Egypt | January 25 Revolution, 15 Years On: A Human Rights Reading of Freedoms and Participation

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On the fifteenth anniversary of the January 25, 2011 revolution, this moment is recalled as a point at which broad segments of Egyptian society, women and men alike, demanded a state governed by the rule of law rather than by a logic of exception; a state that guarantees tangible conditions for living with dignity; and a public sphere that allows criticism and peaceful organization instead of deterrence and repression. At the heart of this vision lies the protection of freedom of expression, freedom of the press and media, the right to peaceful assembly, and the freedom to form associations and political parties, alongside an end to impunity. These are not symbolic or commemorative demands, but established rights grounded in the Egyptian Constitution, in the state's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture, and in its duty to ensure equality, non-discrimination, and the protection of physical and psychological integrity.

January 25 came after decades of governing the public sphere through a state of exception, most notably the near-continuous enforcement of emergency law for nearly 30 years. This resulted in expanded police powers and the erosion of safeguards related to personal liberty and access to justice. In the years preceding 2011, civic space steadily narrowed, and repressive practices became routine, driven by the prioritization of security considerations over rights, alongside weak oversight of the use of force and limited accountability for violations. In this context, the killing of Khaled Said in 2010 took on particular significance for large segments of youth, not as an isolated incident, but as a stark illustration of the cost of impunity and the urgent need to subject law-enforcement institutions to transparent standards and effective judicial and oversight mechanisms, in order to curb arbitrary use of force and ensure victims' right to remedy.

After 2011, the process of building institutional guarantees capable of protecting rights and freedoms from regression remained incomplete. Rules governing the public sphere continued to resemble reversible procedures rather than stable protections. Following the political shifts after 2013, restrictions on civic space expanded, the cost of expression, organization, and public engagement rose sharply, and peaceful participation increasingly became subject to criminalization or repression through the convergence of legislation, security practices, and judicial processes. This was not merely a change in the political climate, but a transformation in governance tools: the discourse of "security" supplanted that of "rights," and the notion that civil society and independent media are integral components of the public sphere gave way to treating them as adversaries to be neutralized. As a result, spaces for peaceful organization and societal oversight contracted,

prohibitions expanded, and the prospects for meaningful public participation and free debate were significantly weakened.

In the years that followed, violations included arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture and ill-treatment, and sweeping restrictions on fair trial guarantees. Prolonged pretrial detention expanded to the point of becoming a de facto punishment, the right to defense was repeatedly curtailed, and communication and visitation were often suspended, alongside restrictions on independent monitoring of detention facilities. These practices infringe non-derogable rights, foremost among them the absolute prohibition of torture, the right to physical and psychological integrity, and the right of every detainee to humane treatment, effective judicial oversight of the legality and grounds of detention, and timely consideration of their case. Detention conditions have also been linked to allegations of medical neglect, poor conditions, and denial of care, exacerbating risks to the rights to life and health and undermining minimum standards for the treatment of detainees.

In parallel, legal and regulatory tools have been increasingly used to restrict fundamental rights in ways that undermine their very essence. These include counterterrorism laws, cybercrime legislation, the protest law, media regulatory frameworks, and laws governing civil society. Such tools have enabled the criminalization of acts that fall squarely within the peaceful exercise of protected rights, or the imposition of disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the right to peaceful assembly. The problem is compounded when restrictions are drafted in vague terms that allow for expansive accusations, or when administrative procedures are transformed into tools of obstruction and prohibition, imposing a high cost on public participation, fueling self-censorship, and constraining evidence-based debate. In the same vein, website blocking has been used as a practical mechanism to restrict access to independent journalistic and human rights content, limiting the public's right to know and exchange information, and weakening society's ability to hold public policies accountable on the basis of accessible information.

This cannot be separated from the management of collective memory and official narratives. Around commemorative occasions in particular, January 25 is re-presented in official media discourse as "Police Day," competing with its meaning as a moment of broad public demand for rights and shifting the debate away from substantive rights toward redefining the occasion itself. This reframing is not merely symbolic: control over meaning parallels control over the public sphere, shaping society's capacity to engage freely with its recent history and the state's responsibilities toward its citizens. Restrictions on access to archives or independent journalistic content, when they occur, further deepen the crisis of the right to knowledge, constrain documentation and societal accountability, and leave the public sphere captive to a single narrative.

At the level of political participation, pluralism has narrowed, and practical constraints on the ability of political parties, opposition forces, and independents to organize and access the public sphere on equal footing have intensified. These constraints have included procedures and exclusions that undermine equal opportunity and erode confidence in the prospects for genuine democratic competition, amid restrictions on political organization, the media environment, and freedoms of

campaigning and public assembly. The right to participate in public affairs (to run for office and to vote in periodic, free, and fair elections) is a cornerstone of civil and political rights. Any political environment managed through exclusion, intimidation, or monopolization of the media empties this right of its substance, reduces political processes to formalities, limits the possibility of peaceful transfer of power, and undermines democratic legitimacy.

Civil society has likewise faced sustained pressure affecting human rights organizations, independent initiatives, professional and labor unions, and student spaces, impairing society's capacity for oversight and for providing legal and rights-based support to victims. This has manifested in administrative and financial restrictions, judicial harassment, smear campaigns, website blocking, security summonses, travel bans, and, in some cases, asset freezes. "Case 173" remains a telling example of the use of judicial proceedings and accompanying measures as tools of pressure on human rights work, creating years of intimidation, restricting legitimate funding and institutional activity, and leaving lasting effects on the independence and operating space of civil society. The persistence of this case's impact, even amid later judicial developments, reflects the cost of weakening civic space for the rights to organize and seek remedy, and undermines civil society's role in protecting rights.

Patterns of targeting have also extended to human rights defenders and journalists abroad through indirect means, including pressure on relatives, punitive use of administrative and consular measures, denial of documents and services, as well as digital surveillance and the use of spyware. When such tools are deployed to silence voices beyond national borders, they violate the rights to personal security, privacy, and freedom of movement, undermine the ability of exiles, journalists, and defenders in the diaspora to participate safely in public life, and extend fear across borders, affecting family relationships and the capacity for open civic engagement.

At the international level, cycles of the Universal Periodic Review and repeated engagement with UN human rights mechanisms have revealed a gap between declared commitments and actual practice, particularly regarding the protection of civil society, the prevention of torture and ill-treatment, and the guarantees of freedom of expression, assembly, and association, as well as the protection of groups vulnerable to discrimination and violence. Addressing this gap requires more than general statements; it demands specific, verifiable reform steps grounded in independent accountability, access to information, respect for pluralism, and an end to the criminalization of peaceful public action. It also depends on genuine, transparent openness to international and regional monitoring and cooperation.

There are also emblematic cases of lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders, and political activists whose prosecution and detention have been linked to the peaceful exercise of their rights or to their professional and rights-based work. Notable examples include lawyer Ibrahim Metwally, translator Marwa Arafa, lawyer Hoda Abdelmoniem, and political activist Mohamed Adel, alongside thousands of detainees whose cases receive no public attention. Targeting these groups does not affect their personal freedom alone; it sends a deterrent message to the entire public sphere, restricts the space for human rights and journalistic work, undermines the conditions for peaceful political debate, and closes legitimate avenues of peaceful dissent.

This picture is further aggravated by policies, legislation, and amendments that reinforce the concentration of power, weaken checks and balances, and tighten control over media, unions, parties, and universities. Any expansion of executive authority at the expense of constitutional guarantees, or any erosion of the independence of oversight and judicial institutions, directly affects the protection of rights and freedoms. International human rights law sets a clear standard: restrictions on rights must be precise, lawful, necessary, and proportionate; they must not undermine the essence of the right; they must be subject to effective judicial oversight; and they must not become permanent mechanisms for criminalizing peaceful participation or silencing criticism. Safeguards must also exist to prevent arbitrary application of laws, and avenues for appeal and remedy must be accessible and effective.

On the anniversary of January 25, HuMENA reaffirms that protecting the public sphere is a prerequisite for the rule of law, not a secondary or deferrable issue. Restoring the significance of this moment begins with ending torture and ill-treatment; safeguarding the rights to liberty and personal security; ending the criminalization of peaceful expression and organization; ensuring that the judiciary functions as a guarantor of rights rather than a tool of pressure; and lifting restrictions that prevent civil society and independent media from fulfilling their roles. Any discourse on sustainable stability loses its foundation so long as impunity persists, fundamental rights are treated as a permanent exception rather than as rights subject only to narrowly defined, necessary, and proportionate limitations, and avenues for peaceful participation and public accountability remain closed.

Accordingly, HuMENA calls on the Egyptian authorities to:

1. Release all detainees held for the peaceful exercise of their rights, end arbitrary arrests, and establish clear safeguards to prevent the use of pretrial detention as a de facto punishment.
2. End torture and ill-treatment; ensure independent and effective investigations into allegations of torture, enforced disappearance, and deaths in detention; hold perpetrators accountable; and allow regular, independent monitoring of places of detention.
3. Cease the use of laws and administrative measures to criminalize freedom of expression, freedom of the press and media, the right to peaceful assembly, and freedom of association and political organization, including ending website blocking and restrictions on independent media, lifting constraints on civil and human rights work, and addressing the legacy of “Case 173” in a manner that prevents its recurrence.
4. Guarantee a political environment that allows pluralism and peaceful competition, including equal opportunities, administrative neutrality, and the removal of restrictions that hinder the work of political parties and independents and their equal access to the public sphere.

HuMENA affirms its commitment to monitoring the state of rights and freedoms in Egypt, to advocating for victims of violations and for human rights defenders, and to defending the public sphere as a cornerstone of the rule of law, justice, and sustainable stability.

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