

Interview

Egyptian human rights chief outlines challenges

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

The fight against terrorism, a lack of will from the government and scant cooperation from state institutions hinder efforts to improve human rights in Egypt, said Mohamed Fayek, the head of the country's rights watchdog.

"These are problems that make it difficult for human rights conditions to improve," said Fayek, who heads the semi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), "but it must be known to everybody that the fight against terrorism, for example, cannot justify human rights violations."

Egypt's military has been fighting against a branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Sinai Peninsula while police and security forces have taken steps to clamp down on radical Islamists, such as designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation.

However, local rights group said authorities are relying on illegitimate measures, particularly temporary detention, that contravene human rights. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced a 3-month state of emergency in April after ISIS attacks on two Coptic churches killed 44 people. The emergency laws give police expanded powers of arrest and surveillance.

"When you put an innocent person in temporary detention, you punish him for a crime he did not commit," Fayek said. "Our next move will be to submit to parliament a bill to limit temporary

detentions."

Observers said the number of Egyptian citizens being arrested but not referred to prosecution as stipulated by the constitution is rising under Sisi. A 2016 Amnesty International report said that hundreds of students, political activists and protesters had been forcibly disappeared.

Asked about human rights conditions in Egypt, Sisi conceded that the state has made "mistakes" but asserted that they are unavoidable as the government works to combat terrorism.

Sisi's critics, however, say that citing the fight against terrorism is an easy way to wave away human rights abuses.

"The authorities keep violating the constitution by putting innocent people in temporary detentions," said human rights advocate Negad el-Borai. "The enforced disappearance of citizens is on the rise and nobody is acting against it."

Fayek said countries that strike a balance between combating terrorism and protecting human rights were best able to protect their citizens.

The NCHR has said it has received little cooperation from Egyptian state institutions to address human rights issues.

"Although some progress has happened in this country, including the drafting in 2014 of a constitution that stresses human rights, the elimination of the emergency laws that [were] enforced for three decades under ex-President Hosni Mubarak and the end of extraordinary trials, his council still has a long way to go to improve human rights conditions," Fayek said.

"The fact is that we are not fully satisfied with this progress. We try to raise awareness about the importance of protecting human



Some progress. Head of the National Council for Human Rights Mohamed Fayek speaking to The Arab Weekly at his office in Cairo.

(The Arab Weekly)

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rights, which is a difficult mission."

Founded in 2003 as the country's national rights agency, the NCHR works to promote human rights and investigates alleged violations. The organisation produces an annual report about the state of human rights in Egypt.

The 2016 report, published earlier this year, cited the enforced disappearance of dozens of citizens, instances of torture inside police custody and the death of some prisoners. The report called on the Interior Ministry to improve prison conditions and cooperate in revealing the whereabouts of citizens reported by their relatives to have disappeared.

At the same time, the NCHR faces criticism from those who say it does not go far enough to take the government to task and overlooks many human rights violations.

"This is a council that only cares about giving a good impression about the government," said Gamal

Eid, head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.

"Prisoners die inside prison cells because of systematic torture, which makes it necessary for some policemen to be taken to court. The NCHR rarely mentions this information or talks to the authorities about it."

Fayek, however, asserted that allegations of torture cannot be described as "systematic." He acknowledged that there were "individual cases" of police and prison officers allegedly committing violations but these are investigated by the Interior Ministry when the council reports them.

"We are not saying everything is perfect but also do not like to look at the negatives only," Fayek said. "We still have a long way to go because protecting human rights always needs a lot of work and we are doing it, despite challenges."

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.

ISIS growing beyond Sinai and into southern Egypt

Ibrahim Ouf

Cairo

The killing of 28 Christian pilgrims on a desert road in the central province of Minya raised fears about the growth of the Islamic State (ISIS) beyond the Sinai Peninsula and into southern Egypt.

Buoyed by ISIS's survival and its ability to attack across the country, ISIS's extremist ideology is finding additional adherents, particularly in southern Egypt.

"ISIS has succeeded in creating its own cells in the southern provinces," said Khaled Okasha, an Egyptian security expert. "This means that security agencies need to open their eyes and intensify their presence in these provinces."

An ISIS presence in the southern provinces would increase difficulties for security strategists in Cairo as Egypt's security and military agencies are already confronting the group in the Sinai Peninsula and neighbouring Libya.

Radical Islamist groups have been present in southern Egypt before but ISIS represents a distinct threat. Divided into Islamist power centres, Egypt's ultra-orthodox Salafists have a strong historical presence in the northern coastal city of Alexandria and among Egypt's Bedouin in the Western Desert.

The outlawed Muslim Brother-



On alert. A policeman stands guard near the Cathedral Road in Minya, on May 26.

(AP)

hood has traditionally enjoyed strong support in the Nile Delta and Cairo.

The Islamist group Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya historically operated in the central and southern

provinces of Minya, Asyut, Qena and Sohag. The group renounced terrorism and formed a political party after the 2011 revolution but offshoots announced an alliance with al-Qaeda in 2006.

"According to their religious and social makeup, Egyptians in the south are more inclined to follow a strict interpretation of the Islamic religion," Okasha said. "This is why these provinces can be fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamist organisations."

The May 26 attack against the two buses carrying the Christian pilgrims was not the first in central Egypt. In July 2014, gunmen attacked a checkpoint manned by border guards in the south-western New Valley province and killed more than 20 officers and conscripts. Security experts said the attack fit ISIS's modus operandi.

In January 2017, an army officer and seven conscripts were killed and four others injured when gunmen attacked another checkpoint in the province.

The suicide bombers who carried out attacks on churches in Alexandria and the Nile Delta city of Tanta in April also originated from Egypt's southern provinces.

This, analysts said, should have led to Egyptian security forces taking a closer look at what was happening in southern Egypt.

"It is necessary for the authorities to now start addressing the reasons why Egyptians in the south are falling prey to such extremist views," said Ahmed Abdullah Zayed, a sociology professor at Cairo University. "Poverty is rampant, unemployment is high and state institutions are totally absent in these southern provinces."

Most economic development has been concentrated in Cairo and the coastal cities for decades, a trend President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is trying to reverse.

Sisi has designated a large portion of the state budget to projects in southern Egypt. Egypt's new investment law offers incentives to investors who want to start industrial projects in the southern provinces.

■ Cairo had been in Riyadh's "bad books" because of Sisi's refusal to send the Egyptian Army to Yemen among other issues.

However, until the government's projects bear fruit and improve living conditions for those in the south, Egypt must deal with the ramifications of its previous neglect of the southern provinces.

"The lack of development in these provinces for a long time in the past has affected the quality of life there," said Farag Abdel Fattah, an economics professor at Cairo University. "This has turned these provinces into a magnet for radical thinking and radical groups."

Ibrahim Ouf is an Egyptian journalist in Cairo.