

# Survivors Tell of Horror of Egypt's Prisons



A defendant reacts after receiving a 15-year prison sentence, in Cairo, Egypt, 9 June 2015. Photo AP

Egypt's prisons are rife with abuse and filled to **triple their capacity**. In 2016, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), an association headed by Egyptian lawyers who are committed to social justice, found that **106,000** people were incarcerated in **504** detention facilities. Some 60,000 of those jailed were arrested for their political views or affiliation.

In contrast, 70,000 people were in prison in 2012, according to a source that ANHRI says is close to the **government**. Even more telling, **5,000 to 10,000** people were imprisoned for defying or criticizing the state at the end of President **Hosni Mubarak's** rule in February 2011.

The number of inmates increased significantly after **General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi** overthrew **Mohamed Morsi**, Egypt's first elected president and a high-ranking **Muslim Brotherhood** member, in 2013. The army's ensuing **crackdown** against Muslim Brotherhood supporters, secular activists and aid workers resulted in what the New York Times **described** as a jailed generation.

In 2014, an Interior Ministry official said that authorities arrested 22,000 people in 2013. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, an independent monitoring group, estimated that the number was closer to 41,000.

Under al-Sisi, the government has tried to ease overcrowding by building 16 more prisons. However, Human Rights Watch (HRW) warns that unless draconian laws are scrapped, authorities will continue to detain anyone at any time. A decree barring public demonstrations, for instance, is frequently used to charge protestors with 'obstructing justice'. Other common accusations include 'thuggery' and 'assaulting police officers'. These charges are almost never supported with evidence except for a written police report.

Those who are imprisoned face appalling conditions. Scorpion, Egypt's most notorious jail, is where many political prisoners are locked up. HRW has said that inmates suffer abuse and torture at the hands of guards, sometimes resulting in their death.

Authorities inside Scorpion have prohibited prisoners from communicating with their families, while failing to provide basic medical treatment to ailing inmates. Guards also routinely beat prisoners and isolate them in solitary confinement, often without a bed or mattress.

Ibrahim Abd al-Ghaffar, a former warden, told a local television network in 2012 that Scorpion was designed to lock up prisoners until they were dead. He said it was made to incarcerate and punish political prisoners.

However, prisoners are dying in detention facilities across Egypt. A report by the Swiss human rights organization Alkarama documented 323 prison deaths between August 2013 and September 2015. In the year following Morsi's ouster, a total of 132 deaths were recorded. At least 191 people died in prison after al-Sisi officially became president, Alkarama reported.

Thanks to a decree issued by former Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim in 2014, police stations have since been classified as prisons, enabling authorities to detain people there for extended periods of time. The decree does not stipulate whether standard prison regulations should be applied in police stations, which has left inmates vulnerable to exceptional abuse. Many inmates have consequently died after sustaining fatal injuries from police officers, often as a result of being denied medical treatment.

A 2014 report by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) found that living and health conditions in Egyptian prisons fall short of minimum standards. Urgent health care was rarely provided, either due to slow procedures or because the prison administration did not want to authorize life-saving treatment.

None of the 37 former inmates whom EIPR interviewed were examined by a physician once they were detained. Few saw a doctor during the entire period of their incarceration. Some inmates were denied access while others refused medical help because they did not trust the doctor.

Physicians working in jails benefit from their affiliation with the Interior Ministry. Inmates are consequently fearful that prison officials influence any medical treatment that is provided. Those who wish to see a doctor typically wait weeks. The lack of basic medicine is also a recurring issue. Most prisoners said that they were given the wrong medication. Those suffering from chronic illnesses typically depended on their relatives to supply them with medicine during their visits.

Inmates with life-threatening illnesses were almost never released on medical grounds. Instead, they languished in overcrowded and unhygienic confines, which often worsened their condition and sometimes lead to their death.

Ibrahim Halawa, an Irish citizen who was arrested as a minor in 2013 while on holiday in Cairo, is a notable case. The son of a senior Muslim cleric in Ireland, Halawa was seized by police officers in al-Fath Mosque as part of a crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood supporters. He has been imprisoned for nearly four years without trial. His family has **said** that his health has deteriorated rapidly, forcing him to use a wheelchair to move around.

Part of the reason Halawa is in poor health is that he has attempted several hunger strikes. However, the appalling conditions in prison are believed to have affected his health the most. Last year 2016, he **described** his life in prison to the British daily the Guardian. In his **testimony**, he said that it is normal for inmates to be stripped naked and beaten with a bar. He noted that during one of his hunger strikes, prison guards refused to provide him with urgent medical care. One day, when Halawa's fellow inmates noticed his health was deteriorating, they began banging on the prison walls. The guards told the inmates to stop making noise until Halawa was dead.

Against the odds, Halawa is still alive. Unlike so many others, the Irish government is lobbying for his release. Most political prisoners have nobody following up on their case except for their relatives. In today's Egypt, anybody can go to prison. Young men **risk arrest** if a member of their family has a past affiliation with an outlawed movement. Joe Stork, deputy director of HRW's Middle East and North Africa Division, **suspects** that the number of incarcerations will continue to rise as long as criticism against the state is considered an act of terrorism.