NGOs letter to the French President: call for a new approach in relations with Egypt regarding human rights

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Your Excellency President Emmanuel Macron,

In light of Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sisi's expected attendance of the 22-23 June, 2023 Summit for a New Global Financing Pact in Paris, we are writing to ask you to **urge him, in public and in any bilateral discussions you may have, to take prompt and effective measures to address Egypt's human rights crisis and reopen civic space and the public sphere**, notably by releasing all those arbitrarily detained for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The implication of arms and surveillance technology transferred to Egypt from European states, including France, in this human rights crisis has been documented and denounced for years. We reiterate our call for a change of approach in relations with Egypt, taking this responsibility fully into account.

We stress our alarm at the Egyptian authorities' unlawful restrictions on the rights to freedom of the press, freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, the severe constraints they have imposed on civil society, as well as their repression of peaceful political opposition and misuse of counterterrorism legislation to silence peaceful critics. Thousands continue to be arbitrarily detained or sentenced in Egypt for peacefully practicing their human rights. This includes staff of Egyptian independent civil society organizations, human rights defenders and activists in the field of economic, social, cultural and minority rights (PDF), as well as lawyers, journalists, academics, women social media influencers and artists. "LGBTQI+ people's rights are still denied by the Egyptian authorities, who continue to target them for their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including through arbitrary detention, prosecution, and violence and abuse in places of detention. Widespread and systematic torture and abuse continue, detention conditions remain abysmal, including for women, and Egypt continues to hand down hundreds of death sentences each year.

These violations are ongoing in spite of the Egyptian authorities' claims to the contrary. Al-Sisi's 2022 call for a National Dialogue came in the context of Egypt's alarming economic and social situation, in what analysts have described as an attempt to both spread responsibility for the

country's dire straits among a broader circle, and to placate Western allies and financial institutions with the illusion of a political opening. The Civil Democratic Movement, a coalition of democratic opposition movements and parties, then put forward demands to create an environment conducive to meaningful political opening, in particular the release of all peaceful political prisoners. The authorities have since highlighted the release of around 1,100 persons, including some high-profile figures, since April 2022, while over 3,600 others were in fact newly arrested over the same period, reports EFHR. Activists and peaceful opposition members are still being subjected to enforced disappearance, political trials and arbitrary arrest even as the "Dialogue" is ongoing – including members of participating parties al-Dostour, al-Karama, Al-Nasri and the Egyptian Social Democratic Party.

Meanwhile, Egypt is widely considered to be on the brink of default after years of excessive borrowing in order to consolidate power, focusing economic policy on highly questionable megaprojects without feasibility studies, involving opaque tenders and deals. The authorities' unsustainable model (PDF) of governance has extended and consolidated control by parts of the State, especially the military apparatus, over large sectors of the economy and over capital distribution. This occurs at the expense of the private sector which has been contracting for most of the past few years, and cannot create the jobs Egyptians need. In the absence of any real institutional checks and balances, or channels for citizens who bear the burden of rapid inflation to hold the government accountable, the authorities continue on this dangerous course. Al-Sisi has frequently blamed Egypt's plight on external factors or on the 2011 revolution, but a recent IMF paper (PDF) reported their conclusion (in Figure 19) that the revolution's impact on Egypt's economic growth has been minor. Egypt's 2023-24 budget, which has just been adopted by a subservient Parliament, will devote over 56% of state spending to debt service and vastly insufficient amounts to essential services, while the budget shortfall has not yet been met.

As detailed by the SWP (German Institute for International & Security Affairs), Egypt's repression of dissent "*facilitates the instrumentalisation of debt policy for power politics. The lack of separation of powers gives political leadership a free hand in borrowing and spending. Public debates on debt policy are impossible because any independent civil society organisations are suppressed, and the press is largely brought into line. Finally, the implementation of economic reforms, demanded by donor countries and institutions, can hardly be adequately monitored from the outside.*"

We are concerned that President al-Sisi's interest in the New Global Financing Pact emerging out of the COP process, however necessary the mechanism may be to ensure that less wealthy states have the resources to address the challenges of climate change, may be to secure further economic support from external sources. Based on its previous record, it is likely that the Egyptian government will seek to obstruct reasonable efforts to attach conditions related to transparency, anti-corruption measures and governance to the provision of such funds.

As highlighted by the SWP, analysts at the International Crisis Group and multiple economic experts including the renowned Dr Yezid Sayegh, Western allies of Egypt must change their business-as-usual approach and press Egyptian authorities to change course, not only in the economic field, but also by lifting repressive policies, tackling the human rights crisis, and taking measures to restore

the rule of law and reopen public space to enable real policy debate.

So far, the upcoming presidential election is set to take place in a completely closed context; when social-democratic opposition figure Ahmed Tantawy announced (from abroad) his intention to be a candidate, security bodies arrested over a dozen of his relatives, supporters and friends. Even the May 2023 Engineers' Syndicate ballot which looked likely to maintain an independent figure at the head of the union, was not allowed to pass: thugs presumably affiliated with the pro-Sisi Mostaqbal Watan parliamentary bloc, stormed the premises and destroyed ballot boxes. Thus, it is crucial to engage the Egyptian authorities to open the public sphere and civic space and allow Egyptian citizens to exercise their right to participate in public affairs. The country's fate depends on a change in governance, which Egyptian citizens cannot peacefully bring about as long as all dissent and free expression is harshly stifled.

In these grave circumstances, we appeal to you not to support the authorization of further sales of arms or military equipment to Egypt, whose purchases soared over the past decade as it became the third biggest arms buyer worldwide in 2016-20 (PDF). Not only are arms and surveillance systems clearly and repeatedly used in violations of international human rights law in Egypt, they are also now an expense for which the country cannot afford to increase its debt burden or to use its scarce resources, sorely needed for development. Hence, further sales would likely contravene Criterion 8 of the EU Common Position 2008/944/CFSP.

Rather, we request that you urge the Egyptian authorities:

- To go beyond the conditional release of a limited number of persons from arbitrary detention; to effect a real policy change by immediately and unconditionally releasing human rights defenders behind bars and all persons arbitrarily detained for exercising their rights to the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association; to refrain from detaining or disappearing other citizens for peacefully exercising their rights; and to cease tracking and arbitrarily arresting individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, either directly from the street or through the use of dating applications;
- To take concrete steps to reopen civic space and the public sphere, so as to allow civil society meaningful opportunities to freely inform decision-making on the economy and other vital areas of public policy. Namely, Egyptian authorities should expedite the necessary changes in legislation and practice – including in the NGO law, the Counter-terrorism Law, the Cybercrime Law, the Protection of Public Facilities Law, the Assembly Law, the Protest Law and the Terrorist Entities Law – to guarantee and protect space for civil society, including independent human rights defenders, to speak, meet, and work without fear of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest or detention, torture, enforced disappearance, or any other form of reprisal or retaliation; including lifting the existing travel bans and asset freezes imposed on activists and human rights defenders.
- To take measures ahead of the upcoming pre-electoral period, to allow citizens to exercise their right to participate in public affairs : ending the harsh restrictions imposed by law and in practice on media and digital freedom, including the blocking of websites of independent

media outlets and civil society organizations; releasing all media workers who have been detained or jailed for carrying out their work; and refraining from unlawful intimidation, harassment, threats, arrests, unfounded prosecution or other forms of interference to prevent citizens from standing for public office, supporting electoral campaigns or participating in policy debates.

Finally, at the Summit for a New Global Financing Pact, we urge you to press for the principles of transparency and accountability to be clearly reflected in the governance of public climate funds (PDF) as a prerequisite of implementation, to ensure such funds cannot be misappropriated by politically-affiliated actors in states like Egypt.

As the President of France, you are in a unique position to engage your Egyptian counterpart on the vital human rights, accountability and rule of law issues that are fuelling systemic economic, social and human rights crises in Egypt. We urge you to do so urgently in your discussions with President Al-Sisi in Paris, and not to pass up this opportunity to play a constructive role with regard to Egypt's downward spiral.

Sincerely,

1. ACAT-France
2. Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies (AITAS)
3. ANKH Association
4. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
5. Egyptian Front for Human Rights (EFHR)
6. Egyptian Human Rights Forum (EHRF)
7. EgyptWide for Human Rights
8. EuroMed Rights
9. HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement
10. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
11. Ligue des Droits de l'homme (LDH)
12. Pen America
13. The Freedom Initiative
14. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

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