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Egypt must immediately and unconditionally release women protesters

The conviction and imprisonment of 21 female protesters, including seven girls, after they participated in a peaceful pro-Morsi demonstration in Alexandria shows the Egyptian authorities' determination to punish dissent, Amnesty International said.

“These harsh prison sentences against young women and girls come after the adoption of a draconian protest law and the violent dispersal of an activists' protest in Cairo. It is a strong signal that there will be no limit to the authorities' efforts to crush opposition and that no one is immune to their iron fist,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“These women and girls should have never been arrested. They are now prisoners of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally.”

The Sidi-Gaber Misdemeanour court in Alexandria yesterday sentenced 14 women to 11 years and one month in prison. An Alexandria juvenile court sentenced seven girls to be placed in a juvenile detention facility until they turn 21.

The protesters were charged with hampering traffic, destroying the entrance of a building, attacking officials on duty, belonging to a banned group engaged in terrorist activities and disturbing public order after participating in a peaceful pro-Morsi demonstration in Alexandria on 31 October.

According to their lawyers, the only evidence the prosecutor presented to court were two banners with the words “anti-coup” written, some stones, and 25 signs bearing the image of a hand holding up four fingers. The image is used by pro-Morsi protesters to commemorate the dispersal in August of the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in in which security forces killed hundreds of protesters.

Eye witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International described how on 31 October security forces attacked protesters on Stanley Bridge and chased protesters escaping into side streets arresting at least 22 women and one man.

Protesters were reportedly beaten with gun butts, batons and were slapped on their faces during their arrests. While the protest included a roughly equal number of men, the majority of those arrested were women and girls.

A 19 year old woman who escaped arrest told Amnesty International: “We were leaving [the protest] when we found an ambulance stopping. Army and police got out and started to shoot in the air, we ran into side streets and the security forces followed us. While I was running, I heard other girls who were arrested screaming because of the beatings, I looked behind and saw at least four girls caught by the security forces, they were beaten by gun butts....I kept running but a man in civilian clothes pulled me by my backpack...then three other police personnel surrounded me and started to beat me with their fists and

gun butts all over my body, they also slapped me on the face, I could not bear the beatings so I fell and they dragged me towards the main street, but they could not continue as I was almost unconscious and my arm was broken, they left me on the street ... the security forces were only running after girls.”

“Instead of imprisoning peaceful protesters, authorities should be ensuring prompt, independent and impartial investigations into police abuse of protesters, reining in security forces, and upholding the right to freedom of peaceful assembly,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Once detained, some of them were held at al-Abadeya Prison. They complained of poor hygiene in the cells and of being forced to sleep on the floor.

Ramadan Abdelhamid, whose 15-year-old daughter and wife are currently in detention, said: “I told them that my daughter is too young and my wife is suffering from heart disease and showed them the medical reports. The police response was ‘everybody is sick here’. I asked them to give my wife access to doctor but they refused. My daughter complained about the treatment inside the prison. The bathroom is outside the cell and security closes it from 8 pm until 10 am leaving them for 10 hours without access to the bathroom.”

Background information

Thousands of pro-Morsi supporters have been arrested in Cairo and across the country since former president Mohamed Morsi was ousted on 3 July 2013, amid concerns over the lack of respect of due process.

Earlier this month, a Cairo misdemeanour court sentenced 12 Azhar University students to 17 years in prison and 65,000 EGP fine (USD 8,600) on charges of committing violent acts during a protest at the University.

In September, the Muslim Brotherhood was banned by court order and its assets frozen. Suspected supporters of the group have been facing charges of belonging to a “banned organization” even before the court judgement.

The protest, organised by a new pro-morsi movement called “seven in the morning”, was the first in Alexandria. Some 350 protesters marched in the morning of 31 October 2013 from Sidi Gaber area to Stanely Bridge on the corniche holding Rabaa signs and banners claiming the return of deposed president Mohamed Morsi and condemning his overthrow.

The police and army arrested 22 women and one man and took them to the Alexandria Security Directorate. The investigations by the prosecutor were conducted there. A lawyer who attended the investigations told Amnesty International that the prosecutor asked the girls “why do you belong to the Muslim Brotherhood and its better for you to avoid it given it will involve you in many problems.” Although one of the charges was destroying a building entrance, the prosecutor never went to check the entrance of the building to prove the alleged damage.

The prosecutor then ordered their preventive detention for 15 days and released the man and a 13 year old girl. The seven girls were transferred to the juvenile detention center in Alexandria and the 14 remaining women were transferred to al-Abaadeya Prison in Damanhour, Behiera. The lawyers unsuccessfully appealed the preventive detention order on 3 November.

Lawyers told Amnesty International that it took them at least two hours before they were able to visit the detainees in al-Abadeya Prison. The visit lasted only 30 minutes and was in the presence of security personnel, in breach of the right of defence.