence of ideology and partisan banners and by their resilience to authoritarian tools and tactics. They hold the promise of restoring a degree of openness in the public space and of reviving pluralist politics despite the generals' stiff resistance.

Since 2013, popular protests spearheaded by young activists, professional associations, student groups, and the labor movement have been shaping Egypt's reality.

The Limitations of Party Politics

Parties on the right and left have taken one of two positions since the 2013 coup: either endorse or condemn the policies of the new authoritarian government. Neither position has prevented the decline of the parties' political roles.¹ Egyptian parties—facing a government that interferes systematically in elections to organize comfortable majorities and a security apparatus determined to restrict their outreach activities and to drown them in internal

conflicts—have not been able to carve out a stable and independent space for their role in politics. The reality of marginalization has pushed some parties to deprioritize politics and move closer to collective actors such as student groups and the labor movement in the hopes of escaping the authoritarian grip. However, there too the government has limited the parties' role using intimidation and prosecution.

Signs of Unwavering Support

Despite the current landscape, some political parties have opted to collaborate with the ruling generals to embed themselves in the legislative and executive branches of government. Their positions are not changing, even as the hegemony of the military establishment and security services is rising within the

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state apparatus and in key sectors of society. This trend is manifested most clearly in the ascendancy of the former minister of defense, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to the presidential office in 2014 and in the expansion of the army's role in the economy.

Notable among these groups are the New Wafd Party, the Free Egyptians Party, the Congress Party, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Nation's Future Party, the

Democratic Front, and the National Progressive Unionist Party. The Wafd and Social Democratic parties led the formation of the first cabinet after the 2013 coup and enjoyed strong representation in the Constituent Assembly tasked with amending the country's constitution. Other parties, including the Free Egyptians, Nation's Future, and Congress parties, have endorsed governmental policies without equivocation and have been rewarded with parliamentary representation.

In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the pro-authoritarian parties nominated candidates and won seats in the House of Representatives.² The Free Egyptians Party gained sixty-five seats, while the Nation's Future and Wafd parties won fifty-three and thirty-five seats, respectively. Smaller parties also won seats: for example, twelve seats went to the Congress Party, four seats to the Social Democratic Party, and one seat to the Unionist Party.³ Although the security services promoted non-party-affiliated candidates and made sure they earned a majority of the seats, the pro-authoritarian parties, apart from the Social Democratic Party, have not faltered in their support for the ruling generals.

These parties also continue to tout the government's populist rhetoric.⁴ They describe the 2013 coup as a revolution against Islamist fascism, deny the role of the military establishment and security services in human rights abuses, and frequently blame the Muslim Brotherhood—and less frequently pro-democracy groups—for sowing the seeds of violence and instability in Egypt.⁵ The leftist Unionist Party, for example, issued a statement in June 2015 lauding the 2013 coup:

[It] was an unprecedented popular revolution that aimed to save the Egyptian society and the nation from the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood and to end the rule of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office. It saved Egypt from conspiracies (put forward by domestic, regional, and international enemies) to break up the state and destroy the nation's army. It saved Egypt from the terrorist militias of the Muslim Brotherhood that violently tried to tear our society along sectarian, religious, and ideological dividing lines.⁶

The liberal-leaning Free Egyptians Party has employed similar rhetoric to mythologize the coup as a revolution and to portray the ruling generals as saviors and modernizers.⁷ The party stated that it was necessary to maintain the 2013 revolutionary spirit to “carry out the more important revolution: the revolution of work, production, knowledge, and social revolution and the revolution in religious discourse.”⁸ In various other statements, it frequently used the government's assertions that Egypt was on the path to a democratic transition and that the creation of a modern civil state and the emancipation of politics from religion were in sight.⁹ The party has even accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being driven by fascists and supporting terrorism, while claiming that the military establishment and security services are being unjustly implicated in human rights abuses.¹⁰

Signs of Opposition

While some parties have shown unwavering support, others have opposed the generals from the beginning or have switched to emerging opposition platforms over time. Several liberal and leftist parties have distanced themselves from the new authoritarian government as of early 2017, after initially siding with the generals as they performed the 2013 coup and remaining silent about their crackdown on voices of dissent and pro-democracy groups.

For example, the Constitution Party participated extensively in the immediate post-coup power arrangement. Mohamed ElBaradei, the party's founder, was appointed vice president on July 9, 2013.¹¹ Other key figures participated in the first cabinet after the coup and in the Constituent Assembly.¹² However, ElBaradei resigned on August 14, 2013, in protest of the forced dispersal and mass killing of Muslim Brotherhood supporters during their sit-ins. He accused the government of violating basic human rights and shedding blood instead of searching for political solutions to the Islamist opposition to the coup. Since the founder's resignation, party leaders have gradually begun to oppose the ruling generals and their new authoritarian tactics.

Other parties have found themselves in similar situations, most notably the left-leaning Socialist People's Alliance Party and the Nasserist Dignity Party. Along with several smaller liberal and leftist parties, they coalesced to form a

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platform named the Democratic Current.¹³ Since late 2013, the Democratic Current has grown more vocal in its opposition. It has issued several statements to condemn the passing of undemocratic laws, such as the Protest Law and the Terrorism Law, and to call on the government to end human rights abuses, including torture, forced disappearances, and the referral of civilians to military trials.¹⁴ In the 2014 presidential election, the Democratic Current refused to support Sisi and instead backed Hamdeen Sabahy, a leftist political veteran and a founding member of the Dignity Party.¹⁵

The opposing platform has pushed back against the government's repression, condemning the detention for political purposes of scores of young Egyptians, the involvement of the security services in torture, and the use of excessive force against peaceful demonstrators and protesting workers.¹⁶ It has supported independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) facing rising pressure from the government—including forced closures and the banning of various activists from travel.¹⁷ And it has stood in solidarity with workers' groups and members of professional associations defending the freedoms of association and expression.¹⁸

As a result of its efforts, the Democratic Current continues to garner the support of other disenchanted parties, such as the Social Democratic Party.¹⁹ This party repositioned itself after severe internal tensions and resignations en masse, led by the party's foremost pro-authoritarian members.²⁰ The opposition also includes parties that did not endorse the 2013 coup from the beginning. As the ruling generals were ascending to power in 2013 and 2014, these parties moved from reserved opposition to full-fledged rejection. The Strong Egypt Party, with semi-liberal and semi-religious leanings, emerged in this context, as did the Bread and Freedom Party that has garnered the support of young leftist activists and students.²¹ Both parties boycotted the 2014 presidential and 2015 parliamentary elections because of the government's systematic interference that undermined any democratic potential. They have also criticized the government's involvement in human rights abuses and collaborated with young activist protesters, student groups, professional associations, and the labor movement.²²

In a formal political arena controlled by the military establishment and security services, making critical statements about official policies has become the opposition's primary tool. Some independent parliamentarians, as well as the few parliamentarians representing the Democratic Current and the Social Democratic Party, have used their seats to establish a parliamentary coalition that has become an opposing voice in the House of Representatives.²³ Yet, the sweeping pro-government majority has sustained the rubber-stamp character of Parliament and has ensured that the body's legislative and oversight roles remain limited.²⁴ The government's tight grip on power continues to successfully marginalize political parties and quell their opposition efforts.

Little Challenge to the Authoritarian Surge

The growing opposition of some liberal and leftist parties has not prevented the generals from closing the public space or mocking formal politics. Statements condemning undemocratic laws have not forced the government to change its position.²⁵ Similarly, increased criticism of human rights abuses has not discouraged the security services from conducting wide-scale repression.²⁶ The Democratic Current and other opposing political parties have been unable to stymie the oppression of independent NGOs, professional associations, and organized labor. In other words, the actions of opposition parties have not elicited any real change in the policies that the government has implemented since 2013, nor in the power arrangement that emerged to subjugate citizens and society to the domination of the military establishment and security services.²⁷

In fact, the government's response has been to implement even harsher policies. For example, in 2016, members of the Syndicate of Doctors publicly protested repeated police attacks on physicians and nurses administering medical support in public hospitals.²⁸ To demonstrate solidarity and support, representatives of various opposition parties attended a general assembly held by the syndicate.²⁹ Immediately after the meeting, citing the politicization of the doctors' protests (through party involvement), the government moved legally and judicially to crush the syndicate.³⁰

Similar events unfolded in the spring of 2016. The Syndicate of Journalists was at the core of peaceful protests against a maritime border agreement signed between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, based on which the Egyptian government recognized Saudi Arabia's sovereignty over the Egyptian-administered Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir. The agreement sparked popular protests, led by young activists and various liberal and leftist opposition parties that for the first time since the 2013 coup seemed willing to confront the government. The syndicate's headquarters became the geographical focal point for the opposition.³¹ In response, and once again citing the politicization of the syndicate's role by the opposition parties, the government ordered the security services to encircle the syndicate for several days and to close all roads leading to it. Security forces arrested journalists participating in the protests, accused the elected board of the syndicate of inciting violence, and drummed up litigation against three members of the elected board.³²

Aware of the limitations imposed on their roles in the public space and in formal politics, opposition parties have sought new outreach activities. Some parties, especially the Strong Egypt and Bread and Freedom parties, have attempted to organize loyal student groups. Other parties, such as those part of the Democratic Current, have focused their actions on preparing candidates for the municipal elections scheduled for 2017, articulating bold plans to contest

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the presidential elections in 2018, and highlighting the ongoing economic and social failures of the ruling generals as well as their human rights abuses.³³

However, even these activities have not altered the structural weakness of opposition parties. Targeted constituencies—such as young activists, students, and the urban middle class, particularly affected by the deteriorating living conditions in Egypt—have lost their trust in parties and party politics. Contributing factors have been (1) the flip-flopping of some parties between

Perhaps realizing the parties' incapacity to effect change and loss of constituency support, Egypt's ruling generals have focused more on cracking down on Islamist movements, independent NGOs, and other emerging activist groups.

legitimizing the 2013 coup and later rejecting the policies of the generals, (2) the initial silence of several opposition parties regarding human rights abuses, and (3) the continued failure of all opposition parties to articulate concrete policy platforms that offer sound solutions for the country's economic and social problems.

Perhaps realizing the parties' incapacity to effect change and loss of constituency support, Egypt's ruling generals have focused more on cracking down on Islamist movements, independent NGOs, and other emerging activist groups.³⁴ Only a few cases of detention and a limited number of arrest warrants have been reported in relation to members of opposition parties. Also, party leaders have not faced the ongoing defamation campaign from the government-controlled public and private media.

The Splintering of Islamist Movements

Different Islamist movements have exhibited different trajectories since 2013. Some have experienced the full brunt of government-sponsored repression because of their opposition to the authoritarian power arrangement. Others have sided with the government and accepted co-optation to avoid being targeted. While opposition Islamists have been forcefully pushed out of politics, co-opted Islamists have held on to what slivers of legitimacy and spaces for activity they can find. However, the splintering of Islamist movements has resulted in a tangible decline in their political significance.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been one of the regime's prime targets. In the summer of 2013, the Brotherhood was at the core of what the government called "enemies of the nation."³⁵ Several Brotherhood leaders were arrested either a few hours before the coup or in its immediate aftermath. The Brotherhood's protest sit-ins—which were organized following the coup to demand the return of the former elected president, Mohamed Morsi—were forcefully dispersed by the military and security forces.³⁶ As of early 2017, arrests of the Brotherhood's rank and file have continued in large numbers.³⁷ The security services have been systematically involved in human rights abuses, including the extrajudicial killing of Brotherhood members, the torture of some prisoners and detainees, and the neglect of the medical needs of others in custody.³⁸

The government has also used various legal and judicial instruments to repress the Muslim Brotherhood. In September 2013, a court ordered that the movement be banned and its financial assets be frozen.³⁹ In December 2013, the government declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, mandating its dissolution and again calling for the freezing of its financial assets.⁴⁰ In August 2014, the administrative court system revoked the license of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and mandated its dissolution.⁴¹

All this has been unfolding in a public space void of freedom of expression and injected with government-backed hate speech and hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴² Charges of undermining Egypt's stability, sabotaging the national economy, and disrupting developmental efforts have been leveled against the Brotherhood.⁴³ The government has also intentionally conflated the Brotherhood's agenda with that of jihadist groups to stigmatize the movement with labels of extremism and terrorism.⁴⁴

In part as a result of this, the Muslim Brotherhood's political significance has declined. Its exclusion from formal politics, the ban of the movement and its party, and the government-sponsored branding of the movement as a terrorist entity have shaken its popular base.

In addition, the Brotherhood's organizational capacities have weakened considerably due to various fissures within the movement between the elders and the youth, the pragmatic doves and the ideological hawks, and the non-violent and violent factions.⁴⁵ In particular, the elders have used their financial influence to retain control over the movement and, in doing so, have alienated the young and middle-aged rank and file.⁴⁶ Young leaders have gradually become more forceful in their opposition to the elders.⁴⁷ A key issue of contestation is the use of violence, which some young leaders regard as a legitimate tool in the struggle against the new authoritarian tactics.⁴⁸ The result has been the emergence of violent splinter groups within the Brotherhood, such as the Revolutionary Punishment Movement and the Egypt Arms Movement.⁴⁹

Due to the sustained and systematic government repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, the probability of internal conflicts and defections within the movement will continue to rise.⁵⁰

Other opposition groups in the Islamist spectrum have exhibited similar trends. Al-Jamaa al-Islamiya (the Islamic Group) and its political party, Construction and Development, along with the Center Party have faced internal conflicts and defections of young members—some of which have become more amenable to radical ideas and toying with violence as a legitimate tool.⁵¹

However, neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor other opposition Islamist groups have completely disintegrated. Some of their mobilization and organizational capacities have remained intact. Between 2013 and 2016, Brotherhood members carried out different protest activities across the country to demand

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either the release of their imprisoned leaders or to voice economic, social, and political concerns.⁵² As of early 2017, the Brotherhood has continued to mobilize some of its members to participate in popular protests against the government's economic policies.⁵³ Also, the fact that mass resignation of the Brotherhood's and other opposition Islamists' rank and file has not happened since 2013 testifies to the continued presence of some organizational capacities.⁵⁴ Sweeping generalizations regarding the total eradication of opposition Islamists are misplaced.

Meanwhile, Islamist movements that chose in 2013 to support the coup and side with the generals have also lost political significance and presence in society. And they are in no better position than the Islamist opposition to counter this erosion.

Pro-government Salafis did not face the fate of the Brotherhood and other Islamists that chose to defy the will of the new regime.⁵⁵ They avoided being banned and were given stakes in the post-2013 power arrangement. For example, after the Alexandrian Salafi Missionary Group and its political party, al-Nur, assisted the military establishment and security services in preparing for the 2013 coup,⁵⁶ they were included in the Constituent Assembly and allowed to have access to the government-controlled media.⁵⁷

The Salafi group and its party endorsed the former minister of defense for president in 2014.⁵⁸ In return, they were free to field candidates in the 2015 parliamentary elections. These pro-government Salafis expected to gain a significant number of seats in the legislature, but that expectation proved to be misguided. The regime's need for Salafi support has declined as its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has ramped up and the government has gained more control over official religious institutions.⁵⁹ As a result, al-Nur was given only twelve seats in the House of Representatives.⁶⁰ This is in stark contrast to the 2012 parliamentary elections, in which the party landed nearly 111 seats.⁶¹

Against the backdrop of declining party politics and the inability of both pro-government and opposition parties to influence government policies, other collective actors have advanced to articulate democratic demands and contest the unchecked power of the ruling generals. Egypt's political reality has been shaped by the activism of these actors and by their resilience when faced with authoritarian tools and tactics.

Freedom for the Brave and Other Single-Cause Initiatives

Since 2013, young activists, students, and human rights groups have taken the helm of numerous advocacy initiatives. They often lack organizational capabilities and remain committed to a single cause related to human rights abuses, such as extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, or torture in places of

custody. In aiming to raise citizens' awareness and mobilize them to demand an end to human rights abuses, these initiatives have to navigate a social and political environment in which large segments of the population are either resigned and less interested in standing up for the victims of abuses or simply fearful of being targeted themselves by an increasingly repressive government. This represents a significant departure from the pre-2013 coup environment in which similar advocacy initiatives were able to mobilize citizens with less fear.

For example, before the 2011 revolution, the We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page was instrumental in drawing public attention to the death of the young Alexandrian Khaled Said at the hands of the security services. It focused on two demands: ending torture and holding accountable the security officials implicated in acts of torture. The page administrators called for the popular protests on January 25, 2011, that culminated in the revolution.⁶² In the fall of 2011, the Maspero Youth Union was formed to demand justice and accountability for Egypt's Coptic Christians after army and police forces killed dozens of them during a rally to protest increased sectarian violence and attacks on churches.⁶³ The union's activism has sustained public awareness about the incident and challenged the government's attempts to erase the memory. However, army and police officers implicated in the Maspero killing have yet to be held accountable.⁶⁴

In post-2013 Egypt, Freedom for the Brave represents the most significant example of a single-cause initiative.⁶⁵ A group of lawyers, young activists, students, and journalists launched the initiative in 2014 to support victims of political detention and prisoners of conscience and to improve conditions in prisons and other places of custody. The group formed primarily in response to the mass arrest of more than 1,000 citizens by the security services on the third anniversary of the 2011 revolution.⁶⁶ The press statement announcing the initiative refers to its members' determination to carry out "vigils and marches to demand the release of all political detainees and prisoners," including those victims affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements whose involvement in acts of violence or terrorism remains unsubstantiated.⁶⁷ Since 2014, Freedom for the Brave has spearheaded attempts to shed light on human rights abuses committed against young activists, students, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In particular, Freedom for the Brave has been a champion for the rights of victims of forced disappearances. The group has documented several cases of both forced disappearances and police detention without judicial investigations. The reports have been informed by direct contact with victims' families and information provided by human rights and legal assistance organizations.⁶⁸

Freedom for the Brave has also been attempting to raise public awareness about the gravity of human rights abuses and the deteriorating conditions for prisoners and detainees. For example, in February 2014, the group launched a campaign called Support Them, in which interested citizens send telegrams

to the general prosecutor and the National Council for Human Rights to inquire about the treatment and health status of prisoners and detainees and to demand that prisoners' complaints be investigated.⁶⁹ In June 2016, the group also started a media campaign to draw attention to the negative psychological and physical repercussions of solitary confinement, a widely used punishment in prisons.⁷⁰

Freedom for the Brave depends primarily on social media networks to disseminate information about specific victims and to organize activities designed to demonstrate solidarity with them. Lawyers associated with the initiative have taken up several cases for imprisoned victims, identified the litigation against them, and argued in their defense in court. Additionally, these lawyers have documented human rights abuses in prisons, such as torture, solitary confinement, and denial of medical treatment. Although these efforts have

neither led to the release of prisoners nor improved prison conditions, they have made the prisoners' stories accessible to the public and have revealed the details of the injustice they have faced.⁷¹

Freedom for the Brave has not been able to organize peaceful protests to draw attention to its cause. The government's wide-scale repression and the draconian laws passed to criminalize freedoms of expression and associa-

tion have made the cost of protesting immensely high.⁷² Fearing the arrest of its young activists and students, the group has refrained from calling for rallies or demonstrations. Individual group action, which lies at the core of Freedom for the Brave, is too limited and too fragile to take on the new authoritarian government in the streets and public spaces. But, organized collective action stemming from professional associations, student movements, and labor activism is not.

Individual group action [as opposed to collection action] is too limited and too fragile to take on the new authoritarian government in the streets and public spaces.

Professional Associations

Some professional associations have also been pushing back against the new authoritarianism on issues related to their autonomy and freedoms of expression and association. The Syndicate of Doctors and the Syndicate of Journalists in particular have taken on larger roles in the resistance since 2015.⁷³ The elected boards of both syndicates have been instrumental in mobilizing the base—either by calling for emergency general assemblies or by other means—and in motivating members to peacefully oppose authoritarianism. The resulting activism has restored pluralist politics to professional associations, created new spaces for the resistance of authoritarian policies and practices, and significantly increased popular awareness about the details of daily repression in which the government is implicated. The role of Egypt's professional associations today is reminiscent of the one they played in the 1980s and 1990s, in

which they were at the forefront of challenging autocratic control over civil society and pushing for their autonomy by defending the right of members to elect the syndicates' boards without security interference.⁷⁴

The Syndicate of Doctors

In 2015 and 2016, there was a profusion of incidents, documented on social networking and other media sites, in which police personnel attacked doctors, nurses, and other individuals administering medical care in public hospitals. One event involved the arrest, assault, and death of a veterinarian in a police station.⁷⁵ In another incident, two policemen attacked medical doctors at the government-run Matariya Teaching Hospital.⁷⁶

In the wake of the Matariya incident, doctors at the hospital organized a full strike and closed the facility pending legal action. The two doctors who were attacked filed a legal complaint in a police station, accusing nine security agents of physical assault.⁷⁷ The elected board of the syndicate issued a public statement to detail the incident and the reasons for the Matariya hospital strike. The board also filed a complaint with the general prosecutor, demanding that the security agents implicated be held accountable.

In response, the general prosecutor ordered the arrest of the security agents, but they were released a few hours later. The board perceived this action as a manifestation of the government's arrogance and disregard for the legitimate demands of the syndicate.⁷⁸ Consequently, nearly 10,000 doctors congregated at an emergency session of the General Assembly on February 12, 2016.⁷⁹ Leading the protest and articulating the demands were two charismatic figures of the board: the president, Dr. Mohamed Khairy Abdel Dayem, and the vice president, Dr. Mona Mina.

Under the board's directive, the doctors unanimously approved a package of decisions and demands to pass on to government officials. The syndicate called on the government to recognize the right of doctors to refrain from work if medical staff or facilities came under attack. The doctors also demanded that the general prosecutor act quickly to investigate police personnel implicated in attacks. The syndicate also lobbied both the legislature and government to immediately pass legislation clearly criminalizing attacks on medical staff and facilities, pushing for harsher punishments for such crimes.

Further, the syndicate asserted its right to hold protest vigils on February 20, 2016—known as vigils of dignity—for doctors who were victims of attacks.⁸⁰ The vigils were held in numerous public and private hospitals;⁸¹ they were also supported by many pro-democracy groups, NGOs, and individual activists. The syndicates of journalists, teachers, engineers, and public transportation workers all expressed their solidarity with and support for the doctors' protests.⁸² The protests garnered sympathetic attention from the general populace and placed their demands at the center of debates about rights and freedoms.

Caught off-balance by the scale of the protests and the evolving public interest in the matter, Prime Minister Sherif Ismail announced that the government was committed to accountability and intended to punish those involved in the attacks on doctors and hospitals.⁸³ He confirmed his readiness to meet with the syndicate's elected board and respond to its demands.⁸⁴ These official statements were followed by the commencement of criminal investigations and subsequent trials against police personnel involved in the Matariya hospital incident. The unprecedented popular rally around the syndicate's board caused the government to rein in the security services by instigating criminal proceedings and promising no further attacks on medical staff and facilities.⁸⁵ The board celebrated this as a step toward rule of law, a guarantee of rights and freedoms in a society marred by repression and human rights abuses, and a milestone in the effort to end the impunity of the unruly security services.⁸⁶

The government's initial retreat, however, only disguised its long-term strategy to inhibit the doctors' protests and intimidate the syndicate's elected board.

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Over the last year, the government has used its judicial, executive, and media tools to contain the syndicate's activities. The administrative court system, which governs the syndicate's affairs, issued a ruling annulling the decisions of the emergency General Assembly. And the government blocked the legal amendments that would have introduced harsher punishments for attacks on medical staff and facilities.⁸⁷ The government-controlled public and private media launched a campaign aimed at discrediting the syndicate's elected board, especially Abdel Dayem and Mina.⁸⁸ The government's intimidation of Mina went even further; the general prosecutor interrogated her about the statements she made regarding the government's health policies that were described as being based on wrong information, inflammatory, and threatening to Egypt's national security.⁸⁹

Still, the government's initial retreat in face of the doctors' protests demonstrated that collective action aimed at defending rights and freedoms could to a degree restrict the government's repressive behavior and limit the security services' transgressions. The campaigns to discredit the syndicate's elected board have failed to undermine popular sympathy for its actions; after interrogating Mina, the general prosecutor decided not to pursue charges against her.⁹⁰

The Syndicate of Journalists

Since 2013, Egypt has become one of the world's worst jailers and abusers of journalists⁹¹—currently only second to China in the number of journalists serving jail time.⁹² The elected board of the Syndicate of Journalists has (1) repeatedly demanded the release of its imprisoned members, (2) described the prosecution of journalists as an authoritarian policy aiming at undermining the free flow of information and freedom of expression, and (3) exposed

the systematic interference of the security services in the affairs of the syndicate to discredit the board and spread discord between it and its members. In response, the authoritarian government has ignored the demands of the syndicate's board and pursued a confrontational course.

In the spring of 2016, the syndicate's headquarters in downtown Cairo was the site of major protests against the maritime border agreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Thousands of journalists, students, and young activists, along with public figures, gathered at the syndicate on April 15, 2016, to peacefully demand Egypt's withdrawal from the agreement.⁹³ They denounced the agreement as the sale of Egyptian land to the wealthy oil kingdom.⁹⁴ The April 15 gathering was larger than the doctors' emergency General Assembly meeting. In fact, it was the largest assembly of citizens in any public site since the dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood's sit-ins on August 14, 2013, and it garnered broad popular support.⁹⁵

While thousands of people peacefully protested and rallied in front of the syndicate,⁹⁶ the security services arrested 110 demonstrators, including journalists.⁹⁷ Further protests were held on April 25, 2016, but the security services surrounded the syndicate and closed roads leading to it, preventing the demonstrations. During the dispersal of the protests, they arrested hundreds of citizens, once again including journalists.⁹⁸

Stepping up their repression, the security services got the general prosecutor to issue two arrest warrants for Amr Badr and Mahmud el-Saqqa, two journalists at the website January News Gate.⁹⁹ In the arrest warrants, Badr and el-Saqqa were accused of violating the law and endangering national security by inciting violent demonstrations and gatherings.¹⁰⁰ A few days after the warrants were issued on April 30, 2016, they started an open-ended sit-in at their syndicate's headquarters. The security services responded by raiding the two journalists' homes, prompting Badr and el-Saqqa to ask the syndicate's elected board to express solidarity with them and publicly state that they were being targeted by the security services for political purposes. Although the board refrained from issuing a collective statement, some of its members spoke out in defense of the two journalists.¹⁰¹

On May 1, 2016, the security services stormed the syndicate and arrested Badr and el-Saqqa¹⁰²—an unprecedented incident in the syndicate's long and often rocky relationship with Egypt's various authoritarian regimes. Never before had the syndicate's headquarters been stormed.¹⁰³ During their interrogation in the general prosecutor's office, Badr and el-Saqqa were served with additional charges, including “attempting to change the constitution of the country and to undermine its republican system as well as its current government,” “violating the stipulations of the constitution and existing laws,” and “preventing state authorities and public institutions from carrying out their work”—violations that could land them prison sentences, if not death sentences.¹⁰⁴

Many journalists perceived these actions as an attack on their independence. Yehia el-Qalash, president of the syndicate's board, expressed strong dissatisfaction with the security services' actions. He called on Egypt's president to take the necessary steps to resolve the crisis and restore the dignity of journalists.¹⁰⁵ Other board members also raised their voices in protest. The most prominent of these journalists included Gamal Abdel Rahim, the syndicate's secretary general;¹⁰⁶ Khaled el-Balshy, the chairman of the syndicate's freedoms committee;¹⁰⁷ and Mahmud Kamel, the secretary of the syndicate's cultural committee.¹⁰⁸ They sharply criticized the security services' provocative actions and attempts to surveil and control the syndicate. They also called for the release of Badr and el-Saqqa and demanded an apology from the minister of interior, who had ordered the raid on the syndicate.

Additionally, on May 4, 2016, an emergency session of the General Assembly convened to address the security services' raid and to articulate collective demands. Similar to the Syndicate of Doctors, thousands of journalists attended and rallied around the cause of defending their independence.¹⁰⁹ The list of demands included the resignation of the minister of interior, an apology from Egypt's president for the raid, the passage of legislation that eliminates existing jail sentences for so-called publishing crimes, and the release of all journalists imprisoned or detained under this pretext.¹¹⁰ Pro-government journalists largely boycotted the assembly.

In contrast to the relatively subdued way it initially handled the demands of protesting doctors, the authoritarian regime dealt with the protests of journalists with a full arsenal of repressive tools and tactics. The security services meddled in the syndicate's internal affairs to create a rift between the elected board and pro-government journalists. On May 8, 2016, for example, a group of journalists known to have close connections to the security services orga-

nized a so-called journalistic family meeting at the state-owned and state-run *Al-Abram* newspaper.¹¹¹ They issued a statement accusing the syndicate's board of placing itself above "state authorities and public institutions," practicing "politics," and acting "as a political party that monopolizes the syndicate as a platform for its objectives." These pro-government journalists tried to split the embattled board

from the inside by highlighting that five board members attended the family meeting because they resented the board's actions and its manipulation of the General Assembly.¹¹²

On May 28, 2016, the authorities summoned the board's president, vice president, and secretary-general for questioning and interrogation by the general prosecutor on charges of aiding the escape of journalists Badr and el-Saqqa and publishing false news related to the details of their arrests.¹¹³ After the investigation, the general prosecutor referred the board's members to a criminal court.¹¹⁴ The court sentenced them to two years in prison, but the sentence is being appealed.¹¹⁵

The security services meddled in the syndicate's internal affairs to create a rift between the elected board and pro-government journalists.

The government continues to escalate its campaign against the Syndicate of Journalists by ignoring the board's well-founded demands for the repeal of jail sentences handed down for publishing crimes. It also continues to use pro-government journalists to sustain internal conflicts within the syndicate and to undermine the board's authority. Moreover, journalists continue to be imprisoned. For example, on October 26, 2016, the general prosecutor issued arrest warrants for sixty-three journalists associated with news websites and media production companies allegedly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹⁶ However, the bold position taken by the syndicate's elected board has added a significant space for activism and resistance in Egyptian politics. More than in the case of the Syndicate of Doctors, the elected board of the Syndicate of Journalists has combined activism in defense of its members' rights in the face of repression with a broad challenge to the government's authoritarian policies and practices.

The bold position taken by the syndicate's elected board has added a significant space for activism and resistance in Egyptian politics.

Student Activism on University Campuses

Despite its repressive tactics, the government has also failed to vanquish student activism. Students have continued to hold protests and mobilize against pro-government candidates in student union elections.¹¹⁷ Still, the crackdown has been harsh. Egypt's ruling generals have used laws, regulations, procedures, and security tools to subdue student dissidents. The government has employed private security companies to patrol public university campuses and has pushed university administrations to enforce harsh penalties against noncompliant students. The general prosecutor has transferred hundreds of student dissidents to criminal courts, and even more have remained in police detention.

In the wake of the 2013 coup, students affiliated with and sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood demonstrated at public universities to demand the return of the deposed president, Mohamed Morsi. Their demonstrations unsurprisingly led to altercations with the new regime and its security services. The security forces responded to a few instances of student verbal and physical violence with excessive displays of force and the mass imprisonment of students.¹¹⁸ In the first semester of the 2013–2014 academic year, there were 1,677 student protests at public universities across Egypt, with the largest numbers occurring at Al-Azhar University (whose campuses are scattered across several provinces of the country), Cairo University, Ain Shams University, and Alexandria University.¹¹⁹

In the face of increasing state-sponsored violence, several student groups gradually began to call for the wholesale rejection of the constitutional, legal, and political measures adopted by the government. Students' demands gradually shifted away from emphasizing the return of Morsi to denouncing Egypt's ruling generals for their crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, liberal and

leftist parties opposed to them, and independent NGOs. Students began to mobilize around the condemnation of human rights abuses and advocacy for students who experienced repression.

Between 2013 and 2016, student groups protested the ban of the Muslim Brotherhood and its branding as a terrorist entity. They condemned the mass killing of Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters during the violent dispersal of sit-ins on August 14, 2013. Students also took bold stances regarding the security services' implication in human rights abuses on university campuses and elsewhere. They demanded trials for police personnel involved in student murders and forced disappearances and insisted on the immediate release of students imprisoned and detained for political purposes.

Several student groups gradually began to call for the wholesale rejection of the constitutional, legal, and political measures adopted by the government.

Some student protests decried the provision in the 2014 constitution that referred civilians to military courts and the passage of undemocratic laws such as the protest and terrorism laws.¹²⁰

In addition, efforts to restrain the role of the security services on campuses moved up on the student agenda. Between 2013 and 2016, students held vigils to oppose the September 2013 decision of Egypt's Supreme Council of

Universities that made administrative security units operating on campuses responsible for "maintaining security and preventing riots, violence, and bullying." They also protested the legal right given to security units to issue arrest warrants and initiate litigation against students.¹²¹ The council's decision essentially overruled a 2010 court ruling that banned the presence of any security units or forces on university campuses.¹²² Despite student protests and doubts about the legality of the decision, the security services have sustained their presence on campuses.¹²³

Egypt's authoritarian regime has engineered a far-reaching set of tools to repress student activism. In 2014, the interim president, Adly Mansour, amended the Organization of Universities Act to give presidents of public universities the authority to dismiss, without litigation, students charged by university administrations with subverting the educational process, endangering university facilities, targeting academic and administrative staff members, or inciting violence on campuses.¹²⁴ Mansour's amended law still allows dismissed students to appeal to academic disciplinary boards and even allows the appeal of dismissal decisions before the high administrative court.¹²⁵ But since the amendment was made, university administrations have demonstrated a high propensity to take punitive action against students involved in protests. For example, in the 2013–2014 academic year, 1,052 students were referred to university disciplinary boards for investigation and more than 600 students were dismissed.¹²⁶ Dozens more were prevented from completing exams.¹²⁷

The judiciary has been supporting the repression of student activism by issuing harsh sentences, such as imprisonment and exorbitant fines for students

arrested at protests and charged with endangering university facilities, rioting, attacking staff members, inciting verbal violence, and possessing weapons. The charges are typically based solely on statements by the security services.¹²⁸

This campaign of repression continued in the 2014–2015 academic year and resulted in a decrease in the number of student protests. During the first semester, student groups organized 572 protests—most of which occurred, once again, at the universities of Al-Azhar, Cairo, Ain Shams, and Alexandria.¹²⁹ Students participating in the protests included members of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as liberal- and leftist-inspired student groups, which gradually began to oppose the regime’s repressive tactics. These latter groups drew their members from parties such as the Egypt Strong, Bread and Freedom, Constitution, and Movement of Revolutionary Socialists parties.¹³⁰

Frequent clashes on campuses between students and administrative security units and between students and private security units facilitated a dramatic increase in the overall number of security forces operating in university spaces. Violent dispersals of peaceful vigils became the norm, and they often resulted in mass arrests and even the killing of a few students.¹³¹ The regime continued to employ its other repressive tools to crush student activism, such as dismissal from universities, arrests, and court proceedings resulting in harsh sentences.¹³²

In the 2015–2016 academic year, the political scene at Egyptian universities changed drastically. Vibrant student activism, which had characterized the two preceding years, seemed to largely disappear, revealing the efficiency of the government’s authoritarian tools.¹³³ The few student protests to occur during this period consisted of vigils and demonstrations designed to show solidarity with imprisoned and detained students. But they did not go unpunished by university administrations and the security services. Thirty-two students were arrested during the first semester and fifty-two during the second.¹³⁴ The arrests were made by either the administrative security units, private security forces, or police forces, whose visible presence on campuses continued. University administrations punished ninety-seven students by either dismissing them, preventing them from taking exams, or referring them to disciplinary investigations.¹³⁵

Despite the decline in student activism, two significant incidents in the 2015–2016 academic year demonstrated that student groups were not completely quashed. First, in late 2015, the government, through the Ministry of Higher Education, attempted to exert control over student union elections in public universities but was relatively unsuccessful. In October 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education instructed university administrations to exclude certain students from running in the elections. The effort targeted those allegedly affiliated or sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood and those who led or participated in antigovernment protests and faced disciplinary punishment. On October 8, the ministry issued a decree to enter these changes into

The judiciary has been supporting the repression of student activism by issuing harsh sentences, such as imprisonment and exorbitant fines.

law.¹³⁶ The decree stipulated that union candidates should not be affiliated with organizations or entities that are criminalized under the law or declared terrorist. It also stipulated that candidates' university records should be free of any disciplinary punishment.¹³⁷

In November 2015, student union elections were held in public universities across the country, and three main student platforms participated. The Voice of Egypt's Students Coalition, with strong ties to university administrations—and through them to the security services—pushed for the depoliticization of universities. Mostly liberal and leftist students aspired to oppose the

new authoritarianism and reinvigorate student activism. And groups of independent students rejected ties to both the government and opposition; they portrayed student unions as being responsible for representing the rights and interests of the student body. The Muslim Brotherhood, meanwhile, was banned from fielding candidates, and it decided not to participate in the vote.¹³⁸

Liberal, leftist, and independent students won most of the unions' seats, much to the chagrin of pro-government candidates.¹³⁹ Ties to university administrations, the security services, and promotion campaigns managed by the

Ministry of Higher Education had failed to ensure the success of the Voice of Egypt's Students Coalition.¹⁴⁰ Two independent members of the student unions were elected to head the executive office of the General Union of Egyptian Students, an umbrella union. Abdallah Anwar, who was a student in the Faculty of Mass Communication at Cairo University, was elected president;¹⁴¹ and Amr al-Helew, who was a student in the Faculty of Engineering at Tanta University, was elected vice president.¹⁴² Both were known for their commitment to students' rights and interests, their advocacy efforts for students who faced government-sponsored repression, and their rejection of governmental and security interventions in public universities.¹⁴³

These unanticipated election results demonstrated that student opposition to the government remained strong and that the government's assault on student activism neither took politics out of university campuses nor silenced student groups. These were the only elections in which pro-government candidates lost. Further, the security services had failed to control the process, as it had done during the presidential elections in 2014, the parliamentary elections in 2015, and the elections of professional association boards.

However, following the student union elections, the Ministry of Higher Education refused to ratify the results and therefore denied the elected union the legal basis for its existence.¹⁴⁴ In December 2015, the ministry dissolved the executive office of the General Union of Egyptian Students, citing a procedural error.¹⁴⁵ These steps underscore the ruling generals' dedication to keeping public universities under their tight control. The regime continues

These unanticipated [student union] election results demonstrated that student opposition to the government remained strong and that the government's assault on student activism neither took politics out of university campuses nor silenced student groups.

to pursue student groups that resist its clampdown and that mobilize against security interventions in universities.

The second incident in the 2015–2016 academic year occurred in April 2016, when students joined other activist groups in holding vigils and demonstrations to protest the signing of the maritime border agreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The protests highlighted that universities remain, to a degree, a site of opposition to the authoritarian government and its policies. Protests against the agreement originated in universities and later spilled into the broader public. Student groups and unaffiliated students organized massive protests between April 15 and April 25 in several public universities across Egypt, in tandem with the broader mobilization centered around the Syndicate of Journalists.¹⁴⁶ As they did with the syndicate's protests, the security services used excessive force to crush the student protests and arrested scores of students who later faced court proceedings.¹⁴⁷

This response aside, students' active participation in the April 2016 protests served as yet another indicator that their interest in public affairs and political matters has not been quelled and, more broadly, that the generals' clampdown has not achieved the complete depoliticization of public universities. In different ways, today's student activism revives the activism of earlier periods on university campuses. Egyptian students were part of the global student movement against authoritarian politics in the second half of the 1960s. And in the 1970s, they spearheaded the local democratic movement, articulating its demands for citizens' rights and freedoms and for enshrining modern conceptions of government accountability in Egyptian politics.¹⁴⁸ Throughout the long rule of former president Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), universities—besides being the primary space for ideological contestation between secular and Islamist groups—continually challenged the government's undemocratic policies and practices, and university students were plugged into political activism beyond the walls of their campuses.¹⁴⁹

Labor Activism

Despite security surveillance, forced dismissals of labor activists, and referrals of labor activists and protesters to military trials, labor activism remains at the forefront of societal resistance to authoritarian policies and practices. Unionized workers in public and private industrial facilities, as well as civil servants in the state bureaucracy and local government, continue to demonstrate and organize strikes to articulate their economic and social demands and to defend workers' rights to freedoms of expression and association.¹⁵⁰ Protests by labor activists have even impacted key service sectors, such as public transportation and healthcare.

Over the last several years, labor activism has primarily focused on Egypt's growing economic and social crises and the ongoing deterioration of living

conditions for a majority of Egyptians.¹⁵¹ Workers and civil servants have been using different tactics to make their voices heard: formal complaints, gatherings and rallies, protest vigils, media campaigns, sit-ins, work strikes, and hunger strikes. Work strikes and protest vigils remain the most widely used tactics.¹⁵² While the total number of protests declined from 1,655 in 2014 to 933 in 2015, the frequency will likely hold steady, given that 493 were recorded between January and April 2016.¹⁵³

Economic and social demands were at the center of the majority of protests in all three time periods: 49 percent in 2014, 27 percent in 2015, and 27 percent

**Work strikes and protest vigils remain
the most widely used tactics.**

between January and April 2016. These protests called for the payment of workers in public and private facilities who have had their salaries withheld, wage increases to balance the rising inflation rate, improvements in working conditions and safety benchmarks, and safeguards for the rights of temporary workers and civil servants. Other protests called for ending punitive measures (especially dismissals and arbitrary transfers), improving transparency and accountability standards and introducing systemic anticorruption measures in the workplace, increasing efficiency and productivity standards, and recognizing the right to enjoy freedoms of expression and association without fear of intimidation or repression.¹⁵⁴

In response, the regime has used various administrative, security, legislative, and judicial tools to reject most of the protesters' demands and to punish protest leaders. While the Ministry of Manpower and Immigration has settled some formal complaints and requests filed by workers and civil servants, most cases have been referred to labor courts in the absence of acceptable settlements with public and private employers. In the first quarter of 2016, the ministry settled 1,392 of 5,322 individual complaints and 303 of 1,561 collective complaints, referring the rest to courts.¹⁵⁵ This equates to low rates of settlement for individual and collective complaints: 26 percent and 19 percent, respectively. Furthermore, in line with common governmental practices in Egypt, the ministry has resorted to providing temporary financial assistance and other short-term benefits to appease some workers and civil servants during times of frequent labor protests.¹⁵⁶

Since 2013, authorities have arrested dozens of workers and civil servants for demonstrating and have enabled the arbitrary transfers and dismissals of dozens of others involved in protests in both public and private facilities.¹⁵⁷ The government has co-opted the General Union of Egyptian Workers, which has helped the regime attack labor activists and suppress their protests. In 2015, the security services-controlled leadership of the union asked the president to issue a decree that criminalizes all work strikes for a year.¹⁵⁸ Several union leaders also announced their intent to form so-called committees of workers to resist sit-ins and strikes and to participate in counter-protest activities aimed at safeguarding the stability and security of the nation.¹⁵⁹

No presidential decree criminalizing strikes was issued, so in 2016, the union's leadership reinforced its anti-labor-activism position. Union leaders continued to ignore the well-founded economic and social grievances of workers and civil servants.¹⁶⁰ Of particular note, the union backed the government's decision and various court rulings¹⁶¹—and later the Labor Unions' Act¹⁶²—that banned the formation of independent labor and trade unions and ordered the dissolution of existing independent unions. All of these unions have helped organize labor activism since 2011.¹⁶³

Since 2015, the new authoritarian government has been undermining labor activism, using the same legislative and judicial tools it has used against professional associations and student movements. In 2015, the government built on the legislative prerogatives of the president to pass a new Civil Service Law, which significantly changes the employment conditions of civil servants. The law, approved in 2016 by Parliament after the insertion of a few minor amendments, makes civil servants' jobs easier to terminate and undermines their right to regular wage increases.¹⁶⁴ It affects more than 5 million Egyptians within the state bureaucracy and local government.

The judiciary, like Parliament, has enabled the regime to surveil, repress, and punish protesting workers and civil servants. Reportedly, criminal courts have handed down various prison sentences for labor activists, and administrative courts have issued rulings that allow workers and civil servants who participate in protests to be forcibly retired.¹⁶⁵

The government has also used the security services to disperse vigils, demonstrations, sit-ins, and work strikes; and the security forces have occasionally resorted to excessive force, using live ammunition and rubber bullets. Instead of holding them accountable, the general prosecutor has issued arrest warrants for protesters and referred them to criminal trials with ambiguous charges that include violent bullying, blocking public roads, disrupting public and private transportation, refraining from work, demonstrating without formal authorization, preventing public and private facilities from carrying out their work, and disrupting public security.¹⁶⁶ For example, in September 2014, a workers' vigil that was protesting management practices in the government-owned Alexandria Spinning and Weaving Company and demanding the payment of late salaries ended in clashes with the security services. Fourteen workers were arrested, and some of them were injured due to the excessive use of force by the police.¹⁶⁷ Similar protests have continued to happen elsewhere in government-owned companies across the country, either inspired by economic and social demands or in response to the termination of workers' contracts and their subsequent dismissal.¹⁶⁸

Additionally, on May 24, 2016, the general prosecutor referred twenty-six Alexandria Shipyard workers who had been arrested to military trials; the

The judiciary, like Parliament, has enabled the regime to surveil, repress, and punish protesting workers and civil servants.

charges included refraining from work and protesting without formal authorization. This measure was the government's response to a series of peaceful protests and vigils at which workers demanded wage increases, job security, workplace safety, and the improvement of efficiency and productivity.¹⁶⁹ The Alexandria Shipyard workers demanded independent arbitration between them and the company's management to reach a settlement, but the army-controlled management rejected this demand. The company has been classified as an industrial facility of the Ministry of Defense since 2007, so the management used the military police to quell the protests and arrest the labor activists who were later referred to military trials.¹⁷⁰ This was a clear violation of constitutionally enshrined rights and freedoms that include the right of civilians to be tried in civilian courts.¹⁷¹

Despite the government's continued targeting of protesting workers and civil servants, labor activism has remained resilient. The banning of independent unions, referrals of protesters to civilian and military courts, and state-sponsored violence have not dissuaded labor protests; nor has the government's renewed co-optation of the General Union of Egyptian Workers silenced the economic and social demands of organized labor activists.

Spontaneous Eruptions of Popular Anger

Popular anger about specific government policies and practices has frequently erupted since 2013. Groups of citizens have mostly taken to the streets to protest the accumulating human rights abuses committed by the security services. These protests are different in that demonstrators are not part of discrete initiatives that have a lasting presence. The demonstrators rather come and go in response to various incidents of abuse. However, the frequency of these protests since 2013 has resulted in an effective push back against the “no limit to repression” policies implemented by the security services and against the impunity of police personnel implicated in human rights abuses.

Police brutality against citizens has been the major catalyst of popular anger. As of early 2017, extrajudicial killings and torture in places of police custody have topped the list of causes pushing citizens—living as far apart as the capital Cairo and small southern city Luxor¹⁷²—into the public space.¹⁷³ As the new authoritarian regime has tightened its control over traditional forms of media, both publicly and privately owned social media networks have played a more central role in raising citizens' awareness of police brutality.¹⁷⁴

In November 2015, hundreds of angry Luxor residents gathered to condemn the killing of a fellow resident, Talaat Shabib, inside the city's police station.¹⁷⁵ Police personnel had arrested Shabib on charges of possessing narcotic substances and taken him to the police station where he was tortured and ultimately killed. The police officers and agents involved attempted to cover up their crime by moving the victim's body to the Luxor Governmental Hospital

and claiming he had suffered a fatal heart attack. However, popular anger and social network activism in solidarity with the victim and his family forced the security services to yield. The Ministry of Interior announced the arrest of several policemen on charges of torture and murder and referred them to the general prosecutor.¹⁷⁶ One officer was sentenced to seven years in prison, five policemen were sentenced to three years in prison, and seven others were acquitted. The Ministry of Interior was also compelled to financially compensate the victim's wife and his sons in the form of 1.5 million Egyptian pounds.

Other protests have been similarly successful. In February 2016, hundreds of residents of the Cairene neighborhood al-Darb al-Ahmar besieged the Cairo Security Directorate after the death of a local driver during an altercation with a policeman.¹⁷⁷ The driver's parents and supporters gathered and chanted slogans denouncing human rights abuses and demanding the murderer be brought to justice.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, social media networks and various news sites picked up on the incident and broke through the official barriers of denial and silence regarding the victim, the offender, and the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior.¹⁷⁹ Again, in response to popular anger and heightened public awareness of police brutality, the interior minister apologized to the victim's parents by publicly kissing the head of the victim's father.¹⁸⁰ The offender was arrested, and the general prosecutor referred him to a criminal trial.¹⁸¹ He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.¹⁸²

The newfound leverage that groups of angry citizens have developed against the security services has at least raised the political and social cost of human rights abuses. Yet, the cases detailed above still represent the exception rather than the rule, as demonstrated by hundreds of documented cases of extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced disappearances that remain unaccounted for.¹⁸³ Despite some arrests of police personnel for extrajudicial killings and torture, and their subsequent referrals to a criminal trial under massive public pressure, human rights abuses perpetuated by the security services have not subsided since 2013. Glaring problems of impunity also persist.¹⁸⁴

Moreover, citizens' dissatisfaction with the government's economic and social policies has not led to similar eruptions.¹⁸⁵ This has been the case since 2013, even though the living conditions of most Egyptians have deteriorated. After years of political turmoil following the 2011 revolution, the poor and middle-class segments of the population have not regained their voices in the public space.

Despite the protests against incidents of police brutality, the few cases of sweeping popular support for doctors protesting police transgressions, and the demands of some activist journalists and students for the annulment of the maritime border agreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia,¹⁸⁶ it seems that fear tactics and repressive tools have proved effective in instilling silence.

The newfound leverage that groups of angry citizens have developed against the security services has at least raised the political and social cost of human rights abuses.

Resilience Amid the Crackdown

Since 2013, four forms of anti-authoritarian platforms have shaped social activism in Egypt: (1) single-cause initiatives that are opposing specific human rights abuses and advocating for the rights and freedoms of the victims, (2) professional associations that are defending freedoms of expression and association, (3) student groups that are challenging the systematic interference of the security services in their affairs and the permanent presence of security forces on campuses, and (4) the labor movement that is galvanized by deteriorating economic and social conditions and by the government's repression of labor activists. In addition, spontaneous eruptions of popular anger in response to human rights abuses have become politically significant.

Egypt's new authoritarian regime—as part of closing the public space and cracking down on civil society and opposition political parties—has tried to manage these forms of social activism through repression, undemocratic legal frameworks, and aggressive judicial tools. It has intensified its efforts to intimidate professional associations, student groups, and labor activists. And it has expanded its targets to include young human rights advocates and citizens who

have publicly stood against police brutality. Nothing has highlighted this fact better than the large number of young activists and students detained and arrested, as well as the systematic referral of protesting workers to military trials.

However, the new authoritarian government has found it difficult to quash a robust and resilient activism scene. At times, the government has made concessions to the demands of professional associations and demonstrating workers. Angry citizens protesting police brutality have

pushed the security services to apologize for their transgressions and to accept putting police personnel on trial. On a few occasions, student groups have mobilized successfully to challenge the security services' tight grip on university campuses and to subvert authoritarian tactics and tools of control. Egypt's ruling generals may not be embattled yet, but with the crackdown on civil society and the decline of party politics, these activist groups currently offer the greatest hope for changing the tide.

Egypt's ruling generals may not be embattled yet, but with the crackdown on civil society and the decline of party politics, these activist groups currently offer the greatest hope for changing the tide.

Notes

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