

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

MEDIA BRIEFING

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Egypt: Municipal elections on Tuesday 8 April, concerns mount

Next Tuesday, 8 April, sees municipal and local elections taking place across Egypt. These should have taken place two years ago but were postponed by the authorities until now. The decision to postpone the elections was widely interpreted as a government reaction to the unprecedented success of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in the 2005 parliamentary elections.

These will be the first elections since the 2005 amendments to the Constitution which now require independent presidential candidates to obtain the support of at least ten elected members of every local council in at least 14 governorates in order for their nomination to stand.

In the run up to these elections, hundreds of potential candidates have been arrested or subjected to restrictions, including many supporters and activists of the main opposition organization, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Amnesty International is concerned that many of those arrested and detained may be prisoners of conscience held for the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression and association. It is calling for those who are being held as prisoners of conscience to be released immediately and unconditionally, and for the Egyptian authorities to lift all other unlawful restrictions on the exercise of freedom of expression.

Arrests and restrictions on potential candidates

Amnesty International has received information that more than 160 would-be candidates have been arrested by Egyptian authorities in advance of the elections.

Other Muslim Brotherhood activists are reported to have been physically prevented from registering as candidates in the local elections by plain clothes police officers who denied them access to registration offices, or were barred from registering because government-appointed election officials refused to accept their registration papers.

In some cases, administrative courts ordered that Muslim Brotherhood activists who had been refused registration should be able to register as candidates, but in practice only a few score have been permitted to do so.

This has sparked protests by thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters across several governorates.

Administrative courts have also ordered the suspension of elections in a number of governorates, including Buhayrah, Gharbiyah, Kafr Shaykh, Qalyubiyah and Minufiyah.

Arrests of supporters

The last two days saw thousands of demonstrators on the streets protesting against the authorities' refusal to implement the administrative court decisions; some 280 people were arrested and remain in detention, most of them from the Buhayrah governorate. Several demonstrators were reportedly injured during confrontations with the police.

In addition, since January, more than 650 Muslim Brotherhood supporters have been arrested in several governorates, of whom some 530 remain in detention. Most were rounded up for allegedly holding unauthorized meetings and possessing subversive leaflets. They include university professors, medical doctors and business executives, as well as three former members of parliament, Sayyed Hazzin, Saber Abdelsadeq and Sayyed Abdelhamid.

Among those currently detained, or at risk of arrest, are two journalists who reported on the arrests and other actions taken by the authorities against members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood organization. Khaled Hamza, editor-in-chief of *Ikhwan web* (Brotherhood web), an English language website reporting on the activities of the group, was arrested on 20 February 2008 and had his pre-trial detention most recently renewed for a further 15 days on 31 March. He suffers from a heart condition but is reported to have been denied adequate medical care in detention. The house of the other journalist, Abdel Galil Al-Sharnouby, editor-in-chief of *Ikhwan online*, the Arabic language site of the organization, was twice searched by police when they sought to arrest him on 12 and 21 March, and he is currently seeking refuge at the Journalists' Syndicate in Cairo.

Muslim Brotherhood

This latest crackdown by the Egyptian authorities follows a longstanding pattern in which members and supporters of Muslim Brotherhood have been repeatedly subject to arbitrary arrest and detention in the run-up to elections. The Muslim Brotherhood is officially banned in Egypt but the organisation has a wide following and it has been common for its supporters to stand as independent candidates in national and local elections.

A verdict is awaited following the arrest and trial of 40 of the organisation's leaders before a military court in Cairo. The verdict in the trial, which began in April 2007, was due to be given in March 2008 but has been postponed until after the local council elections. It is now expected on 15 April. Amnesty International and other organisations sent independent legal observers but they were not permitted entry to the court.

To speak to Amnesty International's experts on Egypt, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566.

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