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Egypt: Travel bans systematically used to silence Human Rights defenders' voices

The travel ban against Mr Gamal Eid issued on 4 February 2016 is only the latest in a long series of arbitrary travel restrictions against prominent Human Rights defenders and activists. Amnesty International, EuroMed Rights, Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch, IFEX, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (a joint OMCT-FIDH programme), People In Need and Solidar condemn this blatant crackdown perpetrated by the Egyptian authorities against independent civil society.

On 4 February 2016, Mr Gamal Eid, a renowned Human Rights lawyer, founder and executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), was informed by Egyptian security at Cairo International Airport, where he went to take a flight to Athens for a business trip, that a travel ban had been placed upon him. No explanation was given to him about the reasons for the ban, nor had any previous notification or summon for investigation been notified to him.

Our organisations would like to stress that this is not an isolated case in Egypt. Travel bans have been repeatedly used by Egyptian authorities as a tool to intimidate and silence independent voices of Human Rights defenders and activists, as well as lawyers and journalists, and are unfortunately becoming standard practice in the country. Furthermore, such measures are being taken without serious judicial grounds and are often unfounded and arbitrary.

The list of Egyptian Human Rights defenders and activists prevented from travelling abroad is increasingly long.

According to reports received by Front Line Defenders, on 14 January 2016, the activist and poet Mr Omar Hazek was stopped at the airport by Egyptian security and was not able to take a flight to Amsterdam to be awarded a prize for freedom of expression from PEN International. The authorities also reportedly confiscated Mr Hazek's passport and mobile phone, and questioned him on his activities in Egypt, his relations with international organisations, and told him the travel ban against him had been issued on 'security grounds'. Moreover, Mr Mohamed Lotfy, founder and executive director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), has been effectively under a travel ban for 'security reasons' since 2 June 2015, when security forces prevented him from flying to Germany to carry out Human Rights advocacy activities and to speak before the German Parliament about the Human Rights situation in Egypt.

On 13 January 2015 political activist, Ms Esraa Abdel Fattah, who worked at the Egyptian Democratic Academy, had to face the same situation as she was banned from travelling to Germany. Travel bans were also imposed throughout the years on Messrs Hossameldin Ali, Ahmed Ghonim and Bassim Samir of the Egyptian Democratic Academy, according to reports received by Front Line Defenders. Many Egyptian Human Rights defenders and activists, including some of those banned from travel, remain under investigation in a criminal case opened in 2011 concerning their alleged receipt of unlawful foreign funding. Investigators have visited the premises of Human Rights organisations asking for registration documents, while judges have continued to ask staff to come in for questioning.

Our organisations firmly condemn increasingly routine imposition of arbitrary travel bans on Human Rights defenders and activists in Egypt, since it appears to be only aimed at undermining their legitimate and peaceful activities in defence of Human Rights and democracy.

Accordingly, our organisations urge the Egyptian authorities to immediately and unconditionally lift travel bans imposed on Human Rights defenders and activists in the country solely for engaging in peaceful activities, and to put an end to all forms of harassment, including at judicial level, against Human Rights and democracy activists in the country. Under international Human Rights law, bans on leaving one's country can only be imposed for legitimate and non-arbitrary reasons. Such bans should be proportionate (i.e. temporary) and everyone on whom a ban is imposed should be immediately informed of the ban, the reasons for it and its duration, and should be able to challenge it in a fair hearing. Finally, our organisations strongly call upon the international community to take a clear stand against the increasing crackdown by the Egyptian authorities against civil society voices. In particular, we urge the European Union authorities to:

- raise their concerns on the increasing use of this means of silencing Human Rights defenders and activists in every high-level meeting with their Egyptian counterparts, in accordance with the EU guidelines on Human Rights defenders;
- to express their support to Human Rights defenders by inviting them to conferences, forums and hearings and to ensure regular exchange with them on the Human Rights situation in the country via the EU delegation and embassies.

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