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**Egypt: Allow peaceful protest**

Amnesty International deplores the recent arrests of peaceful government critics and opposition members and urges the Egyptian authorities to uphold the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, ahead of planned demonstrations in April.

Amnesty International's call comes at a time of growing dissatisfaction in the country with the government policies, the rising cost of living, low wages and lack of labour rights and amid demands for political and constitutional reform.

The organization's concerns are heightened by recent raids on houses and arrests of demonstrators carried out by the Egyptian security forces. These arrests have intensified in the last month and have targeted political activists calling for reform, as well as others protesting Israel's control over access to Muslim religious sites in occupied Palestinian territory, including al-Aqsa Mosque, and other Israeli policies.

On 8 March, security forces arrested student Ibrahim Megahed at the Qaisna Polytechnic Institute, Manufiya, for posting a wall journal reporting the risks threatening the al-Aqsa Mosque. He was reportedly beaten before being taken to a police station where he was subjected to further beating and threatened with torture. He appeared before the Qaisna public prosecutor, who charged him with membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition group, and possession of leaflets but ordered his release on bail, pending further investigations. Instead of being released, he was taken to State Security Investigations (SSI) offices in Shabin al-Kum, served with an administrative detention order and transferred to Damanhur prison, where he is said to be denied access to a lawyer and family.

At least 368 alleged members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood are held in various prisons around the country. Many of them face charges of membership of a banned organization, possession of leaflets promoting its ideology, and participating in demonstrations. They include many who have declared that they intend to run for the forthcoming elections to the Shura Council, Egypt's upper house, which will be held between late May and June 2010. Several of those detained are said to be in bad health; they include Dr Mohamed Saad Elewa, Dr Mohamed Ahmed Abdel Ghani and Dr Adel Abdel Aziz al-Qatari.

Another leading member of the group, Khairat al-Shatir, who is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence imposed after an unfair trial by a military court in 2008, is said to suffer from serious heart problems and hypertension. In 2008, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that the detention of Khairat al-Shatir and 25 other members of the Muslim Brotherhood arrested between December 2006 and January 2007 was arbitrary and urged the authorities to release them.

The authorities have also targeted supporters of former president of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei who calls for democratic reform in Egypt. On 18 February, a few hours ahead of the return of Mohamed ElBaradei to Egypt, the authorities issued statements warning against "illegal demonstration". For instance, Taha Abdel Tawwab Mohamed, a physician from Fayoum, was summoned to the SSI offices in Fayoum in the evening of 7 March after the

security forces had barred political activists from holding a meeting to call for political and constitutional reform. When at the SSI offices, he said he was stripped of his clothes and beaten all over his body for publicly supporting Mohamed ElBaradei. He was released the following day but warned not to tell anyone of his torture. Lawyers from the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and the Hisham Mubarak Law Center filed complaints before the Public Prosecutor but no steps have yet been taken to bring the perpetrators to justice. On 20 March, SSI raided the house of Maha Magdy al-Khadrawi and took her books and computer. The raid came a few hours after she collected signatures from Ein Shams University students in support of calls for constitutional reform to allow free and fair presidential elections in 2011.

The clampdown by the authorities has also aimed at preventing social protests. Over the last few months, a number of protests and unauthorized strikes took place by public and private sector workers to demand better wages and working conditions. Many have aired their grievances in protests in front of government buildings in Cairo. Some of these demonstrations were dispersed by security forces and media workers were barred or expelled from the areas where the sit-ins and protest were held.

Further protests have been planned for early April, including by critics of government policies towards Gaza, 6 April Youth Movement, labour movements, the Egyptian Movement for Change (*Kefaya*) and the National Association for Change, formed by Mohamed ElBaradei and some 30 opposition figures to seek constitutional amendments and free legislative elections scheduled for May/June and November 2010 and presidential elections in 2011. One such protest is due to be held on 3 April, when participants will call for the national minimum wage to be raised. Another protest, scheduled for 6 April, will call for the Constitution to be amended to allow independent candidates to run for president. Amnesty International fears that participants may face a crackdown by the security forces.

In light of the upcoming announced demonstrations and the record of Egyptian security forces of excessive use of force in dispersing public gatherings and arbitrary arrests and detention, Amnesty International call on the Egyptian authorities to issue clear instructions to their security forces. Security forces shall not use excessive or disproportionate force when taking action to disperse demonstrations and shall comply fully with the international standards governing the use of force by law enforcement officials, as set out in the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and with full respect for the human rights of the demonstrators. No peaceful protestor should be arbitrarily arrested and detained or put at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Last year heavy security was deployed along the main gathering points in Cairo and other cities, as well as in a number of universities to prevent strikes or assemblies from taking place. Police detained student activists and protestors.

Egypt has been under a state of emergency since 1981 and the authorities have used Emergency Law provisions to ban demonstrations and curb the rights to freedoms of expression, association and assembly as well as commit other human rights violations, including torture and other ill-treatment and unfair trials before military and emergency courts.

Amnesty International recognizes that the Egyptian authorities may find it necessary to police protests to protect public order, public health or the rights and freedoms of others. This must be done strictly in accordance with the law and the conditions of necessity and proportionality set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Egypt is a state party. However, undue restrictions and sweeping measures have routinely been put in place by the Egyptian authorities to quash the legitimate exercise of the rights to peaceful protest and to strike.

The organization urges the Egyptian authorities to end the arrest and intimidation of opposition activists or government's critics and to allow peaceful protests. The Egyptian government must uphold the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly and honour its commitments made in the framework of the UN Universal Periodic Review, in February 2010, to effectively guarantee these rights and the right to participate in public life and politics in line with its obligations under the ICCPR.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: [press@amnesty.org](mailto:press@amnesty.org)

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK  
[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)