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Egypt: Time to put human rights on the agenda

On the occasion of the referendum on 26 September 1999 confirming President Hosni Mubarak in office for the fourth time, Amnesty International calls for the implementation of effective safeguards against human rights violations in Egypt.

“People in Egypt have a right to feel safe when they are arrested and interrogated by security forces, but we continue to receive reports of people from all walks of life who have been tortured and ill-treated in detention,” the organization said today.

Amnesty International is concerned that for hundreds of complaints of torture which have been filed over the past few years, no thorough, prompt and impartial investigations have been conducted. The Egyptian authorities have also failed to disclose their findings on a number of cases where torture is believed to have caused or contributed to the death of detainees.

“The state of emergency, which has been in force since 1981, has contributed to restrictions of rights and freedoms in Egypt,” the organization added.

Several restrictive laws threaten the development of civil society institutions, including the amendments to the press law in 1996 permitting sentences of up to two years' imprisonment to be imposed against journalists in libel cases. In May 1999 the Egyptian Parliament passed a law on NGOs which stipulates up to one year's imprisonment for failure to comply with new regulations.

The expansion of the competence of military courts by presidential decree since 1992 has established a judicial system under which hundreds of civilians have been unfairly tried - among them prisoners of conscience, who have had no right to appeal against their sentences of several years' imprisonment. Dozens of others charged with membership of armed Islamist groups have been sentenced to death and executed with no right to appeal.

Amnesty International has welcomed the release of some thousand political detainees over the past two years, but continues to be concerned about thousand of others who remain in administrative detention. Many of them have been there for years and live in appalling conditions. The denial of adequate medical care for political detainees and prisoners has reportedly led to death in a number of cases .

“Protection of human rights in compliance with Egypt's obligations under international law should become the key issue on the agenda of the forthcoming presidential term,” the organization emphasized.

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