

November 5, 2014

President Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We write today to urge more robust engagement by your administration on the Egyptian government's current efforts to target independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and likely shut down organizations that do not register under a highly restrictive 2002 law. By all accounts, this effort may well end most independent civil society work in the country.

As you may know, the 2002 Law on Associations empowers the government to shut down any group virtually at will, freeze its assets, confiscate its property, reject nominees to its governing board, block its funding, and deny requests to affiliate with international organizations. In addition, registration is often not granted to any organization viewed as critical of the government. The law provides prison terms for what would become "unauthorized activities" if the groups refuse to register or are not granted registration. The law clearly violates international freedom of association standards.

The last 18 months in Egypt have seen increased repression of civil society, as well as deeply concerning attempts to criminalize free speech and peaceful assembly. The situation for NGOs has become particularly urgent because the government has announced its intention to force them to register by November 10 or face legal consequences. Many of the Egyptian associations with whom we regularly collaborate have no objection to a registration requirement; a great number are, in fact, already registered as civil companies and law firms. But given the draconian restrictions embodied in this law, they have long refused to register as NGOs due to the concern that doing so will undermine their ability to function independently and fulfill their mandates.

You are likely aware that up until now, authorities unofficially permitted some groups to operate without registering. Today, there is every reason to believe many of those groups, as well as others, will face dissolution and potentially jail terms for their most prominent members. We fear that the Egyptian government's enforcement of the law's severe provisions will be even worse than its actions in 2011, when the government investigated a host of NGOs who received foreign funding and ultimately convicted staff from international organizations – including Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the International Center for Journalists – for allegedly operating without authorization despite their repeated attempts to become registered.

We urge you to engage preventively and use all available means to make clear to President al-Sisi that there will be serious consequences if there is a further crackdown on NGOs. It is essential that your administration not take a "wait-and-see" approach to this serious threat. Instead, we urge you to make good on your recently stated commitment "to stand with the courageous citizens and brave civil society groups who are working for equality and opportunity and justice and human dignity all over the world" and make clear the consequences of enforcing such a restrictive law are a central concern for the US-Egypt bilateral partnership.

We thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Margon
Washington Director
Human Rights Watch

Elliott Abrams
Deputy National Security Advisor, Global Democracy Strategy (2005-2009)
White House

Joyce Barnathan
President
International Center for Journalists

Charles Dunne
Director, Middle East and North Africa programs
Freedom House

Michele Dunne*
Senior Associate, Middle East Program
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Christopher J. Griffin
Executive Director
Foreign Policy Initiative

Neil Hicks
Director, Human Rights Promotion
Human Rights First

Margaret Huang
Deputy Executive Director, Campaigns and Programs
Amnesty International USA

Peter Mandaville*
Director of the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies
George Mason University

Stephen McInerney
Executive Director
Project on Middle East Democracy

Joel Simon
Executive Director
Committee to Protect Journalists

Please note that names with an asterisk represent the individual, not the organization.