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A REVOLUTION BETRAYED

Two years on from the revolution that ousted Hosni Mubarak, democracy still eludes Egypt. Independent trade unions are suppressed; street children are arrested and tortured; female protestors are attacked; and dissident voices are being silenced.

ILO MUST SUPPORT EGYPTIAN WORKERS' FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

BY VITTORIO LONGHI



© AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File

It's been two years since Mubarak was overthrown in the 2011 revolution (pictured above) and Egyptian workers are still being oppressed (AP Photo/Ben Curtis, File)

If the June 2013 conviction of 43 NGO activists in Egypt was considered outrageous by the international community, little attention has been paid to what the workers are facing under the regime of President Mohamed Morsi.

The NGO activists were accused of operating illegally and of using foreign funds to foment unrest in Egypt. They were tried in absentia and condemned to up to five years in prison. Most of them have already left the country but the case has drawn the attention of the international media and US diplomacy, in part because there were 16 Americans amongst them.

But for the many unknown Egyptian workers who try to organise, to claim better rights and conditions, the response by the security

forces is much harsher and it is seldom covered by the mainstream media.

On 13 June, 2013, the issue of freedom of association in Egypt was discussed at the International Labour Conference in Geneva, and this represented a good opportunity to shed light on the many violations of labour rights that have gone on in the country, before and after the revolution.

The ILO now expects that a new law “ensuring full respect for freedom of association would be adopted in the very near future”.

However, the systematic denial of rights is such that international labour institutions should go beyond simple expectations and put some extra effort to ensure decent work and workers' freedom in Egypt.

The number of protests has doubled since Morsi was elected in June 2012 and around 650 workers have been dismissed for union activities.

This May in Cairo, the police brutally attacked protestors taking part in a peaceful sit-in in front of an electricity distribution company to demand the release of 17 workers who were arrested the previous week, in a demonstration against heavy pay cuts.

“There's been a long list of anti-union attacks, from nurses to taxi drivers, from teachers to electricity and dockworkers. In most cases, the demands came from the new independent trade unions, still not officially recognised by the government.”

■ INTERESTS BEHIND THE DOCKS

The repression does not spare the transport sector, which is highly strategic in Egypt's economy. The government aims to invest and develop projects in the Suez Canal region to make Egypt an international transportations hub. No wonder that control over dock workers is so crucial.

In September, five workers from the Alexandria Container & Cargo Handling Company (ACCHC), a subcontractor at Egyptian sea ports, were accused of inciting a labour strike and sentenced to three years in jail.

Ahmed Sadek, Yousri Maaruf, Ashraf Ibrahim, Mohamed Abdel Moneim and Essam El-Din Mohamed Mabrouk have appealed the verdict and are now waiting for their court hearing later this month.

In March 2012, hundreds of dock workers had staged a strike demanding the removal of the company's board of directors, suspected of corruption, and reclaiming the lease of the docks at the Alexandria port granted to Chinese and other foreign port-services companies.

The independent workers' syndicate of the cargo company had already filed a complaint claiming that the leasing contract was

“illegal” and would deprive the Egyptian Port Authority of millions of pounds in revenues, Al-Ahram newspaper reports.

“The public sector and ACCHC lost almost 41 per cent of its annual revenues due to the leasing contract after losing main navigation lines and operation terminals,” claims the Egyptian Democratic Labour Congress (EDLC), which includes over 271 independent labour unions.

■ FAKE UNIONS, BIG BUSINESS

The recognition of organisations like EDLC and the new Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) is the only way out to this situation, which does not harm only the workers, but prevents any social dialogue and therefore any chance for socially sustainable development.

EFITU is a result of the protests started in Tahrir Square. It was formed a few days after the uprisings and it seems to represent a true, independent labour movement. The leaders are elected through a democratic and gender-balanced system.

According to Fatma Ramadan, a founding member of EFITU, the new government is adopting the same economic policies as Mubarak, and violence is now considered the only way to prevent the rise of the labour movement.

Other leaders, like Rahma Refaat, a legal advisor at the EDLC, are fighting for the many workers excluded from any kind of social insurance. For example, the young women, aged 16 to 20, who work in the garment sector in very difficult conditions for 12 hours a day and with monthly salaries of 200 Egyptian pounds (about 30 US dollars).

Although Egypt ratified the core ILO conventions on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining in the mid-1950s, free unions are still banned and there is still no actual alternative to the state-con-

trolled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF).

Any attempt to implement freedom of association has so far failed. The former Labour Minister, the academic Ahmed Borai, resigned in late 2011 after the transitional military-led government refused to grant legal recognition to independent unions.

THE CAMELS OF ETUF

The ETUF leadership was docile only with the government and with big economic powers, though.

A former leader of this union, Ismail Fahmy, has been on trial for his role in the so-called “Battle of the Camel”, which occurred on February 2011.

This was a deliberate assault on protesters, in which supporters of Mubarak charged violently into a sit-in in Tahrir Square on camels and horses, leaving nearly twelve people dead.

“Behind the denial of core labour rights there are broader economic reasons. According to a detailed analysis by Bloomberg, among the factors that contributed to Egypt’s growth before the 2008 crisis and to foreign investments from the US, Europe and the Persian Gulf, it was the total docility of the state union, along with a policy of low wages and scarce social protections.”

Last month Egypt’s high court refused an appeal by prosecutors over the trial. The defendants were found innocent on charges of manslaughter and attempted murder. “Families of the victims reacted angrily at the appeals court decision, which is final and cannot be retried,” reported Al Jazeera.

In the attempt to show its reformist will, Morsi has replaced some of the old union

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apparatus appointing new, younger officers. Mubarak-era ETUF President Ahmad 'Abd al-Zahir was replaced by al-Gibali al-Maraghi.

“On December 24 [2012], President Morsi appointed al-Maraghi to the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, which many suspect was a reward for working with the Brotherhood,” reports Sada, a webzine on political reforms in the Arab world.

Other union officers are still in charge and are believed to have strong ties with the security forces. This allows them to keep tight control over workers and dissidents.

“The ETUF is illegitimate and must be disbanded because its membership is compulsory — contrary to the rules of syndicates — its elections were proven to be forged by court rulings and [its officials] participated in actions against the revolution,” said Kamal Abbas, another Egyptian veteran activist for Democracy at Work.

Unless significant support comes from the international labour community — meaning the International Labour Organisation and the International Trade Union Confederation, with open condemnation of labour rights violations and criticism of the state union leadership, things will go on as usual in Egypt.

ETUF will keep drawing dues from millions of workers' salaries. On the contrary, the independent unions will not be able to get any employer to deduct dues, and therefore will be unable to survive.

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CHILDREN DETAINED AND TORTURED BY SECURITY FORCES

BY DEENA GAMIL

© AP Photo/Khalil Hamra



The Egyptian government has detained hundreds of children since the second anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution in January

Human rights groups have accused Egyptian security forces of detaining scores of children without charge and in some cases torturing and abusing them.

On 3 February, 2013, 12-year-old sweet potato seller Omar Salah was ‘accidentally’ shot in the chest by an army conscript.

A military court handed out a three-year sentence to the soldier accused of killing Salah on 7 May, but the Egyptian Coalition on Children’s Rights (ECCR) criticised the verdict for being too lenient.

Earlier this year, 14-year-old teenage cancer patient Mahmoud Adel made the news when he was arrested in the port city of Alexandria and detained for nine days, missing vital chemotherapy sessions.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Adel – who has bone cancer – said he wasn’t even protesting when he was arrested: “I was having a drink and jumping over puddles with my friends. I had nothing to do with the protests.”

The authorities refused to release him, however, even though they were shown papers proving Adel’s illness.

The prosecutor accused Adel and another child of “using excessive force to prevent law enforcement, offending state employees and endangering the safety of the city of Alexandria.”

Adel was only released after pressure from Egyptian human rights groups.

UNPRECEDENTED NUMBERS

Egypt's Interior Ministry has detained 383 children since the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution took place on 25 January, according to the ECCR.

In an interview with Al-Ahram Online, UNICEF Representative in Egypt, Philippe Duamelle, said that the UN agency has provided legal assistance to around 600 children who were accused of involvement in demonstrations in recent months.

“During protests and clashes, Egyptian security forces try to arrest as many people as they can, targeting those less likely to attack them. And that often means minors, human rights activist Ghada Shahbender explains.”

“It is definitely a way of frightening people, the number of children taken by security forces and the manner in which they are detained is unprecedented in my experience,” she said.

Many of those children arrested face serious violations of their human rights.

As well as being subjected to physical violence and having their personal belongings stolen, they often face sexual assault.

Minors are usually detained alongside adults, which is a direct violation of Egypt's children's law, which was amended in 2008.

An investigation by Human Rights Watch recently uncovered strong evidence that police and military officers beat many of the children detained, and in some cases, subjected them to torture-like treatment.

President Morsi's government has promised to put an end to these practices, but it is evident that nothing has changed, say activists.

STREET CHILDREN

Egypt's street children often bear the brunt of government violence as they often get involved in the protests and street clashes that are now so widespread in Egypt.

They have no homes and live on the streets where they hawk goods to earn them enough money to buy food.

“It might be hard to say how many children are living on the street in Egypt, but one thing is clear: the numbers are very large and almost certainly growing,” states UNICEF.

Although it is difficult to quantify the phenomenon, NGOs estimate that there are tens of thousands street children in the country, mostly in the big cities of Cairo and Alexandria.

Given their miserable living conditions and the harassment they face from the police, it is understandable that street children participate in protests against the regime and the authorities.

Like other Egyptians, they too want a better life.

But since taking power in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood has not improved the difficult living conditions endured by Egyptians, and until that changes, the protests will continue.

And as long as the protests continue, it is likely that children will always be victims, especially with the general deterioration of human rights in Egypt.

NO PRESS FREEDOM UNDER MORSI

Mohamed Saad is a photographer with the Egyptian news site al-Badeel, and he was covering the clashes in downtown Cairo on 9 March, 2013, when he was stopped by the police.

They arrested, detained and brutally beat him.

They destroyed his camera and his equipment, and stole his wallet. Only after five hours of detention, they released him.

Attacks like these have become more and more common in Egypt. Intimidation and detentions are now part of the daily life of Egyptian journalists and photographers.

“No one will touch media freedoms. There will be no pens broken, no opinions prevented, no channels or newspapers shut down in my era,” vowed the new Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi, during his electoral campaign.

Speaking to Equal Times, Abeer Saady, the Vice Chair of the Egyptian Press Syndicate, expressed her concerns about the crack-down on freedom of expression. She argues that journalists are targeted while reporting protests and clashes.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) condemned the shooting of al-Housseiny and urged the authorities to investigate thoroughly the circumstances of the incident.

“The authorities have an obligation to protect our colleagues and do everything in their power to prevent and punish acts of violence targeting media,” said IFJ General Secretary, Beth Costa.



© AP Photo/Nasser Nasse

There have been four times as many lawsuits for “insulting the President” in Morsi’s first 200 days in office than during the entire 30 years that Mubarak ruled, according to human rights lawyer Gamal Eid, interviewed by the largest English-language news website, state-owned al-Ahram.

Not only did the number of lawsuits increase, but they are now filed by the presidency directly.

Under Mubarak the presidency never officially filed a legal complaint against a journalist.

Lawyers with ties to Mubarak’s legal team filed the suits, such as in the case against journalist Ibrahim Eissa, who was accused of spreading rumors about Mubarak’s health.

This trend shows to what extent the Morsi regime does not accept any criticism.

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“Our colleague, al-Housseiny Abu Daif, was shot dead while reporting on the protests around the presidential palace last December. The number of journalists wounded while reporting on the frequent protests has increased enormously, also the number of arrests is going up,” she says.

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In January, the editor of al-Ahram Online, Hani Shukrallah, was forced out of his job by al-Ahram’s new chairman, Mamdouh el-Wali, who is considered a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Shukrallah is one of Egypt’s most respected professional journalists and is known for his criticism about the Muslim brotherhood.

Ironically, Shukrallah had already been removed during the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, as the editor in chief of “The Week-

ly”, another al-Ahram publication.

However, al-Ahram is not the only state-owned newspaper that is now headed by a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Other institutions are in the same situation, since the Shura Council – dominated by Islamists – appoints them.

“Mubarak’s regime did not collapse. Only the head of the regime and his entourage were overthrown, but its dynamics and rules are still the same,” said Saady.

The new regime did not change the old system, and did not meet the demands of the revolution; that is why it had to resort to the methods of the old regime, she argues. “They are reproducing what was happening during Mubarak’s days, but now is even more outrageous.”

Morsi is the first freely elected president in Egypt. He came to power after a revolution, demanding “bread, freedom, and dignity”, but none of these demands were met.

“Journalists are determined to continue and fight for their right to freedom of expression. They are determined to do their work, to report about the reality in Egypt, regardless of the hazards,” stresses Saady.

By D.G.

WOMEN SAY 'NO MORE' TO TAHRIR SQUARE VIOLENCE

© Deena Gamil



The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was supposed to bring freedom and justice, but many women have experienced the opposite

Female protestors at the revolutionary epicentre of Tahrir Square have had to endure an increasing number of physical and sexual assaults recently.

On January 25, 2013, which marked the second anniversary of the protests which ousted Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, 19 women reported violent attacks in and around Tahrir Square.

In some of the worst cases, female protestors were sexually assaulted with bladed weapons which left cuts all over their genitals.

In a typical attack, crowds of men quickly surround isolated women, grabbing them and attempting to rip off their clothes. Attempts to rescue the victim only make the attackers more violent.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, recently condemned such incidents saying she “deplored the fact that sexual violence is permitted to occur

with apparent impunity in a public square, and that the authorities have failed to prevent these attacks or to bring more than a single prosecution against the hundreds of men involved in these vicious attacks”.

And on Tuesday 14 February there was a global protest against the ‘sexual terrorism’ faced by female protestors in Egypt.

Organised by the Uprising of Women in the Arab World, they called on people to protest outside their local Egyptian embassy in solidarity with the women of Egypt.

■ ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

But as well as this international call of action, on 6 February Egyptian women themselves decided that ‘enough is enough’.

Under the slogan “The street is ours” hundreds of women marched from Cairo’s Sayyida Zeinab mosque to Tahrir Square.

Their message was simple: Egyptian women will not be intimidated or excluded from participating in the public life.

The protestors – who were also joined by a number of men who stood in solidarity with their demands – carried banners of famous Egyptian women and chanted slogans against President Mohamed Morsi, affirming that Egyptian women are a “red line” that should not be crossed or violated.

Sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon in Egypt – 2008 data from the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights revealed that 83 percent of Egyptian woman and 98 percent of foreign female visitors to Egypt had experienced street harassment.

It also revealed that nearly half of the Egyptian respondents endured this harassment on a daily basis. But harassment – and more worryingly, violence – has become more widespread in the last few years.

“

What’s so alarming about the recent incidents is the fact that they appear to target women in and around the protests of Tahrir Square, leading to concerns that this may result in women excluding themselves from political activism for fear of violent attack.

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In March 2011, a number of women protesters were subjected to “virginity tests” by the military.

And following the publication of a new report by Amnesty International, the Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, remarked that: “The tactics used by mobs in recent protests is a harrowing reminder of the sexual harassment and assault against women protesters under ousted president Hosni Mubarak.”

■ OPANTISH

In response to the increased violence, several groups of volunteers have been formed to protect women from such assaults.

One of the most organised groups is “Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault” (OpAntiSH), which aims to “combat incidents of group sexual harassment or assault of women in Tahrir during protests, sit-ins, or confrontations in the area by rescuing women who are exposed to attacks and transporting them to safety.”

The group also aims to prevent attacks by “actively monitoring the square and intervening quickly in the early stages of mob formation. OpAntiSH also provides follow up medical, legal, and psychological support to women who are attacked in coordination with many individual activists and organisations,” according to its Facebook page.

If people witness or experience any sexual harassment the group also has a hotline which people can call for help.

A number of female survivors of these attacks recently appeared on TV to share their harrowing experiences – this, in itself, is considered an act of resistance in the conservative Egyptian society.

It is not clear who is responsible for these attacks or why.

While some argue that the upswing in attacks is the result of a lack of political and social will to do something about the problem, others argue that these are not random incidents, and that the attacks are being carried out by specially trained groups.

Their mission? To intimidate women and prevent them from participating in political activity.

But in fact there is no concrete evidence to support this argument. It is more likely that the incidents are a reflection of Egypt's endemic social issues following decades of poverty, ignorance and repression.

By D.G.

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