



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ 1820 Jefferson Place, NW ♦ Washington, DC 20036

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

“Human Rights in Egypt”

Longworth House Office Building, Room 1539, May 7, 2009, 1:00 pm

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a hearing on the status of human rights and political reform in Egypt. Discussing these issues before the commission were **Saad Eddin Ibrahim**, Founding Chair of the Ibn Khaldun Center; **Ahmed Salah**, an activist and leader of the April 6 movement in Egypt; **Cameel Halim**, Chairman of the Coptic Assembly of America; **Paula Schriefer**, Director of Advocacy at Freedom House; and **Ayman Nour** via telephone from Egypt. The hearing was chaired by **Rep. James McGovern** (D-MA), co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Also in attendance were Representatives **Joseph Cao** (R-LA), **Joe Pitts** (R-PA), **Jan Schakowsky** (D-IL), and **Donna Edwards** (D-MD).

Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim stressed that if democracy and human rights are to flourish in the Middle East then they must flourish in Egypt. He argued that **unconditional support for the Mubarak regime allows for the perpetuation of human rights abuses and the repression of political and social freedom**. Ibrahim rejected President Mubarak’s argument that Egypt’s only political choices lie in the Muslim Brotherhood on one hand and his regime on the other. He argued that there are “legions of true democrats” in Egypt that are not given the opportunity to participate in the social and political sphere.

He also argued that **under Mubarak’s long rule, Egypt has experienced stagnation and decline, as demonstrated by the “continuous decline” in all economic indicators, the increase in sectarian violence, the depression of public freedoms**, and the declines in Egypt’s ratings according to the State Department’s Human Rights Reports, Amnesty International, Transparency International, and others. He concluded by raising the issue of [H.Res.200](#), a resolution introduced in February by **Rep. Frank Wolf** (R-VA), which calls on “the Egyptian Government to respect human rights and freedoms of religion and expression in Egypt.” Ibrahim described the resolution as having “softly, carefully worded language,” and he urged the members of Congress to support it. In response to a question, Ibrahim also advocated conditioning U.S. assistance to Egypt on benchmarks, to hold the Egyptian regime accountable for frequent promises of reform.

In discussing the pervasive discrimination faced by all religious minorities in Egypt, **Cameel Halim** also advocated for the passage of **H.Res.200**, saying that it would demonstrate America’s commitment to human rights and religious freedom for all. He pointed out that both the State Department and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom have acknowledged that the Egyptian government is directly responsible for oppressing religious freedom in Egypt. Halim emphasized that **a government which intentionally works against religious freedom is one that promotes radicalism and intolerance; and this ultimately undermines peace and security throughout the region and the world**. When asked, Halim expressed support for placing conditions of reform on the U.S. military aid, but not the economic aid, which he requested be restored to previous, higher levels.

Paula Schriefer focused her remarks on freedom of expression and freedom of the press. She noted that Freedom House’s survey has shown an upgrade in these two areas in recent years, but credited this to the persistence of Egyptian activists in speaking out, despite efforts from the regime to restrict speech. Egypt works to intimidate journalists through fines and imprisonment in an attempt to encourage self-censorship. There are now an estimated 160,000 Egyptian bloggers with 90% of the blogs being political in nature, and mediums such as YouTube and Facebook are widely used to disseminate information and evidence of government oppression. Schriefer argued that **the decision to slash democracy assistance to Egypt by 70% this year sends an alarming signal to the region on the U.S. commitment to democracy promotion.**

Ahmed Salah opened by acknowledging, “Quite frankly, I’m nervous, because I may be committing suicide,” by choosing to speak out against the abuses of the Egyptian regime in front of the U.S. Congress. **He noted that he had been jailed before for criticizing the Egyptian government and he described in some detail the torture, abuse, and conditions that he endured in an Egyptian prison.** He described Egyptian jails as “always overcrowded,” with many imprisoned for their willingness to speak out on political issues. Salah cited many such examples, including bloggers **Kareem Amer, Musaad Abu Al-Fajr, and Sameh Al-Arousy.**

Salah continued by asking why this has happened - why are so many political activists jailed? He asserted that it is because the Mubarak regime always tells outside actors ‘it is only me or the Islamists – there is nobody else,’ so they have to “ensure that there is nobody else!” He added, “and of course, Ayman Nour was put in jail for 4 years as an example, because he dared to be a candidate in a Presidential election. Why can't we be part of the free world? Why can't we have freedom like anyone else?” He also described **H.Res.200** as calling for “very simple, basic” rights to be respected, but noted that the resolution “makes the Egyptian government very angry because it is a symbol” that the House is willing to take a stand on behalf of the Egyptian people.

Ayman Nour joined the hearing live via telephone from Egypt, and expressed gratitude for the support given him by leaders of the free world, including the U.S. Congress, during his four year imprisonment by the Mubarak regime. He noted that he was thankful to have finally been released from prison in February 2009, but added that his political and civil liberties remain very much constrained. **He emphasized that the U.S. is seen as a leader in support of the democratic aspirations of people around the world and expressed hope that President Obama’s slogan, “Yes, we can!” applies not only to the U.S. but also to human rights defenders around the world.**

Nour objected to two main “deceptions” promulgated by the Mubarak regime – the dichotomy of “us vs. the extremists” and the idea that supporting dictators maintains stability. He requested that **if the U.S. cannot actively support democracy and human rights in the region then at the very least, please do not actively support the region’s dictators, but allow the people a fair chance to fight for their own freedom.** He also urged the members of Congress to support **H.Res.200**, and declared his support for “the entire resolution except the section that refers to me,” as the bill welcomes the Egyptian government’s decision to pardon and release Nour, without referring to the restrictions placed on Nour by the regime since his release.