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## **Egypt: New protest law gives security forces free rein**

A new law placing broad restrictions on protests in Egypt is a serious setback that poses a grave threat to freedom of assembly and gives security forces a free rein to use excessive force, including lethal force, against demonstrators, Amnesty International said today.

The law, signed yesterday by Egyptian President Adly Mansour, grants the Ministry of Interior wide discretionary powers over protests and lays out broad circumstances in which demonstrators can be found to violate the law.

“It is a dangerous sign that the first piece of legislation regulating rights and freedoms passed since the ousting of Mohamed Morsi curtails freedom of assembly and treats peaceful protesters like criminals. Not only does it allow the police to disperse peaceful demonstrations, but gives them the power to shoot protesters who pose no threat to the lives or safety of others”, said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

“Granting security forces complete discretion to ban protests or disperse them using excessive and lethal force is a serious setback for human rights in Egypt and paves the way for further abuse.”

In practice, the vague and overbroad grounds in the law will not only allow the authorities to prevent or forcibly disperse protests by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, but it will essentially allow for a ban on all opposition protests.

What is particularly worrying is that it gives the security forces a legal framework for the use of excessive force against any protesters deemed to have committed a “crime punishable by law”. In particular, the law provides for the police to use shotguns and rubber bullets, including to disperse peaceful protesters. Amnesty International has documented cases of protester deaths caused by the use of shotgun pellets, most recently on 6 October.

Moreover, the law allows security forces to respond to the use of firearms by protesters by “means proportionate to the level of threat to lives, money and property”. The inclusion of money and property in this provision contravenes international law and standards, which permit security forces to use firearms only when that is the sole means of defence against an imminent threat of death or serious injury.

Amnesty International fears that security forces will make use of the authority given to them under the new law to disperse peaceful protests for not complying with the law’s requirements, including on broad grounds such as disrupting traffic and holding demonstrations in places of worship. Moreover, under the new law, any violent act committed by a small minority of protesters, or even just one, can be used as a legal justification for dispersing the entire demonstration.

“Instead of using the opportunity to break the pattern where the security forces repeatedly kill protesters with no consequences, the new law will further entrench abuse,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

The new law grants the Ministry of Interior powers to ban protests on grounds including “threats to security and peace”, “security or public order”, and “influencing the course of justice”, as well as delaying traffic or transport. Protesters found in violation will face up to five years in prison and/or hefty 100,000 Egyptian pound fines (USD\$14, 513). These restrictions and punishments, which go well beyond the restrictions permissible under international law, will severely curtail the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly in Egypt.

The law also imposes blanket prohibitions on protests and public gatherings of a “political nature” in places of worship. Since the ‘25 January Revolution’, many protest marches began after prayers at mosques – a practice continued by Mohamed Morsi’s supporters since he was ousted in July 2013.

The Minister of Interior and Governors can also use the new law to declare public spaces off limits for protest. These include public areas surrounding presidential palaces, parliaments, ministries, diplomatic missions and embassies, court buildings, hospitals, prisons, police stations or points, military zones and heritage sites.

Protest organizers are required to submit complete plans for any gatherings of more than 10 people to the Ministry at least three days in advance. Taken together with the Ministry's powers to cancel a demonstration or change its route, this in effect means that demonstrations can take place only with the Ministry's prior authorization.

“Since the ‘25 January Revolution’, human rights groups and activists have been struggling to defend their hard-won space to protest. A government – which continues to pay lip service to the sacrifices made by protesters during that period – has now provided a legal cover to ban protests outright and give free rein to security forces, with their abysmal record of using excessive and lethal force, to forcibly disperse protesters at their whim,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“Instead of investigating the large number of killings of protesters since the ‘25 January Revolution’ and punishing those responsible, the current government seems to be rewarding security forces for their excesses and providing them with further legal means to trample on rights.”

### **Background**

On 24 October 2013, Amnesty International sent a memorandum to President Adly Mansour urging him not to sign into law the restrictive draft Law 107 of 2013 Regulating the Right to Public Gatherings, Processions and Peaceful Protests. While some amendments were introduced since that draft, the adopted law still breaches Egypt's obligations under International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights to uphold freedom of assembly, and respect the right to life.

Efforts by Morsi's government to pass similar restrictive legislation earlier this year were thwarted following an outcry by human rights NGOs, political parties, and other stakeholders.

Since 3 July, more than 1,300 people have died in protests and political violence in Egypt, many as a result of security forces using excessive and unwarranted lethal force. No adequate investigations have been launched into security force wrongdoing. Instead, thousands of pro-Morsi protesters have been arrested – many during the dispersal of sit-ins and protests – amid concerns on the lack of respect of due process rights.