

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Egypt: human rights should be at centre of election agenda

Amnesty International is calling on the Egyptian government and candidates contesting Egypt's forthcoming parliamentary elections to put human rights at the centre of their agenda and to commit to promote long-needed reform once in office. The organisation said this was vital for tackling long-standing human rights violations.

Despite some limited recent improvements in human rights, the coming elections, due to commence on 9 November, will be held against a background of continuing, widespread violations, including systematic use of torture, deaths in custody, impunity for human rights perpetrators, and restrictions on freedom of expression and association. These human rights violations persist despite repeated calls for government action to address them made by UN human rights bodies and both national and international human rights organizations.

Amnesty International is urging the Egyptian authorities to ensure that the parliamentary elections are conducted in a way that fully respects human rights. They should be seen as a first step towards creating better protection and respect for human rights in Egypt for the long-term. The organization believes that elections provide an opportunity for open public debate on many human rights issues of major importance to the Egyptian people and the future of human rights in the country. It is the responsibility of the authorities, as well as all those involved, to ensure the right climate exists for such a debate to take place.

In particular, Amnesty International is urging the authorities to suspend state of emergency or repeal all regulations in the emergency legislations that facilitate human rights violations, before the election and to make clear that assaults or other human rights abuses targeting candidates and their supporters will not be tolerated.

The organization also urges all candidates to commit themselves publicly to promoting and protecting human rights and to report any abuses, including by their supporters, to the election monitoring bodies.

All bodies observing the elections should include a clear human rights component in their mandate and should report impartially, accurately and publicly on any election-related violations of human rights, including violations of the human rights of women, and bring these to the attention of the appropriate authorities for investigation and prosecution of those responsible.

Background

The parliamentary elections will be held in three phases in order to allow judicial supervision of all polling stations, starting on 9 November and lasting until 1 December.

The Committee on Parliamentary Elections, headed by Minister of Justice Mahmoud Abu El-Lail Rashed, has told national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who wish to monitor the election to seek permission from the state-sponsored National Council for Human Rights. Individual election monitors are required to meet certain conditions, including being impartial and not belonging to any political party.

During last September's presidential elections, which were won by President Mubarak, the Presidential Elections Committee initially refused to allow NGOs full access to polling stations but later, hours after the vote opened, conceded such access so long as the NGOs had been approved by the Committee. However, a number of monitors were reportedly denied access to polling stations.

In May 2005, scores of demonstrators were reportedly beaten up by supporters of the ruling National Democratic Party when the government held a referendum in favour of amending the Constitution to allow for multi-candidate presidential elections. The protestors, who were calling for a boycott of the referendum, were reported to have been assaulted in the presence of security officials who stood by but took no action to intervene. In July 2005, there were further such attacks on demonstrators protesting against President Mubarak's announcement that he would be a candidate in the September presidential elections.