

Egypt: Chilling rise in executions reveals depth of human rights crisis

In October and November alone, the Egyptian authorities executed at least 57 men and women, nearly double the recorded 32 people they executed throughout 2019, Amnesty International said today. This horrific assault of the right to life included at least 15 people sentenced to death in cases relating to political violence following grossly unfair trials marred by forced “confessions” and other serious human rights violations including torture and enforced disappearances.

This shocking death toll is likely to be an underestimate, as Egyptian authorities do not publish statistics on executions or the number of prisoners on death row; nor do they inform families or lawyers in advance of executions. Pro-government media reported 91 executions citing anonymous official sources since October.

“The Egyptian authorities have embarked on a horrifying execution spree in recent months, putting scores of people to death, in some cases following grossly unfair mass trials,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Research and Advocacy Director.

“These executions are particularly appalling given the well documented and systematic breaches of fair trial rights in Egypt, with courts often relying on torture-tainted ‘confessions.’ Not only are the Egyptian authorities trampling on the right to life in shocking disregard for their obligations under international law, but they are also punishing the brave human rights defenders at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights documenting and speaking out these violations.”

Egyptian authorities have also clamped down on human rights organizations working on the death penalty. Authorities arrested staff members of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) between 15 and 19 November and interrogated them about the organization’s criminal justice work, including its [November publication](#) on the alarming rise in executions.

The execution spree followed an incident at Tora Maximum Security Prison One known as al-Aqrab (Scorpion) on 23 September, when four prisoners on death row and four members of security forces were killed. Official sources blamed the violence on an alleged escape attempt by prisoners. However, there has not been an independent and transparent investigation into the incident.

Amnesty International has spoken to lawyers and relatives of prisoners who have been executed or are currently on death row and reviewed relevant legal documents, as well as reports from Egyptian NGO, media articles and Facebook posts by relatives of murder victims as well as those detained and executed.

Rise in executions

The Egyptian authorities executed 15 men in October convicted of murder in cases related to political violence. In October and November, they executed an additional 38 men and four women, convicted of murder in regular criminal cases, as well as two men convicted of rape.

On 3 October, the authorities executed two men who had been convicted in a mass trial in the case known as "Alexandria Library events," for involvement in political violence taking place in the aftermath of the authorities' deadly dispersal of the Rabaa sit-in in August 2013.

On 4 October, 10 men were executed after being convicted and sentenced to death, in the case known as "Agnad Masr," involving violent attacks on officials and public property. The defendants told Supreme State Security Prosecutors that they had been subjected to enforced disappearance and torture, however there was no investigation into these complaints. One of the men executed, Gamal Zaki, had appeared in a video "confession" broadcast on several media outlets before the trial was concluded, severely undermining his right to fair trial, including his right not to incriminate himself and his right to the presumption of innocence.

Three other men who were executed on 4 October had been convicted in another case of political violence in the aftermath of the authorities' dispersal of the Rabaa sit-in. The case, known as "Storming the Kerdasa police station", involved the death of 13 policemen. In December 2014, a Terrorism Circuit of the Giza Criminal Court convicted 184 people, sentencing 183 (34 in their absence) to death and a child to 10 years in prison and acquitted two people, while two others died by the time of the verdict. In a retrial, a Terrorism Circuit in the Cairo Criminal Court sentenced 20 people to death, 17 of whom remain on death row. [Nine Egyptian human rights organizations](#) denounced the verdict, highlighting gross violations of fair trial rights including defendants being denied access to their lawyers during their detention, being interrogated without the presence of lawyers, and being forced to "confess".

Amnesty International has previously documented concerns over the breaches of fair trial standards in such mass trials especially and the failure to demonstrate individual criminal responsibility. Torture is rampant in Egypt, and [frequently](#) used to extract "confessions", while courts regularly fail to order investigations into allegations of torture and admit torture-tainted "confessions" as evidence.

In addition to the 57 cases Amnesty International verified, pro-government media reported that an additional 31 men and three women were executed in October and November. Amnesty International was unable to verify these reports independently, in part given the reluctance of family members to communicate with human rights organizations for fear of reprisal.

At risk of execution

Given the Egyptian authorities lack of transparency, the number of prisoners currently at risk of execution is unknown. Among those on death row after having exhausted all possibilities of appeal is Wael Tawadros, known as Father Isaiah, a monk who was

convicted of killing Bishop Anba Epiphanius in April 2019. Wael Tawadros was sentenced to death following a grossly unfair trial, where the court relied on his torture-tainted 'confessions' to secure a conviction. He was also denied the right to an adequate defense.

According to his family, Wael Tawadros was arrested and held in an undisclosed location between 2 and 28 August 2018, where the Ministry of Interior refused to acknowledge his detention and reveal his location to his family and denied him access to his lawyer, effectively subjecting him to enforced disappearance.

According to a video statement given by Wael Tawadros in court, examined by Amnesty International, police officers stripped him naked, then took him to the monastery and told him to wear his monk robe. He was then beaten, given electric shocks, and ordered to act out the alleged murder on camera. Wael Tawadros said that when a judge ordered that he be taken to hospital for a medical test, the officer ordered a medical worker to write that he was fine.

Cruel and inhuman conditions

In apparent retaliation for the security incident on 23 September at al-Aqrab Prison, authorities reduced the amount of food given to prisoners, including on death row and cut off the electricity supply to their cells, according to information received from sources knowledgeable of the conditions of detention in al-Aqrab. Prison guards beat 10 prisoners with water hoses, batons and sticks and confiscated prisoners' belongings including bedding. Many were moved to solitary confinement cells or to another notorious prison, Tora Maximum Security Two, after the incident.

Wael Tawadros's family told Amnesty International that the Abaadiya prison administration has been subjecting him to discriminatory and punitive treatment as well, by preventing him from corresponding with his family and denying him regular access to a priest, in violation of international standards and Egyptian law. Others held at the same prison were granted such rights.

"We call on the Egyptian authorities to commute all death sentences, and to quash convictions and order fair retrials without recourse to the death penalty for Wael Tawadros and anyone else convicted after unfair trials. We also urge the international community, including UN human rights bodies, to publicly call on the Egyptian authorities to immediately halt executions, and for members of the UN Human Rights Council to establish a monitoring and reporting mechanism on the human rights situation in Egypt," said Philip Luther.