

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

EGYPT: Fear that adoption of new draft NGO Law will endorse a “no human rights” era

Paris-Geneva, October 3, 2016 – With the approval by the Cabinet of a draft NGO law, authorities are attempting to eradicate existing human rights groups and preventing the set-up of new ones thus virtually banning the conduct of human rights work by independent civil society groups, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (an FIDH-OMCT partnership) said today. As the State Council has now been referred the draft for legal review, human rights groups in Egypt continue to face intensive judicial harassment, aimed at eradicating the human rights movement as a whole.

On September 8, 2016, the Cabinet approved a new draft NGO law, which if adopted in its current form will further shrink the space for civil society in Egypt. The draft law retains restrictive provisions already existing in the current NGO Law (No. 84/2002), in particular giving the Ministry of Social Solidarity authority to approve or reject NGOs' licensing. It also provides for new impediments likely to result in the suppression of independent human rights work by civil society. It establishes a security/governmental committee called the Coordinating Committee, which would include General Intelligence Services (GIS) and representatives of the Interior Ministry, to approve foreign funding of Egyptian NGOs, to give international NGOs (INGOs) licenses to work and to approve the opening by Egyptian NGOs of new branches nationally and abroad.

The draft law also limits NGO work to “development and social objectives”, leaving great uncertainty as to the legality of the conduct of human rights work. In addition, the draft law imposes a hefty minimum capital to set up an NGO, establishes a specific tax for foreign funding, bans activists who have received prison sentence from forming their own NGOs, requires INGOs to conduct work that meet social needs and conform to State development plans, subjects the opening of new offices in the country to the Ministry of Social Solidarity's approval and deprives individuals from any right to remedy.

“Hindering the legitimate activities of civil society groups is contrary to international human rights standards, in particular freedoms of expression and association by which Egypt is bound”, said FIDH President, Dimitris Christopoulos.

The approval of this restrictive NGO draft law is in line with the ongoing tremendous deterioration of the working environment for civil society in Egypt, especially within the framework of criminal case No. 173, known as “the foreign funding case”, which has seen the constant harassment of a significant number of Egyptian human rights groups and their members since June 2013. Within this case, on September 17, 2016, the Cairo Criminal Court handed down an order to freeze the assets of five prominent human rights defenders and three NGOs¹ and at least seven travel bans have also been imposed on leading Egyptian human rights defenders since 2015. If indicted under this case, hundreds of Egyptian human rights defenders could be condemned to up to 25 years in prison and the closure of at least 37 NGOs.

“Whether it is the implementation of restrictive legislation or judicial harassment against NGOs or individual defenders, the Egyptian authorities must immediately cease their crusade against civil society and enable them to effectively function”, added OMCT Secretary General, Gerald Staberock.

¹ See the Observatory Urgent Appeal EGY 004 / 0615 / OBS 049.7, published on September 19, 2016. In June 2016, another judge had already frozen the assets of another rights NGO, Andalus Center for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies (AITAS) and its director, **Ahmad Samih** in the context of the same criminal case.



The Observatory
for the Protection
of Human Rights Defenders

Since late 2011, civil society in Egypt has been the target of a crackdown, with authorities tightening their control on human rights activities in the country. The recent draft NGO law, along with the decision of the Egyptian Court on case No. 173 are only the latest attempts by Egyptian authorities to silence human rights activism in the country, specifically against civil society groups exposing state abuses.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders. FIDH and OMCT are both members of ProtectDefenders.eu, the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism implemented by international civil society.

For more information, please contact:

- FIDH: Audrey Couprie / Arthur Manet: + 33 143552518
- OMCT: Chiara Cosentino: +41 228094937