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Egypt: Muzzling Civil Society

"Human rights activists, political opponents and journalists are targeted among others by the Egyptian authorities because they peacefully exercise their rights of freedom of expression." Amnesty International said in a report released today.

In the report "Muzzling the civil society", Amnesty International said "The authorities in Egypt are sending a clear message to the country's civil society by detaining and imprisoning, those who publicly criticize or oppose the government's policies."

The report highlights how people in Egypt continue to be imprisoned for "offences" which merely amount to the exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association.

For example during the period leading up to the parliamentary elections due in October and November 2000, the risk of opposing activists to be detained has increased significantly.

In the latest clampdown, hundreds of alleged Muslim Brothers have been detained under broad charges, such as "membership of an illegal organization". By the end of August 2000, at least 150 of them were still in detention.

A group of 20 professionals, including a former member of Parliament, accused of membership of the banned Muslim Brothers organization is being tried before a military court since the end of last year. The verdict was due to be pronounced in July 2000, but has been postponed until 7 November which fits in the pattern of the government

sparing no effort in preventing political opponents from participating in the elections.

During the nineties, new Egyptian legislation has progressively restricted the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and association. These include the Anti-terror Law, the Press Law and the law on Civil Associations and Institutions.

Journalists have been imprisoned for libelling officials. On 8 April 2000 an appeal court upheld the sentences of two years' imprisonment of Magdi Hussein and Salah Badawi, in a libel case brought against journalists of an opposition party's newspaper, al-Sha'ab (The People), by a government minister. 'Issam al-Din Hanafi, cartoonist of the newspaper, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment in the same case. The newspaper al-Sha'ab has been banned from publication since May 2000.

Human rights defenders and NGO activists have been targeted for reporting on human rights violations in the country. Hafez Abu Sa'ada, Secretary General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) was detained in December 1998 in connection with an EOHR report on human rights violations in the predominantly Coptic Christian village of al-Kushh.

In February 2000 the General Prosecution Office announced that the case against Hafez Abu Sa'ada would be referred for trial before the (Emergency) Supreme State Security Court (ESSSC). However, subsequently Hafez Abu Sa'ada received oral assurances from the authorities that his case would not be pursued.

Members of religious groups are among others targeted for exercising their right to freedom of belief. Manal Wahid Mana'i, the

alleged leader of a religious group and several of her followers were arrested at the end of the year and accused of attributing divine status to a late Sufi religious leader. On 5 September, she was sentenced to five years' imprisonment and 12 of her followers received sentences ranging from six months to three years' imprisonment.

Freedom of expression in Egypt is also threatened by armed Islamist groups who failed to revoke calls for the killing of civilians whom they consider to be political enemies or "atheists", including intellectuals, writers and academics.

Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities to comply with its international obligations and to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience, who are detained for their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs and who have not used or advocated violence.

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