

PRESS RELEASE

Egypt: Presidential pardon is an inadequate step towards freedom of expression

ARTICLE 19

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Egyptian President al-Sisi's decree, given this afternoon, ordering the release of hundreds of detainees, including Al Jazeera Journalists Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed is an insufficient step in addressing its appalling human rights record. Those now free were unlawfully imprisoned and should have never been sentenced in the first place.

President al-Sisi, who plans to travel to New York to address the United Nations General Assembly next week, should go beyond this welcomed measure, and address systematic violations of human rights, including legislation severely restricting fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, assembly and association.

ARTICLE 19 remains concerned about human rights defenders, students, youth activists, journalists and bloggers still imprisoned. The restrictive legislation limiting freedom of expression and human rights more widely needs to be addressed.

"These pardons are an insufficient step to address the systematic repression against those who dissent. The detention of journalists and activists should not have happened in the first place, and many remain unjustifiably behind bars," commented Thomas Hughes, ARTICLE 19's Executive Director.

"Egypt now needs to address its appalling human rights record, by revising the recently adopted raft of laws severely restricting fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, assembly and association" Hughes added.

The National Council for Human Rights recently detailed the scale of the human rights crisis in Egypt in its annual report in May 2015, stating that in Egypt, "the right to life had witnessed horrible deterioration' in 2013 and 2014." According to the official Egyptian human rights body, there were approximately 2,600 people killed in political violence in 2014, and

thousands were arrested for political offences – official estimates run from 7,000 to 16,000, with unofficial estimates much higher.

Since 2013, Egypt has adopted new, repressive laws regarding protest and on terrorism which provide for numerous restrictions for journalistic work; in addition, older, vague restrictions on freedom of expression continue to be used alongside them. Punishments are also becoming more severe than ever.

These detainees form a small proportion of those unjustly and arbitrarily arrested across Egypt: the threat of imprisonment is just one repressive tool of many to shut down legitimate debate. It poses a threat to the safety and freedom journalists, bloggers and those that want to freely express their opinions and leads to self-censorship.

“The Egyptian government’s increasing restriction of the space for freedom of expression is a major concern for ARTICLE 19. Media freedom, freedom of assembly and the right to fair trial must be ensured;” added Hughes.