

The Working Group on Egypt

March 23, 2016

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to urge you to speak directly with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and to express both publicly and privately your objection to his accelerating crackdown on human rights, including recent moves to prosecute civil society organizations. You were correct to declare in September 2014 that “America’s support for civil society is a matter of national security,” and nowhere is that more true than in Egypt today.

President al-Sisi’s campaign against civil society takes place against the backdrop of unprecedented abuses by Egyptian security forces, including extrajudicial killings, the detention of tens of thousands of political prisoners, the widespread documented use of torture, and the forced disappearances of hundreds of Egyptians. The killing of Italian student Giulio Regeni, whose tortured body appeared on a roadside near Cairo a week after his abduction in late January, has come to international attention, but many Egyptians have shared his fate since President al-Sisi came to power.

On March 24, an Egyptian court will hear a request to freeze the bank accounts and other assets of two internationally-respected human rights defenders, Hossam Bahgat and Gamal Eid, along with members of Eid’s family. Mr. Bahgat and Mr. Eid and other activists may soon be indicted and face trial for illegally accepting foreign funding – a criminal charge that violates their right to free association and could carry a sentence of up to 25 years in prison.

The imminent proceedings are a major step in Egyptian authorities’ campaign to crush the last remnants of Egypt’s independent civil society and human rights community. Egypt’s media has recently reported that dozens of organizations are under criminal investigation, essentially for their peaceful work to monitor abuses and to hold Egypt’s government accountable to its own constitution and international human rights commitments. In recent weeks, Egyptian authorities have ordered the closure of a prominent anti-torture organization, the Nadeem Center; summoned staff from several human rights organizations for interrogation; banned prominent rights activists and advocates from traveling outside Egypt in violation of the Egyptian constitution; and harassed and threatened human rights activists with arrest and violence. The media regularly propagate vitriol against human rights defenders, portraying them as traitors and security threats.

If this crackdown is allowed to reach its conclusion, it will silence an indigenous human rights community that has survived more than 30 years of authoritarian rule, leaving few if any Egyptians free to investigate mounting abuses by the state.

The current attacks on Egypt’s rights advocates are a continuation of the same criminal prosecution of American and German NGO workers in Egypt that began in 2011. That prosecution, driven by senior members of the Egyptian government still in high office today, resulted in the June 2013 criminal convictions, in a deeply flawed trial, of 43 Egyptian and international NGO staff, including 17 American citizens. President al-Sisi, who was the head of military intelligence in 2011 when Egypt’s military government launched the investigation, has refused repeated requests to overturn the convictions.

While the current crackdown is primarily targeting domestic organizations, there are indications that international NGOs may also face increased pressure, including some that currently do not even have offices or staff working in Egypt. On March 20, the newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* published the names of more than 150 individuals and civil society organizations reportedly under investigation for receiving

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foreign funding, including prominent American and European organizations such as the Center for International Private Enterprise, the Solidarity Center, Transparency International, Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, CARE, AMIDEAST, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute.

Mr. President, in your September 2014 Presidential Memorandum on Civil Society, you pledged that the United States government – including you personally – would stand firmly with those in civil society facing pressure or harassment from their governments. While the past five years have been tumultuous and challenging for US policy toward Egypt, this is another defining moment for the United States, a moment that tests your pledge to “stand with civil society.” Secretary Kerry’s March 18 statement of concern was welcome, but further action is urgently needed. Past practice demonstrates that when the United States government speaks clearly, in one voice, and consistently on NGO freedom and human rights in Egypt, the government in Cairo listens.

It is essential that you act to stand up for human rights, freedom of association, and the rights of both Egyptian and international civil society organizations to work together on behalf of common goals. You must make crystal clear to President al-Sisi that continued assaults on civil society, including harassment of US organizations, will make it difficult for the administration to cooperate across a range of issues, including your administration’s efforts to promote American investment in Egypt and to provide financial assistance to the Egyptian government and military. If Egypt’s government continues down a path to destroy its own civil society, American support and assistance will become, in both principled and practical terms, impossible.

Sincerely,

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Robert Kagan (co-chair)
Brookings Institution

Elliott Abrams
Council on Foreign Relations

Daniel Calingaert
Freedom House

Amy Hawthorne
Project on Middle East Democracy

Brian Katulis
Center for American Progress

Stephen McInerney
Project on Middle East Democracy

Michele Dunne (co-chair)
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Ellen Bork
Foreign Policy Initiative

Reuel Gerech
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Neil Hicks
Human Rights First

Sarah Margon
Human Rights Watch

Tamara Wittes
Brookings Institution

This letter reflects the views of the individual signatories; institutional affiliations are listed for the purpose of identification only.