
PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

EGYPT: Arrest and subsequent release of a human rights defender monitoring the referendum on constitutional amendments

Geneva-Paris, March 28, 2011. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), expresses its deepest concern about the arbitrary arrest of Ms. Ragia Omran, lawyer, while she was monitoring the referendum on the constitutional amendments in the South Cairo Primary Court in the district of Bab El Khaleq, together with her sister Ms. Dana Omran who was accompanying her.*

On March 19, 2011, Ms. **Ragia Omran** monitored the referendum at several polling stations in Cairo, accompanied by her sister Ms. Dana Omran, and an American journalist. She had received an official monitoring permit from the Supreme Judicial Committee in charge of supervising the referendum.

At 3:00 p.m., the three women went to a polling station located into the South Cairo Primary Court, where members of the army were present at the entrance. They checked their personal identity documents. When they entered the polling station, the Judge in charge of supervising the polling station, Mr. Mohamed Abdel Hamid Noweir, welcomed their presence and cooperated in answering questions.

At 3:15 p.m., Lieutenant Mohsen Mohamed Heikal entered the polling station, in violation of the Supreme Judicial Committee's instructions and rules related to the process of voting, stating that the presence of members of the army is only allowed to maintain order, on the request of the Head of the Sub-Committee¹. Those conditions were reportedly not met.

Another senior army officer walked in and asked both Omran sisters to show their identity documents. He then reportedly told them to leave the polling station immediately. Ms. Ragia Omran showed him her permit from the Supreme Judicial Committee, and said that she was allowed to be present at the polling station, unlike the army. However, the judge came to tell her that she should leave the place, and Lieutenant Heikal threatened to hand her over to the Military Intelligence if she did not obey.

They all walked out of the Primary Court, and one of the army officers started to insult the sisters and to accuse them of being traitors acting against national interest, in front of the crowd of voters queuing outside the polling station. Then, a group of at least six army members reportedly violently assaulted the sisters, arrested them and brought them to the Cairo Security Directorate. They allegedly confiscated their identity documents and all their personal belongings, which were not returned until their release. They interrogated them about their involvement in the Egyptian revolution movement and their potential connections with the United States, checked personal pictures and information on their phones and in their notebooks, and accused Ms. Ragia Omran of being at polling stations without a permit to monitor, in order to influence voters taking part in the referendum. A woman strip-searched them in underwear and inspected their hair in a room adjoining the Lieutenant's office.

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The Supreme Judicial Committee's instructions and rules related to the process of voting and votes sorting states that: «The President of the Sub-Committee determines the scope of the Assembly of the referendum before the start of voting process, and the assembly includes the Hall, where there are ballot boxes, and the space around it, for the president of each sub-committee will be responsible for maintaining order in the Assembly of the referendum. In addition, he has the right to ask for help from the police and the armed forces, where necessary. Yet, neither the police members nor the armed forces have the right, other than maintaining order, to enter the Hall of the referendum, but at the request of the head of the sub-Committee».

After a while, army officers brought in the American journalist who was waiting outside with the taxi driver who had accompanied the group all day. They confiscated her personal belongings and camera equipment. They also strip-searched her.

At around 8:30 p.m., the journalist was taken into the Lieutenant's office where she was briefly questioned. She was released from custody at 9:30 p.m.

At 11:00 p.m., the Omran sisters were brought to the Military Prosecution building in Madinet Nasr on the grounds that Ms. Ragia Omran had allegedly insulted a public official on duty. They were finally released at 1:00 a.m. on March 20, 2011, as no tangible evidence was provided to prove that Ms. Omran and her sister had been committing any offence.

According to the information received, Ms. Ragia Omran is still trying to find out if charges of insult to army officer on duty have been dropped or not.

The Observatory expresses its deepest concern about the harassment faced by Ms. Ragia Omran on the part of the authorities, which seems to merely aim at sanctioning her human rights activities in the context of the democratic transition process.

The Observatory calls on the Egyptian authorities to put an end to any acts of judicial harassment against Ms. Ragia Omran, and more generally against all human rights defenders in Egypt, and to comply in all circumstances with the provisions of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1998.

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